

Sermon – “Communion Sermon”
Sunday, September 2, 2018
Scripture Readings: 1 Corinthians 11:17-34, Matthew 5:21-26
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Our first reading comes from Paul’s first letter to the church at Corinth, one of the earliest church communities, and one which Paul is traditionally believed to have founded. Hear these words from First Corinthians 11, verses 17 through 34:

¹⁷ Now in the following instructions I do not commend you, because when you come together it is not for the better but for the worse. ¹⁸ For, to begin with, when you come together as a church, I hear that there are divisions among you; and to some extent I believe it. ¹⁹ Indeed, there have to be factions among you, for only so will it become clear who among you are genuine. ²⁰ When you come together, it is not really to eat the Lord’s supper. ²¹ For when the time comes to eat, each of you goes ahead with your own supper, and one goes hungry and another becomes drunk. ²² What! Do you not have homes to eat and drink in? Or do you show contempt for the church of God and humiliate those who have nothing? What should I say to you? Should I commend you? In this matter I do not commend you!

²³ For I received from the Lord what I also handed on to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took a loaf of bread, ²⁴ and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, “This is my body that is for you. Do this in remembrance of me.” ²⁵ In the same way he took the cup also, after supper, saying, “This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me.” ²⁶ For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord’s death until he comes.

²⁷ Whoever, therefore, eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be answerable for the body and blood of the Lord. ²⁸ Examine yourselves, and only then eat of the bread and drink of the cup. ²⁹ For all who eat and drink without discerning the body, eat and drink judgment against themselves. ³⁰ For this reason many of you are weak and ill, and some have died. ³¹ But if we judged ourselves, we would not be judged. ³² But when we are judged by the Lord, we are disciplined so that we may not be condemned along with the world.

³³ So then, my brothers and sisters, when you come together to eat, wait for one another. ³⁴ If you are hungry, eat at home, so that when you come together, it will not be for your condemnation. About the other things I will give instructions when I come.

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Our Gospel reading comes from Jesus’s Sermon on the Mount. Hear God’s Word to you in these words from the book of Matthew, chapter 5, verses 21 to 26:

²¹ “You have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, ‘You shall not murder’; and ‘whoever murders shall be liable to judgment.’ ²² But I say to you that if you are angry with a brother or sister, you will be liable to judgment; and if you insult a brother or sister, you will be liable to the council; and if you say, ‘You fool,’ you will be liable to the hell of fire. ²³

So when you are offering your gift at the altar, if you remember that your brother or sister has something against you, ²⁴ leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift. ²⁵ Come to terms quickly with your accuser while you are on the way to court with him, or your accuser may hand you over to the judge, and the judge to the guard, and you will be thrown into prison. ²⁶ Truly I tell you, you will never get out until you have paid the last penny.

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Today we concern ourselves with the matter of the sacrament of bread and wine. There are a lot of things which could be said about the Lord's Supper, of course, for it has an important role, and a long history of practice and meaning. But today we examine it specifically as *communion*, that is, a *common union* in Christ.

We often hear Paul's story of the institution by our Lord of the sacrament. We usually use Paul's narrative words when celebrating it ourselves. "The Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took a loaf of bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, 'This is my body that is for you. Do this in remembrance of me...'"¹

We do not often hear, as we did today, the verses which surround that passage, from Paul's letter to the Corinthian church. It turns out that this entire section of First Corinthians is something of a corrective reprimand. Paul is concerned over what he has heard about how the members of the church are practicing the Lord's Supper together.

Now we in the contemporary church tend not to give as much thought as our ancestors in previous centuries did to the theological ramifications of taking communion rightly, what it means to do so wrongly, or how serious such an offense might be. But perhaps you have run across elements of the questions of rightly or wrongly participating when you have visited certain churches, such as the Roman Catholic Church, or the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, which are more restrictive and regulated regarding who may receive communion and under what circumstances. It is less common to talk about these matters in denominations such as ours.

Paul, however, seems here to think it matters quite a bit. The whole first reading we heard was a sort of rebuke. He even uses a phrase which some of us might find kind of alien and odd; talking of taking part in the Lord's Supper unworthily. "Whoever, therefore, eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be answerable for the body and blood of the Lord," he says. "Examine yourselves, and only then eat of the bread and drink of the cup. For all who eat and drink without discerning the body, eat and drink judgment against themselves."² Those might be alarming words, especially with regard to a sacrament which we think of as bringing grace. To hear of it bringing judgment is concerning.

