

Last Sunday we celebrated the Commemoration
Of the Presentation of the Augsburg Confession,
And this Sunday we're welcoming 9 young people
To their first communion.

So, today I thought I'd start with our teaching on Communion
As we have it in the Augsburg Confession. Here it is:

It is taught among us that the true body and blood of Christ are really present in the Supper of our Lord under the form of bread and wine and are there distributed and received.

So, we are confessing this:

The bread that we eat in communion is the body of Christ:
It's the body of Christ on the altar, as the pastor gives it to us,
And as we eat it with our mouths.

Likewise, the wine of communion is the blood of Christ:
It's the blood of Christ on the altar,
As the assistant or pastor gives it to us,
And as we drink it with our mouths.

Communion is the body and blood of Christ
Whether we believe it or not:

It's not *our faith* that makes Christ present to us, but *his word*.
But it's also the case that we are *best prepared* to receive communion

When we trust Jesus' word:

When we trust that as we eat and drink his body and blood
We receive exactly what he says he gives us: the forgiveness of sins.

Now, as it happens, today's reading from the Gospel
Gives us a narrative that can help us understand
What happens at communion,
And can give us encouragement to receive Jesus' body and blood
With faith, so that we receive healing in body and soul,
And so that we can go about our lives with God's peace.

Today we are tuning in part way through a larger narrative:

Jesus is on his way to heal the daughter
Of one of the leaders of the synagogue,

And we hear these words: **And a large crowd followed [Jesus] and pressed in on him.**

Let's pause here.

To understand this narrative, it's good to get some mental picture
Of the scene: it's not just that Jesus is on his way

And that he's being followed: people are pressing in on him:
They are touching him.
They are not touching him with faith that anything will happen,
It's just a normal scene of a crowd of people.

But then the focus narrows: **Now there was a woman who had been suffering from haemorrhages for twelve years. She had endured much under many physicians, and had spent all that she had; and she was no better, but rather grew worse.**

Let's think about this woman's situation.

She has a medical issue that was wretched:

It was costly; it was unresolved;

And it made her ritually unclean.

Now we don't think about ritual uncleanness much these days,

But it is worth thinking about our own experiences of life,

Because there are things that happen to us –

Things that we have no reason to feel *guilty* about,

No reason to feel guilty because we have not broken any of God's laws,

But things that can make us feel *unclean*:

Unfit to approach a holy God.

It might be abuse that we have suffered:

Emotional, physical, verbal, or sexual abuse,

Or it might be we feel ashamed of a physical or spiritual defect

That we didn't choose, but which makes us feel

Unfit for the company of other human beings or of God.

This is hardly uncommon, but as we will hear today,

There is good news: Jesus has the power and authority to cleanse us.

Now, as it happens, this woman's ritual uncleanness

And its inability to be remedied by medical intervention

Drove her to the one who could heal her, to Jesus.

This is what we read: **She had heard about Jesus, and came up behind him in the crowd and touched his cloak, for she said, 'If I but touch his clothes, I will be made well.'**

This can sound superstitious: why would touching Jesus' clothes

Give healing to anyone?

Well, it's possible as modern people we are too quick

To separate the spiritual and the material.

As it happens, we confess that the Word became *flesh*,

So at least in principle we can acknowledge

That physical things can bring spiritual blessing,

As indeed happens in the life of the woman.

This is how the narrative goes on: **Immediately her haemorrhage stopped; and she felt in her body that she was healed of her disease.**

Many people were touching Jesus, and nothing happened.

But this woman, in her uncleanness, in her need, touches Jesus,
And she experience healing that comes without cost from God.

It's not just the woman experienced what it means

To *touch* Jesus with faith,

Jesus also experienced what it means not simply to be crowded in,

But to *be touched* with faith; this is what we read: **Immediately aware that power had gone forth from him, Jesus turned about in the crowd and said, 'Who touched my clothes?' And his disciples said to him, 'You see the crowd pressing in on you; how can you say, "Who touched me?" ' He looked all round to see who had done it.**

It's easy to understand the bewilderment of the disciples:

Many people were touching him,

All the evidence they had, the evidence of their senses,

Told them nothing unusual had happened.

But Jesus knew what faith could do,

And so he used his eyes to see who had touched him with faith,

And he used his ears to hear what had happened.

This is what we read: **But the woman, knowing what had happened to her, came in fear and trembling, fell down before him, and told him the whole truth.**

The woman already had healing for her body,

But as she now uses her voice to tell the truth of her situation,

She is about to receive healing for her soul.

But before we hear about that, let's pay attention

To what has happened: We hear that she came *in fear and trembling*,

But the narrative doesn't say exactly *why*,

So, let's think about it. Why?

Maybe she's afraid to talk publicly about her medical condition,

Maybe she's afraid because she touched Jesus' clothes

Even though she was ritually unclean –

So she was afraid she'd made Jesus unclean.

Maybe she was afraid that Jesus would be angry with her

And condemn her for being superstitious, or presumptuous,

Or even sinful.

But listen to how this part of the narrative concludes: **[Jesus] said to her, 'Daughter, your faith has made you well; go in peace, and be healed of your disease.'**

First of all he calls her 'daughter' – daughter of God,

Loved by her Father: her uncleanness was not a sign

Of God's displeasure with her: it was a preparation for God
To do great things in her life.

More than this Jesus said that her faith has healed her –
A phrase that could equally,
And perhaps better be translated from the Greek as
'Your faith has *saved* you'.

Indeed, it was her touching Jesus *with faith* that made the difference.
But also consider this: if you asked the woman *what* saved her,
She would have replied with *who* saved her: *Jesus himself*.
It was not *her faith* that made Jesus the Son of God,
That gave him authority to save: Jesus was and is the Son of God
And where he is, is life, forgiveness, and salvation.

Jesus then dismisses her in peace,
Healed not only in body, but assured of her status,
As one dearly loved by God.

But what about us? In our uncleanness can we touch Jesus?
Can we exercise our faith in our bodies,
The bodies that can cause us so much shame,
And distress, and anxiety?

Whatever may have happened in your life,
Whatever uncleanness you may feel,
However unworthy you might think yourself to be
To come into the presence of a holy God,
Receive the Good News: Jesus is the one who came
To bring his gift of cleansing,
And he is the one who now gives you his body and blood
So that you may receive him bodily,
So that you may receive strength in body and soul
For life everlasting.

We don't need to be anxious about our faith
Whether it is strong enough or good enough:
It is Jesus who gives us his word: it is his body and blood
On the altar, in the hands of the pastor,
That we receive with our bodies
So that we may go in peace. In Jesus' name. Amen!