

Drawing near
Hebrews 10:19-25

It's not often that we get a chance to celebrate the sacrament of baptism and the sacrament of the Lord's Supper on the same day. It certainly makes for a busy worship service, and it would have been possible to put off the Lord's Supper for another week. But experiencing both of these sacraments back to back gives us a chance to meditate, however briefly, on what meaning they have in common.

For as certainly as both are sacraments, visual signs and seals of God's promises to His people, both must point to the Person and Work of Christ. For, as our passage points out, it is Christ alone Who opens a new and living way into the presence of God. It is in Christ alone that His people thus have access to God, His promises, and His blessings.

And it is in Christ alone that God looks with favor on sinners, who, if we were judged on our own merits, would deserve only condemnation and death. It is because we are connected to Christ that God justifies us.

But what does justification mean? Well, each sacrament gives us an insight into that otherwise obscure theological term.

Let's first look at baptism, with its obvious symbolism of cleansing. Just as our bodies have been washed with pure water, so our hearts have been sprinkled from an evil conscience, sprinkled with the blood of Christ. Sure, we continue to sin, but because of our connection to Christ, God justifies us, which means He considers us clean. When God looks at all those who are in Christ, He doesn't see the dirt and guilt of our sin. Instead, God sees only the holiness of Christ.

The Lord's Supper gives us another way to look at this idea of justification. For it points to the sacrifice of Christ on our behalf, to the blood of the Lamb that was slain to pay the penalty for all the sins that His people would ever commit. Yes, we still sin, but because of our connection to Christ, God justifies us, which means He considers us innocent. When God looks at all those who are in Christ, He doesn't see the selfishness and rebellion of our sin. Instead, God sees only the righteousness of Christ.

We are considered by God to be clean and innocent, to be holy and righteous, not because of what we have done or failed to do, but solely because of what Christ has done for us. In baptism, we confess that we are unable to clean ourselves, and so we accept the cleansing water as a sign and seal of the cleansing blood of Christ. As we come to the Lord's table, we confess that we are unable to offer the sacrifice that our sins deserve, and so we accept the blood of Christ offered on our behalf. From both font and table we rise refreshed, renewed, ransomed, healed, restored, and forgiven, solely by God's amazing grace offered to us in Christ.

All that is thus required of us is that we come to the font and the table, bringing nothing but our sinful selves, our honest confession of our weakness and rebellion, and our desire to be restored to a right relationship to God. We come not to give, but to receive, not to do something, but to have something done for us. We come confessing that even the faith which unites us to Christ is itself a gift from God, a sign of the new heart God has given to all His people. We come humbly, we come gratefully, we come joyfully.

But how we leave the font and how we leave the table are just as important as how we come. For just as both these sacraments point to the justification that God gives to all those who are in Christ, so both also point to the sanctification of God's people.

What does sanctification mean? Well, if justification means God considering us holy and righteous because of the work of Christ, then sanctification is the process of becoming what God considers us to be – becoming holy and righteous as our lives are conformed more and more into the likeness of Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit.

In other words, since God has declared us clean, having our hearts sprinkled from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water, we have no business dirtying ourselves with sin anymore. Since God has declared us righteous, accepting the sacrifice of Christ to pay the death penalty we deserved for our sin, we have no business living in rebellion anymore.

That's why our passage doesn't just point us to the reality of our justification and our sanctification. It also challenges us to live as those who are united to Christ: to hold fast the confession of our faith, trusting God instead of our own reason and our own experience, relying on Him to direct our paths, even when the way in which God is leading us makes no sense.

But we are not only to be concerned with maintaining a right relationship to God. Those who have been declared holy and righteous, and those who are in the process of becoming holy and righteous should also be in right relationship to one another, stirring up one another unto love and good works, encouraging one another by gathering to share our faith, to sing, to pray, to worship.

And that's a big reason why we share the sacraments of baptism and the Lord's Supper. These are public acts – welcoming new members into the covenant community, sharing one loaf and one cup – these are signs that cannot be received alone. In giving us these signs, God reminds us that we are not only connected to Him by the new and living way of the body and blood of Christ. We are also connected to one another as members of the body of Christ.

Let us therefore draw near to God and to one another with a true heart in full assurance of faith. Having been washed in the waters of baptism and in the cleansing blood of Christ, let us come to the table to receive forgiveness and pardon.