But there is a long history in the church of caring quite a bit about what it means to partake in communion unworthily. I am not sure the church has always gotten it quite right, which is probably one of the reasons today's church shies away from talking about it at all. But here it is, before us in our words of scripture, so we best not ignore it altogether.

¹ 1 Corinthians 11:23b-24 (*New Revised Standard Version*).

² 1 Corinthians 11:28-29 (*NRSV*).

What does it mean, though?

Different churches have taken up different angles on coming to the table in a worthy manner.

The Roman Catholic Church expects its members to take part in what they call the Sacrament of Reconciliation, commonly called confession, before they share in the bread and wine. The belief is that people are not supposed to receive communion with mortal sins³ on their souls; that they are to go to God with penitent hearts, confess, and be forgiven before taking part.

Some other denominations have the expectation that people will not come to the table with false doctrine, or with less than full membership in the community; one is expected to join that church or meet with the church's leadership before taking the sacrament.

Our own denomination has historically regarded baptism as a prerequisite for communion, and placed emphasis on educating children to understand what they were taking part in before allowing them to partake, although strictly speaking these are no longer absolute requirements as of the most recent Book of Order.⁴ In an earlier era, Reformed churches would require everyone to meet with the Pastor or the Session and be examined first—often in Presbyterian Churches approval was designated by giving a communion token to be presented in worship. (This burdensome requirement is one of the reasons Presbyterians historically celebrate communion much less often than every week.)

All of these kinds of requirements, having to do with personal worthiness or readiness, might be what come to mind most quickly when hearing language of unworthy participation in the Lord's Supper. But interestingly, although surely personal uprightness is important for various reasons, this sort of concern does not seem to be addressed at all by Paul here. Did you note the subject he was dealing with? It wasn't moral purity or sinlessness. It was unity among the body of Christian believers.

The context here was a very early church that was different from ours, which may make the descriptions of things sound odd, but the message remains. In those beginning days of the church, a local body of believers would not very likely have had a building dedicated to church

³ Protestant readers may not be familiar with this term. Roman Catholic theology divides sins into two classes: "venial sins", which merely weaken one's relationship with God, and "mortal sins", which are more grave. Both types require repentance and forgiveness, but the latter are ones serious enough to result in damnation if not forgiven. It is important to Catholics to be absolved of mortal sins not only before death, but also in preparation for the Sacrament of Holy Communion. Protestant churches also recognize the need for forgiveness in order to obtain salvation and eternal life (and in all cases this is granted through Jesus Christ), but they do not always make a distinction between degrees of sin in such a categorical way. The Roman Catholic point of view is partly based on an interpretation of 1 John 5:16-17: "If you see your brother or sister committing what is not a mortal sin, you will ask, and God will give life to such a one—to those whose sin is not mortal. There is sin that is mortal; I do not say that you should pray about that. All wrongdoing is sin, but there is sin that is not mortal" (NRSV).

⁴ The 222nd General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) voted in 2016 to alter the Directory for Worship and eliminate the baptismal requirement. This was approved by a sufficient number of Presbyteries and was therefore adopted as a part of the *Book of Order 2017-2019*. See the following two web sites for descriptions of the exact change to the language surrounding the Lord's Supper:

<https://www.pc-biz.org/#/search/6325>

<https://www.pcusa.org/news/2017/4/10/all-proposed-constitutional-amendments-have-been-r/>

functions, but would have probably been meeting in a home. And it sounds as though the way they held the sacrament at that time and place was more like Christ's Last Supper itself—that is, an actual meal eaten together⁵—rather than a ritual, small bit of food and drink as in our own worship services. So his discussion of some people being full and drunk and others getting nothing may sound strange to our ears. But that does not mean we can toss it aside as inapplicable to us.

For what he is addressing is factions. Divisions. Disregard for one another. Placing oneself above others. Incomplete unity, incomplete equality, failure to treat one another as full brother and sister. Concern for one's own place, status, and enjoyment, and lack of concern for one another's needs. Too much concern for getting respect and being honored oneself. Disrespect for others. Looking down on them, caring little for them, treating them rudely and unkindly. Are there these things in the church today? Are there not these things in every church today?

