

Written Copy: 1 Corinthians 11:17-20 “Closed Communion?”

Maundy Thursday

Thursday, April 14th, 2022

Text: 1 Corinthians 11:17-20

¹⁷ But 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, in the first place, when you come together as a church, I hear that there are divisions among you. And I believe it in part, ¹⁹ for there must be factions among you in order that those who are genuine among you may be recognized. ²⁰ When you come together, it is not the Lord's supper that you eat.

The text's intent

To correct wrongful and sinful observance of the Sacrament that amounted to the Corinthians celebrating their own meal instead of faithfully following and worshipfully observing the Sacrament that Christ had given them for their physical and spiritual benefit. They gather as separate factions instead of the one Body of Christ they were called into, united in repentant faith toward Christ and the doctrinal teachings of His Apostles and united in forgiveness of one another. They are to celebrate the Sacrament as given by Christ to His Apostles recognizing His true presence in the bread and wine through which they receive the salvation He gave His body and blood to procure for all men. In faithfully observing this Sacrament they are proclaimers of His Gospel and His death and resurrection with an eye to His Last Day return. Faithful observance grants all the gifts Christ has to give in the Gospel. Partaking against His instructions in an unworthy manner that does not recognize His presence or the His desire for our unity brings judgment upon the partaker instead of blessing. This judgment has the aim of moving each to repentance and back into the unity of faith unto life everlasting.

Focus Statement:

The Lord's Supper is to be celebrated in the manner in which Christ gave it to us. It is His Supper given for our physical and spiritual strengthening as He is truly present in the bread and wine according to His own word and promise. We receive along with Him all the benefits He gives through the Gospel of forgiveness of sins, salvation and eternal life. He works to draw us into communion with Him through repentant faith and in unity with one another by the faith we share in the one true Apostolic doctrine we confess.

Function Statement:

Why it's important to know:

In our current culture of tolerance just to get along it is a temptation to ignore the call that we celebrate the Sacrament as the One Body of Christ united around faith in Him and in the Apostolic doctrine that forms our unity. We are tempted to allow anyone and everyone to celebrate the Lord's Supper so that there are no hard feelings or anyone feeling left out or seeing us as acting superior to them.

What the hearer should do as a result:

Hear and heed Paul's admonishment to celebrate the Sacrament as Jesus gave it to us. To examine our need as sinners for the grace He offers in the Sacrament, and to observe and foster the unity with our fellow members Christ desires and encourages us to have.

Subject Sentence: Sacrament of unity with Christ and one another

Introduction: Factions Among Us

How many of you faithfully root for University of Michigan Sports Teams; raise your hand. Great. Now all of you who faithfully root for Michigan State sports teams raise your hand. Great. Now, what if for every worship service we had assigned seating so that all of you who root for U of M sit in the section to my left, all who root for Michigan State sit in the middle section to my right, and those like me who just don't care one way or the other sit in the section to the far right. And of course those who root for Ohio State would be made to gather outside on the lawn in the rain and cold. Could you imagine what might develop if this seating pattern became the normal? Might some of you, when you came to sit in your appropriate section, start flying your team's colors and proudly wear your team's jerseys? How long would it take before you began to see yourselves as better than those sitting in that section over there? I don't know, maybe that's a stretch. But could you imagine if we did the same thing only divided and assigned seating according to each person's political party affiliations? My point here is that it wouldn't take long for us to turn from the unity that we have as of Lamb of God members into factions and divisions with varying degrees of animosity toward one another.

Thankfully our Lord and Savior is neither a U of M fan nor an MSU fan. He's not a member of any political party, not today, or even when He walked the earth in Palestine 2000 years ago. Membership in Christ's kingdom, which is His Church, is founded not on these earthly things but on faith in Him as Lord and Savior, and on His salvation that He won for us and has given to us by grace through faith. In His Word He calls us to be united as His One Church on Earth in **Ephesians 4:4-6** ***4 There is one body and one Spirit---just as you were called to the one hope that belongs to your call---5 one Lord, one faith, one baptism, 6 one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all.*** Over and over again the emphasis is on "ONE". And despite our differences in non-religious non-salvation related worldly things, like college teams and political parties, we try to live out our lives as the One Body of Christ in forgiveness and love as He calls us to.

Yet that is not the way the Church on earth manifests itself today, is it? We break off into denominations that are similar to the factions and rivalries we have in college sports; except we are divided on religious issues. There are us Lutherans. But there are also the Roman Catholics, The Presbyterians, The Methodists, The Episcopal Church, and the Baptists, just to name a few. Is there any unity amongst these diverse denominations? We can unite around our faith in Christ and our confession of the Apostle's Creed. Confession of these things would mark a particular congregation as being a Christian congregation no matter what denomination they are aligned with. That being said, I would not encourage you to worship at a Baptist Church, or a Roman Catholic Church, or a Presbyterian Church, or any of the other denominations I listed. While they may confess the Apostles Creed, they differ with us in a number of beliefs and practices that are confessed and explained in our Small Catechism; truths that are drawn from Scripture, including our belief that Christ works through means of grace including the Sacraments.

