

Sermon for Zion – October 11 2020 – Thanksgiving and Communion Sunday

Hymns: 802 – For the fruits; 536 – Christians, lift your hearts and voices;

775 – Sent forth by your blessing

Scripture: Acts 2:42-47; 1 Corinthians 11:17-26

Sermon Title: Communion: Paying Attention

*Acts 2:42-47*

*They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. Everyone was filled with awe at the many wonders and signs performed by the apostles. All the believers were together and had everything in common. They sold property and possessions to give to anyone who had need. Everyday they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.*

*1 Corinthians 11:17-26*

*In the following directives I have no praise for you, for your meetings do more harm than good. In the first place, I hear that when you come together as a church, there are divisions among you, and to some extent I believe it. No doubt there have to be differences among you to show which of you have God's approval. So then, when you come together, it is not the Lord's Supper you eat, for when you are eating, some of you go ahead with your own private suppers. As a result, one person remains hungry and another gets drunk. Don't you have homes to eat and drink in? Or do you despise the church of God by humiliating those who have nothing? What shall I say to you? Shall I praise you? Certainly not in this matter!*

*For I received from the Lord what I also passed on to you: The Lord Jesus, on the night he was betrayed, took bread, 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." In the same way, after supper he took the cup, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood; do this, whenever you drink it, in remembrance of me." For whenever you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes.*

It is wonderful to be together for Communion. Our last Communion service was March 8 – just before everything was shut down due to COVID – just over seven months ago! I know that many of you have missed celebrating the Lord's Supper together, as have I. There is something significant and deeply moving about Communion – our ancestor in the faith, John Calvin, described it as a channel of grace, through which, united with the proclamation of the Scriptures, the Holy Spirit moves among the people in a special way, joining us together, lifting us to God.

Calvin, in founding the Reformed Church some 500 years ago, which in Scotland became known as the Presbyterian Church, believed that Communion should be celebrated every week. However, the elders and city fathers of Geneva, in what would become a central Presbyterian characteristic, were concerned about the cost. You might wonder how much expense could possibly be involved in such a simple observance, but once you remember that the entire city of 15,000 attended church – you would be fined if you didn’t – and that records show each participant had not only bread but a good solid sip of wine – estimates agree about 2 ounces per person – no little tiny cups for them – well, things added up. 750 or so bottles of wine per week was a daunting cost. A compromise of four times per year was reached, but Calvin was still unhappy: *“I have taken care to record publicly that our custom is defective, so that those who come after me may be able to correct it the more freely and easily.”* Little did he anticipate COVID protocols.

Even four times a year was an improvement upon the custom of the day. In most Roman Catholic churches of that era, communion was celebrated daily, but only by the officiants. Everyone else just watched. The people in the pew were only served once per year. Calvin wrote, *“Plainly this custom which enjoins us to take communion once a year is a veritable invention of the devil, whoever was instrumental in introducing it... For there is not the least doubt that the Sacred Supper was in the beginning set before the believers every time they met together; and there is no doubt that a majority of them took communion...”*

And that does seem to be the case. The Book of Acts, in the little section we read, tells us that “the breaking of bread” was celebrated every time the believers got together; in Paul’s letter to the church in Corinth, it seems to have been a weekly practice. All other early Church records say the same. So what happened?

In Calvin’s case, the church believed that every participant in Communion should first be deemed “prepared.” This preparation generally involved a visit from an elder or two, and some very pointed questions regarding your spiritual life and societal conduct. If you somehow fell short – let’s say you missed several services, or you had been suspected of shifty business dealings, or drunkenness, or gossip, or infidelity – any number of things – you wouldn’t be permitted to partake. This practice continued up to comparatively recent times – in order to receive Communion, you had to be visited by an elder, and if everything seemed OK, you would be issued a “Communion Token” – kind of a ticket to Communion. No token, no Communion. Many of you are old enough to remember this practice. How on earth did this idea come about?

We’ll have to blame the Apostle Paul. Or rather, the Corinthian church, to which he wrote a couple of letters we have in our Bibles today. Corinth was a bit of a wild place,

famous throughout the Roman Empire for its loose moral character – to describe someone not from Corinth as a Corinthian was considered a grave insult. Some of the issues Paul addresses in his letters reflect this situation – one prominent member carrying on an affair with his mother-in-law; believers suing one another; the list goes on. Unfortunately, these problems carried over even into the celebration of Communion.

