

“Holy Communion- God’s Love Feast”

1st Corinthians 11:17-34

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This morning, we have gathered with churches all over the world to celebrate a “love feast” together. After all, that’s what Holy Communion IS- it’s a “love feast” for the people of God WITH God, where God is the HOST who invites us to the meal and who at the same time offers us his own body as THE MEAL’S MAIN COURSE. In Jude, v. 12, the writer makes reference to the church’s “love feasts.” It is assumed that this is a reference to the Lord’s Supper- a meal that was foremost meant to be an occasion for Christian fellowship AND love.

Our text from 1st Corinthians 11, containing those familiar words of institution recited every time we partake of this sacrament, gives us some background as to why this meal WAS so important to that early church and how far it had deviated from what God INTENDED it to be. The congregation in Corinth had been split into various cliques and factions which were disrupting the spirit of unity they were meant to enjoy in Christ. To begin with, there was great SOCIAL INEQUALITY there whereby the richer members would eat without waiting for the arrival of the poorer brethren who would be late because of their occupations. (Perhaps this is why when we receive the bread in our OWN Communion meal, we all wait together until EVERYONE has been served and then we partake of the element together.) In addition, when they sat down to eat, they ATE AND DRANK TO EXCESS while others went COMPLETELY HUNGRY. In doing so, they humiliated their less fortunate brethren and demonstrated their contempt for the church of God. The place to feast was at home, NOT at church.

Such behavior was completely at odds with the meaning of the Lord’s Supper as Paul had taught them. He tells them it was not the Lord’s Supper they ate when they assembled because brotherly fellowship was absent from their gathering. He chastises them for eating and drinking without discerning the body and as a result, they eat and drink judgment upon themselves, that some of them had gotten ill and a few even died for it. What he means by this “lack of discernment” for the church body is not that they don’t take the sacrament seriously enough but that they have FORGOTTEN WHAT IT MEANS TO BE THE BODY OF CHRIST. When they act so selfishly towards their LESS WEALTHY brothers and sisters in Christ, they fail to recognize the church for what it IS, that IT IS THE BODY OF CHRIST IN WHICH THE LIVING LORD IS PRESENT. The Corinthians had used this meal to make themselves feel superior to others, and people who feel superior tend to despise, belittle, and ridicule those who are not like them. Paul makes it clear that like Christ, he is there to protect the claims of those who are made to feel less than whole or less than full members of his church. The church is the one place in all the earth where EVERYONE IS EQUAL- equal before GOD and equal before EACH OTHER. In Christ, there is neither Jew nor gentile, male nor female, slave nor bondsman; there is no white or black, no gay or straight, no Republican or Democrat for HE ALONE remains the great equalizer of us all.

Some years ago, three persons presented themselves for membership in a Washington, D.C. church. One was a common laborer, another was an immigrant from China, and the third was the Chief Justice of the U.S. Supreme Court. As all three stood before the congregation for full membership in the church, the minister said, “Thank God, at the foot of the cross the ground

is level.” YES, the ground at the foot of Christ’s cross IS level, and so must be the ground that serves as the foundation of THIS and EVERY church AS WELL. This is the ONE place in the world where “radical equality” is meant to be practiced- in the STRUCTURES AND OFFICES OF THE CHURCH as well as in her WORSHIP with Holy Communion serving as the SUPREME EXPRESSION of that principle. As every one of us finds ourselves on the same level BEFORE GOD, we should all, therefore, be on the SAME EQUAL FOOTING before one another!

With so much division and inequality among its members, how COULD such people celebrate the Lord’s Supper in a worthy manner? They were failing to discern the body; they had no real sense of to whom they ultimately belonged or whose body they essentially were. They were eating and drinking as selfish individuals, more intent on assuaging their hunger and slaking their thirst than in offering themselves to God as one family in thanksgiving around the Lord’s Table. For Paul, unless our act of breaking bread and drinking from the common cup expresses the love and solidarity of the members of the Body of Christ towards one another, then IT CEASES TO BE HOLY COMMUNION ALTOGETHER. If in our fellowship we fail to display real unity in Jesus Christ, then our eating this bread and drinking this juice is NOT Holy Communion and our church is anything BUT the Body of Jesus Christ. This meal wouldn’t benefit us any more than going through the drive-thru at McDonald’s or Burger King.

