

Gottesdienst!

I'm going to begin my message with a statement of pure, unadulterated opinion.

The best music ever composed has come out of Germany.

(My ancestors were not German so I can say that without bragging!)

The Germans created and perfected classical music, giving us Bach, Mozart, Haydn, Handel, Beethoven, Brahms, Mendelssohn, Wagner, Schubert, Schumann—the list goes on and on.

No other country on earth can match that record in the music arena.

The Germans didn't do so bad in the area of theology as well!

They gave us Martin Luther who changed the course of western civilization when he discovered that the Gospel of Jesus Christ was the beating heart of the Scriptures.

The message of God's free forgiveness of sins shone like sunlight once again into human hearts.

It set people free from worrying about whether or not they were saved (Luther called this "the monster of doubt") and it did so by assuring them that if they simply believed in Jesus Christ as their Savior they **were** saved.

This doctrine—the doctrine of salvation by faith—changed the very nature of worship.

The Latin mass was considered to be a eucharistic meal which "made present" the sacrifice of Jesus on the cross.

It was called the "sacrifice of the mass" and "a prayer of thanksgiving for Jesus' suffering and death."

Luther believed that the focus of worship should not be as much on Jesus' sacrifice but on what His sacrifice had accomplished: the forgiveness of sins and assurance of eternal life.

He called worship "gottesdienst," which means "God's service."

In the Lutheran Church we still call worship "divine service"—the service of God to His people.

This is important to understand, because we are sometimes inclined to view worship as a duty or an obligation rather than a gift.

Ever heard someone say, “I’ve got to go the church”?

Ever said it yourself?

But everything that happens in Divine Service is a gift—not a requirement.

You are not serving God; God is serving you.

The first Christian Divine Service was conducted by Jesus Himself.

It is called “the last supper” and it was held in an upper room in a house in Jerusalem.

Jesus began the service by washing His disciples’ feet—assuming the role of a house slave.

Then He invited them to sit down at a meal and during the meal he preached an eight-word sermon.

(You should be so lucky.)

His sermon was: “I am among you as one who serves.”

Then he offered them his body and blood to atone for their sins.

This was Divine Service.

But Divine Service didn’t originate with Jesus.

It originated some fifteen hundred years earlier when God met Moses on a mountain in the wilderness and gave him the Ten Commandments—the moral law of God.

Included in the Commandments was a commandment which instructed them to honor the Sabbath, the seventh day of the week, by focusing their thoughts and their prayers on God in heaven rather than on their daily lives on earth.

God then gave them instructions as to how they were to honor the Sabbath.

First of all He gave them a pattern—a blueprint—for building a portable dwelling—a sanctuary— where they could gather together and receive His forgiveness of their sins.

(If you want to see what these instructions were, you can read the last fifteen chapters of *Exodus* and the *Book of Leviticus*.)

The portable sanctuary would be called a tabernacle.

Then He gave them specific instructions as to how they should gather in the tabernacle where he would conduct his divine service.

His service would consist of receiving sacrifices in the form of the blood of certain animals, as well as offerings of grain and oil and wine.

God promised to accept these sacrifices as payment for the sins of those for whom they were being offered.

And having been forgiven, in God's eyes they would once again be clean and pure.

What Moses could not have known was that the sacrifices for Israel's sins were a pattern of something that God would do in the future when He would sacrifice His own Son—not only for the sins of Israel but for the sins of all mankind.

His Son would be called Messiah.

And when Messiah came He was given the name Jesus, which meant "salvation" and He was the ultimate fulfillment of the pattern God had shown Moses.

He who had allowed the blood of animals to serve as sacrifices for the sins of the Israelites, would now allow the blood of His Son to serve as a sacrifice for the sins of all mankind.

Instead of offering up the blood of bulls and goats, God would offer up the blood of His only begotten Son.

Then he would proclaim that all who believed that their sins were forgiven through His Son's death would be cleansed of their sins and have eternal life.

They would be the beneficiaries of gottesdienst: God's divine service to His people.

And when we meet for Divine Service every Sunday morning, we too are beneficiaries of gottesdienst.

Jesus Himself is in our presence, conveying God's love and forgiveness to all who believe in Him.

In every element of the Divine Service Jesus is speaking to us—His people.

In the words of absolution, the liturgical elements, the songs, the readings, the sermon and the Lord's Supper God is speaking to you and to me.

And, "...the word of God is living and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart."

And while God is speaking to us He is also looking into our hearts where He surveys our hopes and desires and longings and fears, rooting out our sinful thoughts and forgiving them, and strengthening us in faith and hope and love.

So let's take a closer look at what goes on in Divine Service.

We begin with the Invocation where we invite all three persons of the Triune God to come be with us.