People, it seems, brought their own food to Communion. The wealthy would bring baskets full of choice food and wine – the poor only a crust of bread and a drop of sour plonk. And while the well-to-do would gorge on food and wine, even so far as getting drunk, the poor would go largely without. No one thought to share. Communion in Corinth had come to resemble a Bacchanal – a pagan feast which many in Corinth celebrated long before Christianity arrived. In a Bacchanal, which celebrates the god Bacchus, whoever eats and drinks the most wins. It was far removed from Communion as could be imagined. But old habits die hard, and the Corinthians confused the two events.

*“This won’t do,”* wrote Paul. *“You need to take a good look at yourself and think hard about what you are doing before you have communion like that.”* Or, as JB Philips translates the passage from Corinthians (11:26-29):

*Whenever you eat this bread or drink of this cup, you are proclaiming that the Lord has died for you, and you will do that until he comes again. So that, whoever eats the bread or drinks the wine without due thought is making himself like one of those who allowed the Lord to be put to death without discerning who he was. No, a person should thoroughly examine himself, and only then should he eat the bread or drink of the cup. He that eats and drinks carelessly is eating and drinking a judgment on himself, for he is blind to the presence of the Lord’s body.*

*“Think about what you’re doing,”* says Paul. *“Pay attention; we are here to remember Jesus, to commemorate the sacrifice of Jesus, and to think about how when Jesus gave his life, he gave it for us; and that when we eat the bread and drink the wine, it is a reminder that Jesus is a part of who we are now; that the very presence of God is within us; through Communion, it is as though Jesus is with us, here, now, as surely he is. Think about that,”* says Paul. *“And as you do, think about those parts of your life and your conduct that you would want to correct in order to be in the presence of Jesus.”*

That is as helpful and true for us as it was for our Corinthian friends. However, our forefathers and mothers in the faith took this a step further, and said that to be absolutely, positively sure that you have undertaken this self-examination, we are going to examine your life and conduct too. This made getting ready for Communion an extensive process of preparation, examination, correction and, finally, approval. In

addition to the elder's visits, special services would be held, often for weeks in advance. Communion, under such circumstances, was often reduced again in the Presbyterian Church to once a year. Poor John Calvin would be so upset!

The challenge for us is to pay attention to Communion. To not regard it as an empty or tedious ritual, but to think about what it means, about what is going on, and about where we fit in. And for me, that happens when I think about Communion as an act of connection. When we celebrate Communion, we are, in our common remembrance of the birth, the life, the death and the resurrection of Jesus, joining ourselves with one another here, as well as with those in churches throughout the world who are celebrating Communion too. Wherever we are, we are doing this together.

Further, Jesus says, "whenever you do this, do it to remember me." In remembering Jesus, we are not only being joined with those sharing Communion now, but with all who have gone before. It is not only a horizontal connection reaching north, south, east and west – it is a vertical connection, reaching both back in time to that first Communion meal, gathered round the table with Jesus, and forward in time to that great and glorious day when we shall all be together again in the Kingdom of God, celebrating the heavenly banquet with him. As you have Communion, think about that. Think about sitting there with Jesus, as he passes you the bread, the cup. "This is my body, my blood," has says to you. "I'm giving both. For you. To you. Remember."

Tomorrow is Thanksgiving. At the Rollwage house, our family will gather, but it won't only be us. In our hearts and minds will be all those we wish could be with us, but who are separated from us by distance and protocol; and in our hearts and minds also will be those separated from us by death. For all of these, we will give thanks to God. And we will remember. And in remembering, they will be a part of our thanksgiving, a part of our lives, a part of us, as surely they are, and ever shall be.

And today is Communion, the great celebration of remembrance and thanksgiving. And here we gather, our church family, but it isn't just us. There are those in lands and churches near and far now separated from us by distance; there are those who have gone before, now separated from us by death. And uniting us all, is Jesus. And we will give thanks. And we will remember. And by the power of the Holy Spirit, Jesus becomes a part of our thanksgiving, a part of our lives, a part of us, as surely he is, and ever shall be; as we remember, we are joined together, and lifted up to God.

That is how we pay attention. That is how we are connected. That is how we remember, how we prepare, to receive the gifts of God.

Thanks be to God. Amen.