You see, this meal is a primary means of reminding us how we are all ONE IN JESUS CHRIST and that we have been BOUND TOGETHER IN A COMMON LOYALTY. In the previous chapter, Paul had told the Corinthians, “Because there is one loaf, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread.” When Paul wrote these words, he addressed a people who were as different as WE are here in America, for Corinth was the ANCIENT WORLD’S melting pot where Jews, Greeks, Romans, and barbarians all came together. Like them, we TOO are all different. There is not one of us who is exactly alike--either in race or ethnic heritage, in ambition, emotion, intellectual qualities, or opinions; no two of us are completely the same. Still, although we are all DIFFERENT, there is yet ANOTHER sense in which we ARE ALL THE SAME, says Paul- we have all received a COMMON GRACE which has come from the same COMMON SOURCE--JESUS CHRIST. Hence, any differences that may exist among us are really of no importance as the grace and love of our Lord in our lives TRUMPS EVERYTHING ELSE.

The Church as the Body of Christ can only remain strong so long as we recognize our common unity in and through Jesus Christ, and that worship and our participation in this meal is our opportunity to CELEBRATE such oneness. This carries with it some major implications for US. FIRST, it means we must strive to lay aside many of the issues and rivalries and distinctions which divide us and tend to dominate so many of our relationships OUTSIDE these church walls so that they never intrude and become issues and distinctions here WITHIN these walls. REMEMBER, when we walk through the doors of this sanctuary, we are All one, we are ALL equal- BEFORE EACH OTHER as we are BEFORE CHRIST. There IS no male or female, young or old, rich or poor; no educated or uneducated, no white or black, no gay or straight, no conservative and no liberal, no Republican and no Democrat for the truth is that all such distinctions DISAPPEAR BEFORE CHRIST AND HIS TABLE. We all become brothers and sisters under the skin and we can never forget it. Therefore, each of us has to make a real effort to put aside whatever personal issues and agendas we might have and instead focus on working towards the common good, towards that which is highest and best for our church. Otherwise,

EVERYTHING suffers INCLUDING our worship, our mission, and the quality of our fellowship together. We then risk becoming no better than the Corinthians were in their OWN Christian lives.

SECOND, as Paul says, we need to “discern the body of Christ” which means that we all need to keep in check any attitudes that would endanger the unity that Christ wished and died for. This includes any SPIRIT OF NEGATIVISM which might creep into our hearts and undermine so much of the good that we in fact do. We need to beware of CHRONIC COMPLAINING which can so easily TEAR DOWN THE BODY OF CHRIST rather than BUILD IT UP. We need to guard against LOOKING FOR EVERY LITTLE THING TO CRITICIZE, of anything that doesn’t quite measure up to our OWN personal standards, and practice patience and forgiveness instead, that is, extending the same grace towards others that God never stops extending towards US. And we ESPECIALLY need to repent of the SECTARIANISM that is dividing, not only our nation, but also our communities and even our own FAMILIES. We need to repent of the arrogance that infects our soul, the false sense of superiority that we are always right and anyone who disagrees with us is not just wrong but our ENEMY. Instead, Christ orders us to cultivate a humble and teachable spirit; he instructs us to become more patient and understanding with others who may look or think or act different from ourselves. I can’t repeat more strenuously, that the Church is not liberal or conservative and certainly not Republican or Democrat. Rather, the Church is defined by one person and one person alone- JESUS CHRIST, WHOSE BODY WE ARE AND WHOSE INTERESTS WE ALONE REPRESENT!

And THIRD, we must keep in mind that the one who extends the invitation to this meal is NOT the Presbyterian denomination of which our church is but one small part, and it’s certainly NOT FROM ME by virtue of being the pastor of this church. No, the one who summons us to this table is the LORD HIMSELF, JESUS CHRIST, who opens his arms up wide and says “Whosoever will, COME!” REGARDLESS of your age or sex or level of education, JUST COME! REGARDLESS of whatever race or ethnicity or sexual orientation you may have, JUST COME! REGARDLESS of what position you may hold in the church or perhaps this is the first time you’ve ever darkened the DOORS of one, YOU ARE WELCOMED HERE! Maybe you’re struggling to make sense of WHO I AM or maybe you’re not even sure you BELIEVE anymore, then STILL COME for this meal is intended ESPECIALLY for you.”