And even among those who call themselves the Lutheran Church there is division. As members of this Missouri Synod Lutheran Church, I would not recommend you worship at those congregations who are members of Evangelical Lutheran Church of America or ELCA. They differ from us in very substantial ways that reflect their belief that Scripture contains God's Word but is not totally God's Word. They believe that some of Scripture is the word of man which can be changed or ignored. Since we believe that every single Book in our Bible is 100% God's infallible Word to us, we do not and cannot have fellowship with them even though they call themselves "Lutheran".

Denominations and Factions. Factions are nothing new to the Church. Factions existed even in Paul's day before any of these denominations existed. We can see them at work in Paul's letter where early on he addresses the problem of factions. **1 Corinthians 1:11-13** ¹¹ **For it has been reported to me by Chloe's people that there is quarreling among you, my brothers.** ¹² **What I mean is that each one of you says, "I follow Paul," or "I follow Apollos," or "I follow Cephas," or "I follow Christ."** ¹³ **Is Christ divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Or were you baptized in the name of Paul?** The Corinthian Church was splitting into factions gathered around their favorite Apostle. It was like some wearing Apollos jerseys and sitting on the left, while others were wearing Cephas (aka Peter) jerseys and sitting in the middle right, and still others were wearing Paul jerseys and sitting on the far right. And they are each eyeing those sitting in other sections, seeing themselves as better and having God's favor more than the others. Instead Paul says that all should be wearing the jersey that boldly proclaims Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior, the One who sent each of these Apostles to point them to Christ alone and teach them the Apostolic faith that He handed down to them. His Church should be united and centered on Him and the truth He taught.

Problems Paul is Addressing with Observance of Lord's Supper

1 Corinthians 11:17-18 ¹⁷ **But 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, in the first place, when you come together as a church, I hear that there are divisions among you. And I believe it in part,**

In our text Paul is describing how factions are causing serious problems in the Church's celebration of the Lord's Supper. In fact, the trouble is so serious that he says rather their worship lifting them up in faith, it is leading them into a worse condition than they were in before. He tells them that in Jesus eyes they are not really celebrating the Sacrament that He had given to them at all.

1 Corinthians 11:20-21 ²⁰ **When you come together, it is not the Lord's supper that you eat.** ²¹ **For in eating, each one goes ahead with his own meal. One goes hungry, another gets drunk.** ²² **What! Do you not have houses to eat and drink in? Or do you despise the church of God and humiliate those who have nothing? What shall I say to you? Shall I commend you in this? No, I will not.**

Do you hear what Paul is saying? When they come together in what they call a worship service, instead of celebrating the Lord's Supper, they are celebrating a supper of their own design and intent. How could this be? In the city of Corinth the social strata you belonged to was a very important thing. The wealthy didn't mingle with the common working class, and neither had any time for the poor. The Church would gather for worship that included a Fellowship Meal at the house of a wealthy person who had room as was able to supply the food for members of the Church. But how much you got to eat, and drink, depended on if you could get there early, like the wealthy could, or if you had to wait until you got off work, like the working class did. And where you sat for the Fellowship Meal depended on your income level. The wealthy had a prized place in the banquet hall where the food was served, the working class and the poor were made to sit out in the courtyard. Those who worked and arrived late and sat outside didn't always get their fair share of the supper, but the wealthy in the banquet hall most certainly did, as well as more than their fair share of the wine. And when it came time at the end of the meal to celebrate the Lord's Supper, there wasn't always enough to go around for those out in the courtyard either. None of this was conducive to worship, and this setting most certainly was not Jesus had in mind when He instituted His Supper.

Paul's solution? These Fellowship Meals didn't belong as a part of worship. Factions and divisions have no place in the Church where Christ proclaims Himself to be the Lord of the rich and the poor, the slave and the free, the Greek and the Jew. To allow these divisions to be manifested in a worship service, and brought into the celebration of the Lord's Supper, amounted to despising the Church of God, despising the very Body of Christ. It's easy to see why Paul lays down the law with them here.

1 Corinthians 11:19 **for there must be factions among you in order that those who are genuine among you may be recognized.**

So what was the solution to the problems of factions? Just pretend they didn't exist? Just tell everyone to get along? That doesn't work as we stand in worship before our God who knows our hearts and minds. Our God is the God of truth who exposes sinful divisions through His law.

And Paul says that indeed there must be factions. Why is that? When some are adhering to the correct teaching of Apostolic Doctrine as Paul had come to teach them, while others are not, then factions and divisions are a must. Otherwise those who are adhering to the truth are lumped in and can be sucked in with those who are holding to teachings that are not correct according to the Word of God. Those who were attempting to worship and observe the Lord's Supper in compliance with what Paul had taught them had to separate from those who were not. And as they did, they stood as a witness to the truth, just as we in the Lutheran Church Missouri Synod stand as a witness to the faith from Scripture that is explained in the Small Catechism.

