

The LORD called to Moses and spoke to him from the Tent of Meeting. He said,² “Speak to the Israelites and say to them: ‘When any of you brings an offering to the LORD, bring as your offering an animal from either the herd or the flock.

³ “ ‘If the offering is a burnt offering from the herd, he is to offer a male without defect. He must present it at the entrance to the Tent of Meeting so that it will be acceptable to the LORD. ⁴ He is to lay his hand on the head of the burnt offering, and it will be accepted on his behalf to make atonement for him. ⁵ He is to slaughter the young bull before the LORD, and then Aaron’s sons the priests shall bring the blood and sprinkle it against the altar on all sides at the entrance to the Tent of Meeting. ⁶ He is to skin the burnt offering and cut it into pieces. ⁷ The sons of Aaron the priest are to put fire on the altar and arrange wood on the fire. ⁸ Then Aaron’s sons the priests shall arrange the pieces, including the head and the fat, on the burning wood that is on the altar. ⁹ He is to wash the inner parts and the legs with water, and the priest is to burn all of it on the altar. It is a burnt offering, an offering made by fire, an aroma pleasing to the LORD. ... ^{3:6} If he offers an animal from the flock as a fellowship offering to the LORD, he is to offer a male or female without defect. ⁷ If he offers a lamb, he is to present it before the LORD. ⁸ He is to lay his hand on the head of his offering and slaughter it in front of the Tent of Meeting. Then Aaron’s sons shall sprinkle its blood against the altar on all sides. ⁹ From the fellowship offering he is to bring a sacrifice made to the LORD by fire: its fat, the entire fat tail cut off close to the backbone, all the fat that covers the inner parts or is connected to them, ¹⁰ both kidneys with the fat on them near the loins, and the covering of the liver, which he will remove with the kidneys. ¹¹ The priest shall burn them on the altar as food, an offering made to the LORD by fire. (Leviticus 1:1-9; 3:6-11)

We See Jesus Giving Us Fellowship with God

A man pulled his car to a stop. It was dark. He shut off the motor and the lights. Then he turned and looked at the house he was parked in front of. He could see a woman serving dinner to another man and a teenage girl. The family laughed and talked. It broke the man’s heart because the woman used to be his wife. The girl was his daughter. The house used to be his house. But he wasn’t welcome anymore. That scene actually comes from a movie. But we all can understand how much it would hurt to lose the love and unity of our families. Tonight God leads us to reflect on the love and the unity he offers us in his family. In the church we use a special word to describe that unity: fellowship. God used two offerings—the fellowship offering and the burnt offering—to teach his Old Testament people about their unity with him. Those offerings are shadows of Christ. In them, **we see Jesus giving us fellowship with God.**

I.

Everywhere Lutherans get together, they eat. Even in mission fields overseas, Lutherans get together and break bread—or serve tacos, or curry, or whatever the local food is. Why? Because sharing a meal expresses love and unity. Just sit at a Lenten supper and listen to God’s people laugh and talk before going into church to celebrate their faith. Lutherans aren’t the only ones who understand the value of a fellowship meal. To teach his Old Testament people to treasure their unity with him, God gave them a meal: the fellowship offering. In this meal **we see Jesus giving us fellowship with God. Because of Jesus, the Lord welcomes us.**

The fellowship offering—the second one in the text for tonight—was a meal. After the priest killed an animal, he butchered it. He then took the choicest parts of the animal, generally speaking the ones with the most fat. Today we tend to think of fat as being bad for you. But it certainly makes meat taste better. Moses wrote, **“The priest shall burn them on the altar as food, an offering made to the Lord by fire.”** Those best parts of the animal were given to God as food. Now God didn’t come down and eat them. They were burned. But Moses calls them God’s food. The priests and the people bringing the offering ate the rest of the animal there in the tabernacle before the Lord. It was a rich meal—a whole lamb or even a cow. It was all eaten in one day. God wanted his people to understand what this meal meant, so centuries later, God spoke through Isaiah and pictured heaven in terms of a banquet with all the richest meats. Through the fellowship offering, God welcomed his people to eternal life.

But to eat the meal, the people had to be ritually clean. Even if they were clean, before they could bring the Lord’s portion to him, let alone eat their own, the priest had to repeat the ceremony of blood. The person

bringing the offering had to put his hand on the head of the lamb and then kill it. The priest had to take the blood of that lamb and sprinkle it all around the altar. Every time they brought an offering, they had to repeat this ritual to drive home their need to get rid of their sins. These actions taught that to be welcome before God you must be perfect. No sinner is invited into God's presence. But even more, they taught how God threw open the door of his house and welcomed them in. Sprinkling an animal's blood didn't remove their sin. They needed the blood of the true Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. They needed Jesus.

And so do we. There's a war raging in our hearts. God created a new man in each of our hearts, and he wants fellowship with God. But before God put him there, the old Adam—the unbelieving, sinful nature inside us—was alone and in full control. And even now it keeps clawing at our hearts. Even if we never did or said anything sinful, the thoughts and feelings the old nature provokes would be enough to keep us out of God's fellowship. But over and over again, we do deny our love for Christ by sinning. That's what sin is—putting our desires ahead of what God wants. Every day we're guilty of that. All that sin should send us to hell. But Jesus shed his blood for us all. He died on the cross, and he paid for the sin in our hearts. He paid for all the times that our old Adams won and we said and did things that deserved hell. He rose and took away our punishment. We're free from hell. We're even free from death, since it will only last until Jesus returns.

