

“MORE THAN MEDIOCRE - COMMUNION”
A SERMON PREACHED ON 1 CORINTHIANS 11:17-34
PREACHED AT CHIPPAWA PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH,
NIAGARA FALLS, ONTARIO
SUNDAY, FEBRUARY 3, 2019
10:00 a.m.

There are signals at our house
that the meal is going to be a special one.

An initial signal is that the plates and wine glasses
are coming from the cabinet in the living room,
not the cupboards in the kitchen.

Another signal is the sound of muttering
as we hunt for a full set of the cloth napkins for the table
rather than pulling a few sheets off the paper towel roll.

We'll know the meal is an important one
because candles or a centre piece and the better cutlery
will go onto the table.

In the life of the church know that communion is a special meal.

The signals are there.

We know it is an important meal,
because when we hear Paul speak to the Corinthians
in this part of his letter,

he adds one more signal,
the tone of his voice.

You know, *the* tone.

The tone the dog receives when he's been on the couch,
The tone your child receives when after you've asked
for the third time and she still doesn't have her coat
and boots on to get out the door.

You know the tone.

The tone a teenager receives when he's been out too late,
The tone spouses give each other
when the bills need to be paid and you find out
what the other has spent.

The tone is actually a chord, three tones in one,
fear, concern and anger,
it is a broad tone.

Paul has the tone.

Fear, concern and anger.

I have no praise for you.

I never would have believed you would stoop to this.

In this matter I do not commend you.

If you eat the bread or drink the cup in an unworthy manner,

you will be guilty of sinning against the body and blood of the Lord.

Examine yourself before you eat the bread and drink the cup.

If you take part without discerning the body of the Lord,

you are eating and drinking judgement on yourself.

That is why some of you are so unwell and even dying.

The tone.

What have you been doing?

What were you thinking?

Don't you realize?

It's a special meal.

In fact,

if you grew up with the King James Version of the Bible,

the Bible that was translated in 1611,

then you have grown up knowing,
that not only is it a special meal,
it is a downright frightening meal.

In King James language it sounds especially frightening.

“Wherefore, whosoever shall eat this bread,
and drink this cup of the Lord, unworthily,
shall be guilty of the body and blood of the Lord.

But let a man examine himself,
and so let him eat of that bread,
and drink of that cup.

For he that eateth and drinketh unworthily,
eateth and drinketh damnation to himself.”

Whoa. Damnation.

Okay then, who wants to come for dinner?

Anyone for seconds?

You can see how historically there is a strong motivation to make sure
communion is celebrated in a worthy manner.

Celebrated in a worthy matter

because it is seen as a life and death matter.

So the church has worked hard to get it right.

In fact the church has been fighting about communion for centuries.

The Church of Scotland,

is the church which could be considered

the biological parent

of the Presbyterian Church in Canada.

Church of Scotland DNA still runs through us.

You can trace the genes as far back as 1644,

at the Westminster Assembly in Britain,

where a gathering of clergy and laity,

were called together to advise Parliament on religious matters.

They were to develop a worship service

that would stand against the Anglican book of common prayer,

as well as the Catholics.

It would be something shared for the Puritans,

the Presbyterians, the Reformed, the Independents.

Part of the debate in this assembly was what to do with communion.

It is a special meal.

They debated how it should be practised in a worship service.

You think Brexit is challenging,

you should watch British Parliament figure out communion!

The debate began on June 20.

It continued until July 10.

Unfinished, they picked up the debate again in November.

It is a special meal.

There were important concerns.

It was considered a life and death matter.

Taking part unworthily could bring damnation.

So questions arose about Issues such as

whether communion should be taken

sitting or kneeling,

whether groups should come up around the table in turns,

or whether there should be one large table.

Who should break the bread?

The minister? or each person herself or himself?

There was a question about whether the minister's words about the table

should be delivered from the pulpit or not.

There was the question of whether Psalms
could be sung while groups came up to the table.
or whether there should be silence.

With all their time, work, debate and discussion
in 1645 they produced is called the Westminster Directory.
A guide to worthy worship.

Here are some of the instructions.

The ignorant and scandalous
are not fit to receive this sacrament of the Lord's Supper,
and therefore should not receive it.
That means children and those without mental capacity,
and those living scandalous lives
were not allowed to take communion.

