



# Rhythms of grace

## Hungry for the feast

**What kind of group are we when we gather for worship? What does it mean to be God's assembly, as distinct from any other community group? Lutheran liturgy offers a striking answer: we are a gathering of hungry sinners feasting on God's forgiveness.**

**Let's recall what happens when we come together.**

First, the pastor invites us to confess our sins, with the assurance that none other than our loving God calls us to do so. Traditionally, the liturgy uses the words: 'Let us draw near to God with a true heart', echoing the passage in Hebrews where believers are said to 'have confidence to enter the sanctuary by the blood of Jesus' (Heb 10:19–22). Symbolically, then, we are getting ready to enter God's sanctuary, God's holy place, and we dare to do so 'by the blood of Jesus'.

With this merciful invitation, pastor and people pray together an all-encompassing, one-size-fits-all prayer of confession, into which all our personal faults can be dumped. Its language is uncompromising, leaving no wiggle room for excuses. Quite bluntly we confess that we have sinned, and that our entire human condition is sinful. In sinning against and neglecting others, we have done no less than assault and abandon our Creator, in whose image all are made. Yet just as boldly we ask for forgiveness, the very purpose of Christ's 'holy, innocent sufferings and death'.

But confession is only a prelude to something truly remarkable.

Speaking in Christ's name, the pastor forgives unconditionally all who have confessed. What an audacious act! This is no general statement about God's grace; nor is it simply a prayer for mercy; it is God's powerful proclamation: 'I forgive you all your sins'. Indeed, the pastor can dare to utter such words only because Christ himself says: 'If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven' (John 20:19–23). Yet in these brief words the entire saving work of Christ embraces us personally: we are cleansed, justified, given peace with God and access to God (Rom 5:1,2; 1 John 1:6–9).

This is what it means to be God's assembly! We do not gather as the morally superior or the spiritually advanced, for through confession we die to all the pretensions and distinctions that mark one social group from another. And through absolution God raises a new kind of community, ready to receive God's blessing and share it with all creation. In fact, coming together like this takes us back to our baptism, where God gathered us into his assembly for the very first time.

Consider this: Even before the confession and absolution, our service begins with the same words with which we were baptised. And some Lutheran liturgies even replace the confession and absolution with an extended thanksgiving for baptism.

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