And when Jesus returns and raises our bodies to eternal life and glory, we will enjoy the feast Isaiah promised. Because Jesus lived and died and rose for us, already now we are welcome in God's house. Through faith in Christ, we can never be unclean again in God's eyes. And because Jesus knows how often guilt rises in our hearts, he replaced the fellowship offering with an even better meal. He gave us the Lord's Supper. The fellowship offering was a prophecy of Holy Communion. Paul talks about "the bread that we break" and "the cup of thanksgiving" that we share as a participation—a fellowship—in the body and blood of Christ. We eat and drink Jesus' true body and blood when we receive that bread and wine. This meal that God gave his Old Testament people pointed forward to this treasure, holy communion.

When we celebrate the Lord's Supper, God renews our fellowship with him. How? By sharing Jesus' forgiveness with us. By giving us the actual body and blood of Christ, which are present in and with and under the bread and the wine. Every time you come up here, you come into God's presence, spiritually and physically. Physically because the Lamb of God shed the very blood you will drink and offered the very body you will eat to remove your sin. Spiritually because God forgives you and welcomes you again. In heaven we will enjoy the banquet that Jesus lays before us. But we don't have to wait until we get to heaven to enjoy God's fellowship. That's the miracle of the Lord's Supper. God sets aside the sin that separates us and brings us into his presence. You aren't sitting outside looking in and wishing you could be a part of God's family. You are a son or a daughter in God's house, served and welcomed by Christ himself.

II.

Lent is a time for sober reflection of what our sins cost Jesus. But it's also a time for commitment, inspired by God's mercy. The gospel reaches down inside us and changes our lives. That's what we see in the other sacrifice we're considering tonight, the first one in our reading, the burnt offering. In it, **we see Jesus giving us fellowship with God. Because of Jesus, we dedicate our lives to the Lord.**

What if, after we gave our offerings this evening, I took the plates from the ushers and led the congregation in solemn procession out into the parking lot, where I had a grill set up? What if I carefully arranged the charcoal on that grill and put lighter fluid on it? What if I then, in a very dignified manner, arranged your offerings on that grill? Then, lifting my eyes up to heaven, I torched your offerings? How would you react? The treasurer might have to be restrained. Wouldn't that be a horrible waste of God's gifts? Wouldn't you be outraged? That's exactly what God commanded the Israelites to do with their burnt offerings. The priest solemnly arranged the parts of the animal on the altar. Then he burned up this animal completely.

Since it was a male from the herd, it was a bull. And a healthy one too. What do you suppose a healthy bull is worth? Several years ago, a Michigan State University county agent told me that a healthy, commercial breeding bull that will be harvested for meat sells for between one and three thousand dollars. By God's command, the Israelites didn't sell this animal and use the money to pay their priests or to cover their general fund. They killed it and burned the meat. Now this wasn't the only offering God commanded. Every Israelite was also required to bring ten percent of his or her income to support the work of the Lord. But still, burning these animals seemed like a total waste.

Why did God command this? God was showing his people that he didn't need their offerings. He doesn't want his people to give out of a mechanical need to balance a budget. The offerings we bring are not gifts to our pastors or even to our congregations. They're gifts to the Lord. The gift God wants is total devotion. Paul told us to offer God our bodies as living sacrifices. The money you put in your envelope is a relatively small part of what God wants. He wants everything that you do with your bodies. Our lives are our true acts of worship. The burnt offering symbolized complete dedication to the Lord.

But like every other animal sacrifice, this one required atonement. Again the person bringing the offering placed his hand on the bull's head and killed it. Again the priest sprinkled the animal's blood on the altar to remove the stain of sin. Our devotion is never enough to bring us close to God. It doesn't matter if you've dedicated your life to the public ministry. It doesn't matter if you give until you make your family poor. It doesn't matter if you sacrifice everything you enjoy to spread the gospel. Not one of those things makes us righteous in God's sight. The fact that deep down inside us there is a part of us that believes these things do make us righteous shows just how unacceptable to God our gifts really are. Nothing we can offer is worthy of God. He should spit on our offerings tonight and then send us to hell.

But God sees our gifts through Jesus' blood. When Jesus died for us, God declared that we are perfect. And now he accepts all that we bring as if Jesus himself were giving it—because in a sense, he is. One weekend a little girl made a drawing for her bus driver. It will never hang in an art museum. It will never bring a big price at an art auction. But her parents thought it was beautiful because their beautiful daughter drew it. Her bus driver also appreciated it as an expression of affection from a little girl. The best gifts we bring to God are worthless in reality. All our money, all our time, all our sweat is worth nothing because it's all ruined by sin. But God counts all of our gifts as being the most precious offerings ever made. Why? Not because he sees our love in them, like that bus driver did. Our love is ruined by sin too. But because he sees Jesus in them. When we serve him, God considers us as if we were Jesus. That means we please him beyond our ability to even imagine it.

It's a blessing to serve the Lord, because our service comes from Christ living in our hearts through the gospel. The power, the ability—even the desire—all come from God. They're all expressions of being forgiven. Tonight take home the lesson of the burnt offering. Give God your lives, not just your money. We can do that because we are sprinkled with Jesus' blood and we are clean. We can do that because Jesus himself lives in our hearts. Trust what he's doing in your heart through the gospel.

God offers us his fellowship. We aren't outside looking in. We're sitting at his table. We can always come here and experience God's fellowship. We can always open our Bibles and be with our Lord. We can always come to the Lord's Supper and be one with Christ. And one day soon, we will celebrate that fellowship forever. Today God welcomes us because of Jesus. Today, because of Jesus, we dedicate our lives to God. What a joy! What a fellowship! Amen.