

Worthy and Well Prepared

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As you know, today is the day of our Annual Congregational Meeting, and so some of you may think that my sermon title, “Worthy and Well Prepared” is referring to our excellent Leadership and Staff as they present reports to the congregation. And although I think they are both of those things, worthy and well prepared ... well ... no, that’s not what I’m going to be preaching about this morning.

We’re in the third week of our sermon series on Paul’s First Letter to the Corinthians. As we heard in our first two weeks, the church at Corinth was a young, feisty, spirit-filled but also rather immature group of folks with whom Paul had to deal at a distance by letters – letters which ended up as books of the Bible and for which we are grateful because the things Paul had to address still occur among us today.

Paul started off reminding them that, when he came to them, he brought nothing but “Jesus Christ, and him crucified.” Paul knew that, before saying anything else, he had to lay a solid foundation. And that’s just as true today; as a church, we get involved in many things – FISH Food Pantry, Grow Groups, MOPS, classes, fellowship groups – excellent and important every one. But only one thing is central for the church, only one thing sets us apart from other excellent but secular organizations – and that’s the proclaiming of forgiveness and new life through “Jesus Christ, and him crucified.”

Paul then had to speak to the Corinthian congregation about disunity and divisions among them – in particular their choosing of favorite leaders. Some followed Paul, some followed Apollos, others Peter – but Paul emphasizes that there is only one true leader, only one whom we follow unquestioningly, only one who brings us true unity: Jesus himself.

This morning, we jump over some of Paul’s letter – which we’ll get back to in coming weeks – and we land at rather a different and surprising point of Corinthian disunity: Communion. The word

“communion” is related to community, after all, so one would not expect disunity in Communion. But something had happened in Corinth, and so this morning I want to ask two simple questions: First, what’s going on in Communion? ... and, second, what was going on in Corinth?

First, What’s going on in Communion? What’s happening when we come forward to receive the sacrament of bread and wine? You know it’s got to be important, especially for us as Lutherans, because we say that it takes only two things to have “church”: not a sign and a building, not pews and an organ (band), not even a pastor and a group of people. Lutherans say that you have “church” any time the Word is rightly preached and the Sacraments are rightly administered. In other words, sermons, baptism and, yes, Communion. Pastor Jonna’s father – also a pastor – points out that even we Lutherans have an “altar call”: it’s the Lord’s Supper, that time and place where Jesus has called you to meet him at the altar rail in the words “given for you” and “shed for you.”

It all goes back to the Passover, of course, that celebration of God leading his people under Moses out of slavery in Egypt to a new land of freedom. Centuries later, Jesus was celebrating the Passover with his disciples when he astonished them by saying, “from now on, this bread is my body, given for you, and this wine is my blood, shed for you” for the forgiveness of sins. Turns out, the Passover deliverance from Egypt, as big an event as it was, had also been a pointer toward that day when God would send his *Son* into the world to bring salvation from sin, death and Satan – and not just for Israel but for the whole world. That’s what we celebrate in Communion. But there’s even more.

“This is my body,” “this is my blood” – just how do we understand these words? There’s rather a variety in the church, of course, from the Roman Catholics, who believe that the bread and wine actually physically change to Christ’s flesh and blood, to folks on the other side of the spectrum such as Baptists who believe that the bread and the wine simply commemorate what once happened long ago and far away.

So where do you find us as Lutherans? Well, we’re right in the middle – neither physical change, on the one hand, nor just commemo-

ration, on the other, but rather what is called the “real presence” of Christ. “Real presence”? Well, let’s try to explain it this way. A Lutheran, a Catholic and a Baptist go into a bar on Super Bowl Sunday. Now you need to realize that, in this story, the Lutheran comes out on top because ... a Lutheran is telling the story. Others might want to throw down a red challenge flag, but stay with me: I think this story comes pretty close in describing what “real presence” is all about.