It sounds exclusive, judgmental and controlling.

But it was viewed as a pastorally sensitive decision.

For the ignorant were considered unable to examine themselves,

and if someone was living scandal,
and if they took part in an unworthy manner, well,
'he that eateth and drinketh unworthily,
and eateth and drinketh damnation upon himself.'

Preventing the ignorant and scandalous from taking communion,
wasn't exclusive, judgmental or controlling.

It was pastoral care, saving them from damnation.

It provided the worship service with a five star safety rating.

It was the air bag which

provided protection from a head-on collision with God.

There were side airbags too.

The Westminster Directory, the worship guide

required that public warning be given the Sunday before

the administration of the sacrament.

"The administration of the sacrament',

it sounds like a medical procedure.

The Directory required that people must be taught how to prepare
so they could come ready.

Do some of you remember a Sunday called Preparation Sunday?

There were ABS brakes.

at the service itself.

The minister is to give warning at the start of the sacrament.

“All such as are ignorant, scandalous, profane,

or that live in any sin or knowing offence,”

they should not take part in communion.

The minister was to remind worshippers that if they eat or drink unworthily,

they eat and drink judgment on themselves.

It's a special meal.

Make sure you get out the good dishes and do it right.

These practices were passed down to us.

Although they have become faint echoes of what they were.

In my time in the Presbyterian Church,

I still remember communion cards.

Many years before there were cards,

there used to be communion tokens.

In the time around Preparation Sunday,

communion tokens used to be given out by elders.

Elders would come to your home for a visit.

They would decide if your life was in good enough shape
to receive communion.

If they deemed it was,

you got your token.

You could get through the door
to get to the table.

In some historic churches you will still see a little fence
across the front of the church.

If you had your token, you could come through the gate
and approach the table.

If you didn't have a token, you didn't get communion.

It was called fencing the table.

Some were in, some were out.

Getting measured for a token

was like having your height measured at an amusement park

letting you know if it was safe to get on the ride.

Fencing the table still occurs today, although in a much gentler way.

Listen closely during the invitation,
there are words for those who should
and should not come to the table.

It is a special meal.

We have been handed down much of the family china.

I remember communion being onerous and somewhat frightening.

I remember trying to decide if I was in a worthy state,
to take communion.

I would examine myself and try to take stock of my spiritual state.

Three coveting, one major jealousy,
a few talking back to my parents,
but still, an improvement over last time.

A quick prayer of confession and repentance before the bread went into my
mouth

and I was good to go.

Must have worked, I'm not dead yet.

But there were other times,

times I forgot communion Sunday was that Sunday!

I didn't prepare, didn't examine myself.

I wasn't sure if communion was something I could cram for.

When I knew I had had a brutal few months,

just knew that I wasn't right with God, my friends, my parents,

well then how could I partake?

What if communion just became habit?

What if I drank my Welch's grape juice without recognizing

the body of the Lord?

Well that's just playing with matches at the gas pump.

I mean, who wants to eat and drink damnation upon themselves?

Because of this text in Corinthians,

because of Paul's tone,

we have learned to be very, very careful at communion.

Don't let the children near it.

Don't alter it.

Don't do it too often.

This is potent stuff,

and it could blow us all sky high.

Of course you are seeing it and feeling it at this point.

There is a paradox, a contradiction here.

While you were still a sinner, Jesus died for you.

God so loved the world that he gave his son.

It is by grace you have been saved, through faith,

and this not from yourselves,

it is the gift of God.

Not by works, by what you do or don't do,

so that no one may boast.

The gift of God.

Yet at the table we have waited for God's fist to come crashing down,

bouncing all the dishes and cutlery,

for not doing it right.

I mean, Paul has the tone, right?

Better be worthy, or its going to be bad, really bad.

The trouble with reading other people's mail,

is you only have half the story.

This letter to the Corinthians,

we only have half the story.

We have Paul's tone and his remedy
for something that has been occurring.

What we didn't really get a good handle on was the problem,
what it was that would give him such tone.

So we've taken it upon ourselves to guess.

Unworthily means in a sinful state before God.

Examine yourself means do a heart check.

And whoa, well damnation is pretty clear.

Fill the cups right.

Make sure the juice is Welch's,
the bread Wonder,

and that the loaf the minister breaks isn't covered in flour.