Paul Correcting the Wrong Observance of the Lord's Supper

1 Corinthians 11:23-25 ²³ **For I received from the Lord what I also delivered to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took bread, ²⁴ and when he had given thanks, he broke it, and said, "This is my body which is for you. Do this in remembrance of me."**²⁵ **In the same way also he took the cup, after supper, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me."**

Paul reminds them of what he originally taught them about the Lord's Supper. Paul lays down the template by which they can in fact celebrate the Sacrament Jesus had given to the Church. It was given to him by the Lord Jesus Christ Himself who instituted it as His gift to His disciples then and to us the Church today.

On that night Jesus lays out what it is and explains it so that His disciples then, as well as we today, know what we are receiving. Jesus takes two common elements and by the power and authority of His Word puts Himself into them, giving them His power to bring salvation to all who believe. He holds bread in His hand, but then tells them the reality that they can't see in the bread, that it is also His Body. He takes the cup of wine, and tells them the reality that can't see, that in that wine is His blood. His body and His blood that He would give as the sacrifice that atones for our sins and the sins of the whole world. Christ would very soon go to the cross to win for us that forgiveness in His suffering, death, and resurrection. And through this meal He delivers those gifts to you, and me, and all who believe. That's the Lord's Supper that He has given the Church, that we are to do often to remember His work of salvation for me, and for you. When we use the very elements that He said to use, and when we hear His powerful words of institution, we hold fast to His promise that when we take and eat, and take and drink, He is truly there to give us His gifts of forgiveness of sin, salvation, and eternal life.

1 Corinthians 11:26-27 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 guilty concerning the body and blood of the Lord.**

When you partake of His Sacramental meal you not only receive these wonderful gifts of grace, but you proclaim to your brothers and sisters in Christ and to the world at large your faith in Christ and His death and resurrection. When we faithfully follow His instructions, we proclaim that One true faith to each other and to the world.

But what happens when we don't follow His instructions? How might we be guilty of celebrating this Sacrament in an unworthy manner? When we replace His Supper with our own supper. When we don't use the earthly elements that He specifies in His giving of the meal, such substituting instead grape juice instead of wine. When we fail to recognize and believe that He is truly present in the bread and wine just as He promises. When we refuse to believe that this Sacramental meal is His means of grace to deliver to us what He won for us on the cross.

We are unworthy celebrants when we allow factions to be a part of our celebration. When we fail to forgive one another and see ourselves as better than our fellow worshiper. But we are also unworthy participants when we pretend that members of other denominations with beliefs that are not in accord with those from Scripture as explained and taught in the Small Catechism are one with us. The Lord's Supper is a family meal. And we who confess and believe the Apostolic teaching contained in the Small Catechism are united as a family in that One true faith that our Lord gave to Paul, which He taught in all His Epistles. We are united with them and with all other congregations that hold that same faith. But to allow those who don't share this faith to join us at the rail is to celebrate not our unity but a lie, because they are not united in the same faith with us. And Paul tells us there are serious consequences for all who celebrate this meal unworthily.

Our Observing the Sacrament as "Closed Communion"

1 Corinthians 11: 28-29 ²⁸ Let a person examine himself, then, and so eat of the bread and drink of the cup.²⁹ For anyone who eats and drinks without discerning the body eats and drinks judgment on himself.

Paul says that each person should examine himself or herself before partaking of the Lord's Supper. We do that examination together at the beginning of each Divine Service as we together confess our sins and then hear Jesus' words of Absolution. But we should also ask ourselves if we believe the Apostolic faith taught in the Small Catechism. Those who have been confirmed in a Missouri Synod Lutheran Church, such as these Confirmands have been and are being taught that faith. But that is not the case for those who come from denominations outside our own. So we celebrate what is called "Closed Communion". We close the rail to those who do not believe that Christ is truly present in the bread and wine. But we also close the rail to those who do not know that Apostolic faith because their Church doesn't teach it or hold fast to it. We do this out of love and protection for them because Paul tells us that those who celebrate the sacrament in an unworthy manner drink judgment upon themselves.

Conclusion

The Lord's Supper is a wonderful gift given by Christ to strengthen our faith in Him to life everlasting. But when we change it to make it a meal of our own design to please ourselves or make it more inviting for visitors from another denomination, we are taking a meal that gives assurance of faith and entering doubt into it. When we do not do as He has told us we may doubt that He is truly present with us to bless us.

Factions will always exist in the world around us. In this sinful broken world people will continue to divide according to sports teams and political parties. But factions and divisions have no place among us in the One true Body of Christ. As Paul says when there are those who do not hold to the true Apostolic teaching then factions are necessary, as we who believe and confess correctly stand apart as loving witnesses for Christ. Christians from other denominations that hold fast to salvation by grace through faith just as we do are most certainly saved and will join us in eternal life. But we celebrate Closed Communion to protect them and their faith so they will join us in everlasting life. Christ alone has the power to resolve the factions and separations that are the various denominations that exist today. We pray that He would use the mighty power of His Spirit to correct the errors they hold fast to so that we all one day might gather around the One True faith in Him. And if it doesn't happen this side of eternity, we know we will live as the united people of Christ in eternal life to come. Until then, we lovingly regard them as Christ's precious children, just as He does us. Amen.