So these three guys go into the bar. The TV over the bar is on, and suddenly Jimmy Garoppolo appears. “Wow!” the Catholic exclaims, “that television has just become Jimmy Garoppolo!” “No,” the Baptist says, shaking his head, “that’s just a photograph of Jimmy Garoppolo.” But the Lutheran – clearly the wisest guy in the room – replies “No, both you guys have it wrong. The TV hasn’t become Jimmy Garoppolo; the TV is still a TV. But what we’re experiencing is also far more than just a photograph of Jimmy Garoppolo. Rather, through the medium of television – in, with and under that medium, Luther would have said – we are able to experience Jimmy Garoppolo – the ‘real presence’ of Jimmy Garoppolo – in a far deeper way than any photograph could ever provide.”

And so it is; the example isn’t perfect, but it’s close enough, I think. “Real presence.” You can forget the three guys in the bar, but what you don’t want to forget is this: when you come forward to receive the bread and the wine, Jesus has promised to meet you here. The words “given for you” and “shed for you” are, indeed, *for you*. This is your altar call; this is your meeting place with the Son of God – not the only one, certainly, but the one Jesus had in mind when he said, “Do this in remembrance of me.”

... which brings me to that second question, What was going on in Corinth? Turn with me, if you will, to 1 Corinthians 11, found on page 1136 in your pew Bibles. And you’ll find that reference printed in the bulletin, as well.

What was going on in Corinth? I mentioned a problem of disunity. You see, when they came together for worship, they celebrated the Lord’s

Supper which also, at that time, included a meal, called a “love feast” – and that’s where problems developed. Look at verse 20 where Paul says:

When you come together, it is not the Lord's Supper you eat, for as you eat, each of you goes ahead without waiting for anybody else. One remains hungry, another gets drunk. Don't you have homes 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 praise you for this? Certainly not!

And then he goes on into the Words of Institution,

... The Lord Jesus, on the night he was betrayed, took bread, and when he had given thanks ... and so on.

Apparently, as we just read, when they got to the Lord’s Supper and the “love feast,” those who were wealthy were feasting rather sumptuously and were ignoring – Paul even says “despising and humiliating” – “those who (had) nothing.” They were thus “despising the church,” or “the body of Christ” as Paul often describes the church. And that’s the critical issue. *That’s* the issue in Paul’s mind when, in verse 29, he continues by saying:

... anyone who eats and drinks without recognizing – other translations say “discerning” – the body of the Lord eats and drinks judgment on himself.

“Without recognizing or discerning the body of the Lord”? Actually, the Greek just says “without recognizing the body.” The editors of our pew Bibles have added the words “of the Lord” – some translations add “of Christ” – but either addition just confuses things. [Now this may sound scandalous, but you have my permission to cross out those words “of the Lord.”] Paul warns of eating and drinking without recognizing “the body” – simply “the body” – because he’s warning of ignoring – dissing – “those who have nothing,” those whom they were “despising and humiliating.”

Now sometimes, among us Lutherans, that phrase “without recognizing the body” has been thought to mean not recognizing – not having a proper understanding of – the “real presence” of Christ in the bread and the wine. Remember “the real presence”? – the TV in the bar and all that? Well, listen carefully, because this next point is very important for Lutherans.

Sometimes, certain Lutherans have said that, unless you have a proper understanding of the “real presence” you are not “discerning the body of Christ” in the bread and the wine. Which, I think you can see, is to misunderstand Paul and what he was dealing with here. His mention of “the body” – just “the body” – refers to the congregation here, not Jesus’ presence in the bread and wine – though he is present there.

But the misunderstanding doesn’t end there. The next step is to say that non-Lutherans – in particular those who don’t understand, or agree with, the “real presence” – are not welcome at the Lord’s table because they will “eat and drink judgment on themselves.” But no, my friends, that is *not* what Paul is suggesting here. He is not concerned with the metaphysics of “real presence.” Rather, he’s concerned with folks who are looking down their noses at “those who have nothing,” as he puts it. *They* – the *despisers* – are the ones who are eating and drinking “without discerning the body” – that is, without recognizing the gathered faithful – and thus *they* were “eating and drinking judgment upon themselves.”