For over forty years, I have subscribed to *The Christian Century*, one of the most important and influential Christian magazines in America. This past week, the editor and publisher Peter Marty, who also serves as the senior pastor of the St. Paul Lutheran Church in Davenport, Iowa, wrote a compelling article he entitled “Who Is Welcome at the Communion Table?” In it, he QUESTIONS the notion that the sacrament of Holy Communion is a meal primarily intended for persons of faith, that is, for church members who have first been baptized and instructed as to its meaning, as set forth in our Book of Order. He suggests that if the meal is meant to satisfy the spiritual hunger we all experience in the deepest parts of our soul, then perhaps it might make BETTER sense if instead of limiting access to the table to just BELIEVERS, it should be opened up TO ANY AND ALL WHO MAY BE HUNGRY AND THIRSTY FOR THE GRACE THAT IT OFFERS- to those who hunger for LOVE and for RIGHTEOUSNESS, for PEACE and for JUSTICE in this world; to those who still thirst- for FAITH and FORGIVENESS, for HOPE and for DEEP AND MEANINGFUL RELATIONSHIPS whether they are baptized believers OR NOT, whether they

understand the meaning and significance of our theology and can recite our creeds OR NOT! He asks, “Maybe it’s time we start seeing the Eucharist as Christ doling out love to ALL God’s people, whether their belief is sturdy, shaky, or very much unformed.”

I concur with Rev. Marty and I’ll tell you why. About twenty years ago, my mother’s husband suddenly passed away, and because he was a faithful Catholic, his service was conducted by the local priest. The night before the service, a viewing was held at the funeral parlor and it was there I had the chance to meet him. I shared how I too was a pastor, though a Presbyterian one, and that where I attended seminary, I had taken classes alongside a number of Catholics preparing for the priesthood. In fact, we got so involved talking to each other that we completely lost track of the time and didn’t stop conversing until the funeral director interrupted us to tell us that it was now closing time and everyone had to leave.

The next morning, we all assembled at the local Catholic Church where the service was to be held. I, along with the rest of the immediate family, was invited to sit up front, right along the Communion rail from which my “new friend”, the local priest, would administer the Eucharist. After a hymn or two and a short homily, he blessed the elements and began serving us one by one. Starting from the extreme left, he went right on down the row placing the host on each person’s tongue and then reciting the Catholic mantra. When he got to me, he stopped and said, “Oh hi Dave” and then suddenly walked right past me without offering me the Eucharist. When he was done, every one of my family had been served Holy Communion except for me, and that was because he knew that I was a Presbyterian and ONLY CATHOLICS are allowed to partake of the sacrament. The irony here was that everyone else in my family was a Protestant TOO, and where I was the minister in the family, the one with an authentic religious calling, the rest of my family is a pretty secular group with very little interest in God or the church. Yet THEY were served the Body and Blood of Christ while I was denied it.

If there is a lesson here, perhaps it is to remember that if Christ is the one who extends the invitation for ANY AND ALL to join him for the meal in which he is both the host and the meal itself, then who are WE to say who is worthy or acceptable or qualified to partake of it, whether we’ve been instructed as to the meaning and purpose of that sacrament or not. God’s grace is free and open to EVERYONE, REGARDLESS of whether they understand or not, REGARDLESS of whether they are “good” Christians or not, REGARDLESS of whether they are faith-filled or perhaps even faith-LESS. To reiterate what Peter Marty says in his article, “Maybe it’s time we start seeing the Eucharist as Christ doling out love to ALL God’s people, whether their belief is sturdy, shaky, or very much unformed.”

The story is told of a good man who for one reason or another had become angry with the church and decided he would stay away from it and that included refraining from worship and the Lord’s Supper. Well the pastor went to see him and sitting before an open fire, the two of them conversed about what the problem was. After they had become quiet for a while, the pastor took a pair of tongs from the hearth and began separating the flaming coals, spreading them around the outer edges of the open grate. In a few moments, the flames died down and in another few minutes the coals lost their brightness and they increasingly grew ashen and dull. The pastor looked up at the member and said, “Do you understand?” The man thought for minute and nodded his head. Then the minister took the tongs again and taking the coals from

the outer edge of the grate, he placed them all together into a single pile. It wasn't long before the coals began to glow once more followed by the reappearance of flames. Again the pastor looked at the member and said, "Do you understand?"

Well the question before US this morning is "Do WE understand?" Church doesn't begin when the church bell tolls at 9:30 or 11:00 on a Sunday morning summoning everyone for worship. It begins right HERE and right NOW, IN OUR HEARTS AND IN OUR COMMON LIFE TOGETHER, for if we DO, then we not only eat and drink in a manner Christ would deem most worthy, but also this common fellowship and mission we enjoy will indeed be worthy of the name "the Church, the Body of Christ." Let us pray...

*Father, enable us to enter into our love feast this morning with pure and unblemished hearts. Help us to lay aside our many differences and strive for the love and unity you desire us to show and to become. In Christ's name we pray. Amen.*