

What happens when we commune in our online worship service?

Short answer: Jesus comes to you, is present with you, “in with and under” the bread and the wine, in the words “given and shed for you” – including in this exceptional exercise of distance communion.

A more detailed answer:

Communion and community are closely related – not just as words but as what we do. Communion – the Lord’s Supper – is meant to be celebrated when we are *together*, as worshiping followers of Jesus, and we eagerly long for that day to return.

But there have always been situations when that is not possible -- hospital visits and visits to shut-ins, for instance. We as pastors often offer communion during those “exceptional” situations, and we are certainly in an exceptional situation today. So we have begun the temporary practice of “distance communion,” making the Lord’s Supper possible by means of the Internet.

Note that we have not called it “online communion,” “Internet communion” or “virtual communion,” because that is not what is happening. What *is* happening is happening not through the Internet, through your computer or through your television but rather in your home. To understand that, let’s consider three things: the pastor, you and Jesus.

The pastor. We normally have a pastor lead a communion service for matters of “decency and order” – that is, to be sure things are done respectfully and to prevent the fragmenting of the community that would occur if every little group were running off to hold its own communion services. That being said, however, there is nothing in scripture that connects communion and pastors – certainly nothing that says a pastor must be present or lead a service.

In addition, when we as pastors lead the service and speak the words of institution (“In the night when Jesus was betrayed, he took the bread ...”), we don’t “consecrate” the bread and wine or do anything to them that makes them different. Pastors bring no “added value” to communion, no metaphysical transformation of the elements – nothing except “decency and order” and the reverence and respect we all want to see when receiving the “real presence” of Jesus in the bread and the wine. And that brings us to *you*.

You. In distance communion, we, as pastors, are seen on the screen. We commune our spouses (Jonna and Alek, Jim and Judy) because that is safe to do in this pandemic. We then invite you to commune on your side of the screen. And note this: nothing passes over the Internet or through the screen. If you are communing alone, we invite you to receive the bread and wine as if from a pastor or another fellow Christian when the words are spoken, “The body of Christ, given for you; the blood of Christ, shed for you.” In doing so, know that Jesus is there, present with you and coming to you “in, with and under” the bread and the wine because that is what he has promised to do, not because there is a pastor on the screen.

Likewise, if you receive the bread and wine from a spouse, a parent or a child, it is in those words, “the body of Christ given *for you*,” “the blood of Christ shed *for you*,” that Jesus comes to you. What happens is happening right in your home because, again, scripture speaks of communion as something that is offered among Christians and no requirement of a pastor is mentioned. It is the words (see *Luther’s Small Catechism*, below) that give the power, not the presence of a pastor. After all, those to whom Jesus first gave this gift, and his command to share it (“Do this in remembrance of me”), were all lay people; and the early Christians began meeting not in churches but in homes.

If having that sense of communing with the larger congregation is important to you, one thing you might do is choose to join our online worship at 9:00 am or 11:00 am. Those are the two times when our “live” worship services are offered and thus are times when a good number of others in our congregation will be worshipping and communing, as well. (And if you don’t want the “chat” features, simply go to “full screen.”)

Jesus. He is present in communion, “in, with and under” the bread and the wine, as Luther put it, and that is true whenever and wherever Christians celebrate the Lord’s Supper. That includes when, during this “exceptional time,” you commune in your home, following the “order” and guidance we provide on screen. Again, it is in the words spoken during communion (“The body of Christ, given for you …”) that Jesus comes through the elements. Luther put it this way in his Small Catechism:

How can eating and drinking do all this?

It is not eating and drinking that does this, but the words, “given and shed for you for the remission of sins.” These words, along with eating and drinking, are the main thing in the sacrament. And whoever believes these words has exactly what they say, forgiveness of sins.

When is a person rightly prepared to receive this sacrament?

Fasting and other outward preparations serve a good purpose. However, that person is well prepared and worthy who believes these words, given and shed for you for the remission of sins. But anyone who does not believe these words, or doubts them, is neither prepared nor worthy, for the words for you require simply a believing heart.

Finally, as we said at the beginning, we are talking here of something exceptional and temporary. We eagerly long for the day when we can all gather once more in the sanctuary to worship and receive the Lord’s Supper. In the meantime, distance communion allows us to celebrate this great gift given to us by Jesus.

Admittedly, distance communion is not the same thing as communing together – but is, in this case, the next best thing. After all, even when we do all get back together in the sanctuary, it will *still* be but a “foretaste of the feast to come” as we look forward to that great day when we all gather at “the marriage feast of the Lamb.”

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Rev. 5/12/2020