So who is welcome when we come forward for Communion this morning? *You* are, if you believe that in Jesus – through his death and resurrection – you have forgiveness of sins. *You* are, if you believe the words “given and shed for you for the forgiveness of sins.” And that’s true whether you are a Lutheran or a Baptist or a Roman Catholic or a Pentecostal; if you have faith in Christ, you are welcome at his table. This is, after all, the *Lord’s* table, not just the *Lutherans’* table.

Finally, there’s something else here in 1 Corinthians 11 that has sometimes really troubled folks – unnecessarily. Maybe it’s even been troubling you. In verse 27, Paul says:

So then, whoever eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty of sinning against the body and blood of the Lord.

Well, what’s *that* about? What is “an unworthy manner”? What is a “*worthy* manner”? And, most importantly, what must I *do* to eat the bread and drink the wine in a “worthy manner”? We all come to Communion unworthily, after all – that’s why we come. You and I come as hopeful sinners, eager to receive the bread and the wine and to hear

those words “given and shed for you.” Unworthy sinners, we are, coming forward in hope to hear words of forgiveness and acceptance. That was as true for the Corinthians then as it is for us today. What Paul is speaking of here is coming in an unworthy *manner*.

But a misunderstanding of verse 27, and its warning about coming in “an unworthy *manner*,” sometimes makes people afraid to come to Communion without sufficiently preparing. Without, for instance, first carefully confessing every sin or, for some, without having fasted or followed some other practice. All this in order to come in a “worthy manner.” These kinds of convictions can lead to overly sober, and even grim, faces coming forward to receive. Might that be you?

Now I’m not saying that Communion is a light or trivial matter; far from it. Rather, I’m saying that Communion, the Lord’s Supper, is a gift that should make us glad and eager to receive it. Another word used for the Lord’s Supper is “Eucharist,” after all. “Eucharist” means “thanks-giving” – the point being that we should come forward in a spirit of “Yes, thank you Lord!”

So what’s the issue about eating and drinking “in an unworthy manner” here in verse 27? Well, what have we just been seeing? Paul’s big concern in this chapter is not “unworthiness” in general – again, we are *all* unworthy to come to the Lord’s table, after all. Rather, the issue here was that

each of you goes ahead without waiting for anybody else. One remains hungry, another gets drunk. ... do you despise the church of God and humiliate those who have nothing?

Indeed, if you approach Communion, or even worship in general, with a sense that someone down the rail, or in the next pew, is of no account and perhaps even shouldn’t ought to be here ... well, then, God still has some work to do with you. But if you – perhaps for your whole life – have had this sense that you really aren’t worthy to come to the Lord’s table, then, my friend, I can tell you with joy in my heart, “You’re missing the whole point!” And that should bring joy to *your* heart – because it’s precisely those who *aren’t* worthy – including your pastors – who are invited to come and receive. I once saw a church sign that

read, “No perfect people allowed.” We could hang that sign over the communion rail – because, truth be told, there are no perfect people, and this is precisely *why* we come forward to meet our Lord at his table. Eucharist! Thanksgiving. Thanks be to God.

So let’s close with a trip down Lutheran Memory Lane. If you have gone through Confirmation, whether in the past year or 70 years ago, do you remember what Martin Luther said about Communion in his Small Catechism? Here’s what he said:

When is a person rightly prepared to receive this sacrament?

Fasting and other outward preparations serve a good purpose. However, that person is worthy and well prepared who believes these words, “given and shed for you for the forgiveness 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.

“Simply a believing heart.” Not for perfect people but for sinners – sinners who come forward “worthy and well prepared” with “simply a believing heart.”

So ... when you come forward in a few moments to encounter your Lord in the bread and the wine, what will you bring with you? And with what will you leave? I don’t expect to see giddy smiles as you approach, but I do hope you come in joy and expectation ... with “simply a believing heart” ... and that when you leave it will be with a deep sense that Jesus words, “given and shed for you” are indeed “most certainly true.”

Let us pray

Gracious God, thank you for the gift of salvation and life, given through Jesus by his death and resurrection – and through this meal which we are about to share and in which he said, “Do this in remembrance of me.” Help us to come gladly, joyfully, expectantly. And keep us always aware of, and concerned for, those who gather with us – that together we might experience and show that oneness we have in him. For we pray in Jesus name. Amen.