

Sermon for October 6, 2019 – “Worthy?”

World Communion Sunday, 27th Sunday in OT, Year C – Text: 1 Corinthians 11:18-33

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Question: At large family meals how many of you have a kid’s table? Okay, now, how many of you, when growing up had a kid’s table set up? How many of you had to sit there? Did you enjoy it? I’d imagine that for a while, you did – right? But I wonder, were there a few years as you got older when you wanted to sit with the adults but weren’t allowed to and you were forced to sit at the kids table with your younger siblings or younger cousins? Didn’t you hate that? I’m not a kid anymore, we’d say! How many thought that it wasn’t fair? Where was the kids table located? The kitchen? The living room? What was often the case in my family, the main dining table was for the adults while the kids were usually set up in the kitchen when it was at our house; anyone else’s house it was wherever they could find room. At one particular aunt and uncle’s house we were put in the living room that really wasn’t all that close to the dining room, kind of down the hall and to the left, and they sat us kids at a rickety old card table. The darn thing wobbled and when you tried to cut your food someone’s drinks would spill so you had to be really careful. It was kind of a pain and the thing was that even though we had gathered as family the meal was never quite fully shared as family.

Such is the case with the Corinthian church as Paul writes to them in our reading this morning. Though the church is considered the Body of Christ a family united with Christ as our head the Corinthians had instituted some practices surrounding their observance of the Lord’s Supper that were more divisive than unifying. It was not unlike the family that gathers for a meal but then does not actually share the meal together. Unfortunately, though, the divisions among the Corinthians weren’t so sublime as a simple “kids’ table” versus “adult table.” You see, the Corinth of the ancient world was a bustling crossroads of the major trade routes to both the East and the West. It was known as a prosperous city and the wealthy of the city certainly flaunted their riches. As was the case all around the ancient world there was a deep division between rich and poor. This problem was magnified by the fact that many rich people in ancient times prided themselves on showing hospitality to the poor but the rich did so in such a way as to **shame** the poor and let them know they were inferior. For example, it was not uncommon for a rich person to have a main dining room for themselves and their closest friends where excellent food and wine would be served and then another room for the poorer guests with food and drink of a poorer quality. And now, it seems, this practice had crept into the sharing of the Lord’s Supper among Corinthian Christians. The thing of it is, though, the Lord’s Supper is **supposed** to be a meal that transcends **all** divisions. It’s one of the main things that’s supposed to bring all Christians together, uniting them as the Body of Christ.

At the time of Paul’s letter when Christians gathered to share the Lord’s Supper it was much like the Last Supper, the meal Jesus shared in the Upper Room with His disciples on the night before His crucifixion. The Christians shared a whole meal together.

And during the course of the meal a particular loaf of bread and a particular glass of wine was blessed and shared. The problem was the Corinthian Christians weren't sharing this meal in such a way. Those with homes large enough to host these gatherings were generally the wealthier believers but they did not serve the meal equally to all gathered as a family should. Instead they continued the secular custom of keeping the best for the rich and giving the rest to the poor. And so the Lord's Supper, which was one of the central acts of worship uniting the body of believers, was having the exact opposite effect. It was, instead a way of solidifying the deep divisions in the community. Paul was outraged – and who could blame him? Christians were to be examples for the rest of the world. We are supposed to show the same hospitality radical hospitality that Christ showed when He ate and drank with the kind of people that most people didn't even want to acknowledge even existed let alone be in the same room with. This was not on display in Corinth.

Not long ago, I read a story about a minister in Houston Texas. This story actually took place about five years ago and it describes a fascinating thing that this minister, a man by the name of Tom did when he would help out at the local homeless shelter and their soup kitchen. After the homeless people have been fed Tom would invite them to join him in a service of Holy Communion and they would all go to the shelter's little chapel and share the Sacrament of the Lord's Supper together. They'd share a meal in the soup kitchen and then share communion together in the chapel. One day, Tom had an unforgettable experience. As he was serving communion he came to a man kneeling there who looked like he had been out on the streets for quite some time. The man looked up at Tom and whispered, "Skip me." Caught off guard, Tom said, "What? Pardon me?" In a louder whisper, the man said again, "Skip me." "Why?" Tom asked. "Because," the man said, "I'm not worthy." Tom said: "Neither am I." Then Tom added, "I'll tell you what. I'm going to serve communion to these other people. Then, I'm going to come back and serve communion to you and then I'd like you to serve it to me." The man blinked and said to Tom, "Father, is that legal?" "The name's Tom and yes, it's legal. "It's also beautiful and that's what we're going to do!" Tom went on and served all the other people kneeling there. Then he came back to the reluctant man and said, "What's your name?" The man said, "Josh." Tom placed the communion elements before him and said, "Josh, here is the Body of Christ broken for you and here is the Blood of Christ shed for you. Eat this and drink this in remembrance that Christ died for you. Amen." Josh blinked back the tears in his eyes as he received Holy Communion. Then, Tom handed Josh the bread and wine knelt down and said, "Now, you serve me." Josh nervously took the trays and again he said, "Father – sorry, Tom, Are you sure this is legal?" "Yes, it's legal. Just do it." Josh's eyes were darting from side to side as he looked over this shoulder and then the other as if he expected the police, the FBI, the CIA, or the Pope to come rushing in and arrest him at any moment. Finally, he held the elements toward Tom. As Tom received the Sacrament, Josh muttered, "Body – blood – for you, hang in there!" Tom said later, "Of all the communion rituals I'd ever heard I don't recall the words 'hang in there' in any of them. But at that moment for me Holy Communion had never been more 'holy.'"

At the Lord's Table all distinctions are abolished. Paul acknowledges in this passage that even within the church there will inevitably be some varied groups but that should never be the case when we come to share the Lord's meal. This is a meal for all even though none of us are worthy. And if, when we break the bread all share it in the same way this declares powerfully that we are all one body. But if you divide the room and the guests into different groups that makes the opposite point. And when I say share it the same way I don't mean that we're all to use the same method. Whether by intinction or in what we consider here at Westwood First the "traditional" way doesn't really make all that much difference. It doesn't matter what kind of bread or whether we use wine or grape juice. What matters is this, and here, brothers and sisters, is the thing, when we share this meal the "body" we're to recognize is both the presence of the Lord in this meal AND the unity of the church that shares that bread. The two belong together. If we're not sharing this meal as one in Christ then we're dishonoring Christ himself!

Today, all across the world Christians are observing World Communion Sunday. As we join Christians of all colors and creeds at this table today we're reminded that our sharing of the common loaf in this common meal signifies our unity **in Christ** above all. Still, we come to this table today marked by the divisions of our world. We come knowing that there are places where people are not able to gather in public and place themselves at great risk to share this meal together. We all know how easy it is to distrust and bully, to ridicule and ignore, to separate ourselves and exclude people and point them out "the other." But our time at the Lord's table calls us to a different way of thinking, a different way of living. A way that rises above all division. A way of unity. A way of grace and love. A way that reflects the very love of Jesus Christ himself. This shared meal with its shared memory, a kind of embodiment of Jesus' own sacrifice, is at the essence of who we are as Christ's disciples. So, as you come to receive the Lord's Supper this morning, as we share in this meal with Christians around the world, come ready to experience God's grace. Allow that grace to wipe away feelings of "otherness" and division and then let that grace mold you and shape you. The same grace that molds and shapes us all unites us all as the Body of Christ and gives us the strength to hang in there!

Thanks be to God.

Amen and amen.