The Father who planned our salvation; the Son who purchased our salvation; and the Holy Spirit Who preserves our salvation.

Then we confess not only our actual sins but our innate sinfulness, laying them down before the mercy seat of God.

This is always good medicine for our souls, for confessing our sins mortifies our pride—which is our biggest enemy.

You cannot confront your sins and your sinfulness and remain proud of yourself.

But you can do this with assurance that God will forgive you and make you clean and pure in His sight.

Being cleansed of our sins we are fit to be in God's presence and we sing the five prayers of the Kyrie Eleison which means "Lord have mercy!"

In this we express our humility which has been regenerated by pride-killing public confession, along with our prayers that God will restore us and our entire congregation to Shalom—the peace that passes understanding.

Next, the whole congregation bursts forth in the *Gloria in Excelsis*, a song of joy and thanksgiving that Jesus has interceded for us—and continues to intercede for us—to purchase God’s forgiveness of all our sins.

Then come the readings in which God speaks to each one of us in a way that our minds and hearts can understand.

In the *Old Testament* lesson, he shows us His plan for our salvation which He formed before the beginning of time.

It also shows us how He has been active in human history to fulfill His plan.

Then comes the Epistle Lesson which proclaims the chief doctrines or teachings of the church.

Then we come to the zenith, the pinnacle of God’s spoken word: the Gospel.

The words of the Gospel speak to our heart, engendering and sustaining our faith.

These are God’s words of salvation, His means of forgiving our sins and endowing us with the gift of eternal life.

Jesus speaks in the midst of us who are “two or more are gathered in His Name.”

Finally comes the message of the day: the sermon.

The sermon explains and applies the word of God to the minds and hearts and lives of the congregation.

It preaches law to the unrepentant, the secure and the proud, convicting them of their sinfulness and convincing them of their need for a Savior.

It preaches grace and forgiveness to the despairing, the doubting, the fearful and all those who are in need of consolation.

It teaches the knowledge of Jesus Christ and helps the congregation grow in faith, hope and love.

After the sermon we recite the Creed—the Apostles’ Creed on non-communion Sundays and the Nicene Creed on communion Sundays.

The Creeds are our confession of faith; they renew our baptismal covenant and remind us of the basic teachings of Scripture.

They witness to the perpetuity, unity and universality of the Christian faith.

The Offering is the one sacrificial element of worship where we express our gratitude to God for all that He has done for us.

We do this to support the work of the Church, which Christ called His body on earth.

The Offering is followed by the Prayer of the Church: a prayer for church state, government, home and the welfare of all people.

It fulfills the words of St. Timothy, who wrote: “I urge then, first of all, that requests, prayers intercession and thanksgiving be made for everyone—for kings and all those in authority, that we may live peaceful and quiet lives in all godliness and holiness.”

The Prayer of the Church is followed by the Lord’s Supper or Holy Communion, which along with the reading of the Gospel are the two most important parts of worship.

In the Gospel, Christ, the Incarnate Son of God, comes to us in spoken words; in Communion he comes to us physically in His body and blood.

The Lord’s Supper begins with the *sursam corda*: the proclamation: “Lift up your hearts!”

It continues with the *sanctus*, the great hymn of praise in which the congregation joins in the song of the angels.

“Holy, holy, holy Lord! God of power and might! Heaven and earth are full of your glory! Hosanna! Hosannah! Hosannah in the highest!”

Then we join in the *Lord’s Prayer*, a prayer of fellowship and faith in the Lord to prepare us for receiving His body and blood.

Next is the *Agnus Dei*. “Agnus Dei” means “lamb of God” and refers to Jesus Christ, God’s sacrificial lamb who served as a scapegoat for all of our sins.

Finally there is the distribution of the wine and host.

Luther wrote that the best preparation for taking communion was a heart which hungered and thirsted for the forgiveness of sins.

This is called repentance which is sorrow for our sins and the desire to turn away from them in the future.

Communion strengthens our love for each other and our faith in God. It is a foretaste of the feast to come.

The post-communion canticle is our song of praise to God for the benefits of the Lord's Supper.

Finally, the pastor bestows God's blessings to the congregation in the words of the Aaronic Benediction.

The benediction doesn't merely **ask** the Lord to bestow the blessings: it **transmits** those blessings to the people.

The entire Divine Service revolves around the presence of the risen, exalted Christ, where He serves as our mediator and High Priest.

He brings God and His blessings to us and He brings our needs to God.

Our reception of God's gifts and our access to Him depend entirely on Jesus' intercession on our behalf.

He is as present with us in Divine Service as if he were visibly seated upon the altar.

So when you worship, keep in mind that you are not there merely to mindlessly repeat liturgical formulas but to experience the Divine presence and service of your Lord and Savior.

In His Name,

Amen.