Then don't mess with it.

But we've guessed wrong.

We can't just read the mail the Corinthians received from Paul.

We have to read Paul's mail from the Corinthians too.

Except we don't have Paul's mail.

So we have to do our best to figure it out,

by reading between the lines,

by doing historical studies of what times were like then,

by using archeology to put it all together.

The early church wasn't concerned about little cups,

or one big cup.

Or whether music should be played

during the serving of the elements.

Or whether people had their token to get in.

The early church didn't even have a building,

or a communion service set,

or an organ, or communion tokens.

The church gathered in people's homes.

Usually they would be in a wealthy person's home,

because they would have more space.

They would gather and eat together.

It was pot-luck. Everyone brought something.

They would worship and have the Lord's Supper,
finishing the meal with a remembrance
that Jesus died for them.

This is my body. This is my blood.

It actually sounds rather lovely.

Food, community, worship and a chance to experience and receive
first hand Jesus' grace and love.

However, what was actually happening was

the wealthy, who didn't need to be at work,
would arrive early.

They could also afford the good food.

The caviar, the camembert, and the fine French wine.

They would get the seats in the dining area of the home,

in the really nice room,

which would only hold about nine or ten people.

And they'd have a grand time.

They wouldn't share this good food.

In fact,

by the time those in the church who worked for wages,

or who were slaves,

who could only afford Doritos and dip,

or nothing,

by the time these people arrived,

the food was gone,

those who had got there early were plastered,

and the rest were left to stand out in the courtyard.

Listen to Paul again.

You can hear it.

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 in?

Or do you despise the church of God, the body of Christ,
and humiliate those who have nothing?

For anyone who eats and drinks without recognizing
the body of the Lord,
eats and drinks judgment on himself.

“Without recognizing the body of the Lord.”

One page later Paul says,
you are the body of Christ,

and each one of you is a part of it.

When you come to the table,
recognize the body of Christ,
look up,

from gorging yourself, feeding yourself,
focusing on yourself, worrying about yourself,

look up from the self-centred, self-focussed gobbling
and see, recognize, the body of Christ.

You are in a church family. Look around.

Whenever you eat this bread and drink this cup,

you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes.

You tell of Jesus' death.

This is my body broken for you.

This is my blood shed for you, a new covenant.

You tell of Jesus death.

Jesus died for her.

Jesus died for him.

Jesus died for you.

This is my body which is for you.

A gift for you.

My life for yours.

Paul's tone is one of worry, fear, concern.

Don't you get it?

It's about giving your life.

Jesus gave himself on the cross,

he shared himself.

It was about what he gave,

not what he could get.

If you are chowing down at the table,
self-centred, self-focussed, self-obsessed,
oblivious to everyone else, turned inward,
the danger is,
you don't get Jesus, at all.

If you don't get him, if you haven't received him,
if you don't have him,
you are on your own in this life.

You are stumbling in darkness,
you are going it alone
without the one who says,
I am the way. I am the life.
I am the light of the world.

You will stand on your own before God, with no extra help,
and you don't have what it takes on your own.
It is damnation.

The Corinthians' behaviour at the table,
selfish, self-focussed, self-indulgent,
blind and calloused to those standing at the door

means they didn't get it, they didn't get or have Jesus.

That was the danger.

Jesus gave his life for me.

Jesus gave his life for you.

Gave his life away, to you.

If you are anxious, clamouring, clutching and grabbing,

if you are turned inward,

hoping Jesus is just another self-help leverage point

to make you happy, and make your own life better

then you don't get it.

Communion is more than a mediocre meal.

At the Lord's Table, at this special meal,

table manners require that

we look up and we look around beyond ourselves.

We listen as Jesus gives of himself.

We are reminded in the way we are able to receive Jesus

because he freely gives of himself,

we too are to give of ourselves

and to give ourselves
back to Jesus,
to one another and to our neighbour.

When we give of ourselves,
we are proclaiming, showing the Lord's death til he comes.

This is a special meal.

Recognize the body and blood of the Lord.

See that you have been saved by the grace and love of Jesus.

Live a life that reveals Jesus.

In sacrificing and giving of yourself

remember his body given for you

his blood shed for you.

It is more than mediocre.

It is a special meal.

Amen.