He addresses something not about our own personal virtue at all—in fact, overmuch regard for our own personal virtue is one of the ways we divide ourselves from one another. In other words, when Paul speaks of eating and drinking unworthily he is not talking about eating and drinking *as an unworthy person*, he is talking about *the manner in which the eating and drinking occurs*. He goes so far as to say it is not even the Lord's Supper when they eat in disunity, without regard for one another.

The Lord's Supper proclaims the Lord's death, he reminds us, a death for our sake, and if you remember the Last Supper as narrated in the Gospel of John, you will recall that his prayers on that night were for his disciples to be one, as he and the Father are one,⁶ and his command was for his followers to love one another as he loved them.⁷ His death is in the name of love and forgiveness and an act of forgiving, pure love for them, and they are to love one another in the same way, with the same love he showed them. So the whole point of that death is disregarded—we refuse to accept its meaning when we, his followers, live without such love. And when we do so in the very church itself, even while eating the very meal remembering Christ's death, we are defying the selfsame thing we are declaring to be true. This is what I think Paul means when he speaks of people “eat[ing] and drink[ing] judgment against themselves.”

It reminds us easily of the words of Jesus himself, as we heard in today's reading from Matthew: “So when you are offering your gift at the altar, if you remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift.”⁸

I know someone who grew up in a church where the sacrament of communion was served similarly to how we do it here at our Saturday night service; everyone came together into a large circle and shared the meal as a sort of gathered family, standing beside one another and able to see all those who were present with them, face-to-face. His preacher, though,

⁵ Christ's Last Supper is described in some form in each of the four Gospels. Matthew 26:17-30, Mark 14:12-26, Luke 22:7-39, and John 13-17 tell the story of this meal. John is by far the longest account, and has many details the others do not, but the other three (along with the 1 Corinthians passage being discussed in this sermon) are the ones which specifically describe the institution of what is now known as the Lord's Supper or Communion.

⁶ See the prayer Jesus offers in John 17, and specifically the petition he makes in verse 11.

⁷ See John 13:33-35 and 15:9-13.

⁸ Matthew 5:23-24 (NRSV).

always would give them a challenge before they began to partake of the Lord's Supper: "If anyone here has anything standing between him or her and someone else in the body of Christ then go and first take care of that. Be reconciled to one another, and then come back here and take part in this meal."

That's a bold order. It is a strong challenge. And yet it is probably entirely right. Paul has given us his own direct reminder in today's readings that communion is not communion without union. To take part in the ritual while defying what it means is an insult to the remembrance of Christ.

So I am going to issue you the same challenge. But this deserves some discernment. There is a reason our forebears in the early Reformed church and in the Roman Catholic Church alike required going through intentional self-examination before taking part in the sacrament.

That is why you're hearing this sermon today. Perhaps you wondered about that—why would we hear something entitled "Communion Sermon" this week, when we aren't celebrating Communion until next week? It is because I am going to give you the same charge as the preacher I spoke of gave to his church: if any of you have something you are holding against another person in this church, or if there is something they rightfully have against you, then go, "first be reconciled to your brother or sister," and then come back and share the Lord's Supper in true unity. Are there grudges? There is no room for that in the church. Are there divisions between you, or factions? Things you have done to another member of the body of Christ which you have not made right or for which you have not sought forgiveness? This might take some thought, some prayer, and some work in humility. So I'm being nice here—it seemed more gracious, true, and meaningful to speak of this seven days in advance than to put us all on the spot and throw such a thing at everyone seven minutes before communion.

Because I do mean for us all to take it seriously. Spend some time in prayer this week. "Examine yourselves," as Paul says. Spend some time in the work of forgiveness, and as necessary, in the interpersonal work of reconciliation. For some this may sound like hard work. For others it may sound like no work at all—at least until we have had time to think about it thoroughly. But however much or little work this may involve, the result is that we come back here refreshed. Christ has come to lift our burdens, and to bring us to unity, with one another and with God.

The Church is not meant to be just like any other institution of people, weighed down and encumbered by the fractures between people, full of cliques, petty disputes, disregard for one another, and prideful thinking. We are called to something greater, to a different way of life. May the Lord hear our prayers of healing and discernment. May we act on what we hear in our hearts. And in our efforts, even be they feeble, beginner steps at the fullness of unity and reconciliation, may God sanctify and make complete our unity, in the love of Christ; amen.