

Examination Time

A sermon by the Rev. Dr. Jon M. Fancher
Rocky River Presbyterian Church, Rocky River, Ohio
June 5, 2016

- 1 Corinthians 11:17-34 For I received from the Lord the teaching that I passed on to you.... (v. 23a)
- Sermon-in-a-sentence: Examining our lives prepares us to submit our wills to God's purpose.

How many times have you participated in a communion service? Think about it. We celebrate communion monthly, plus a few other holy days. Suppose you were at communion services, say, ten times per year on average... about how many communion services would you have experienced so far in your life?

The point is that most of us have received bread and cup in the setting of Christian worship many, many times. For a few minutes this morning, let's pause to examine this ritual, this practice.

To start, let me point out that our understanding of communion has benefitted from the rudeness of certain Christians. It's true! It's because of some "Believers Behaving Badly" that we know as much as we do about how the early Church celebrated communion. You see, the four gospels describe Jesus sharing the gifts of bread and wine at the Last Supper. But the gospels don't tell of the disciples celebrating communion in anything approaching that manner. Nor does the gospel writer Luke describe communion in the Book of Acts, which was his *de facto* sequel to his gospel. No, it's only in the First Letter to the Corinthians that we learn from the apostle Paul that Christians were actually re-enacting that Last Supper in a worship-related ritual. We learn about this from Paul because he scolded them about the manner in which they carried out the ceremony. They were behaving badly. Here's how it went down:

- Christians didn't have church buildings of their own in the earliest days; they met in private homes. It was logical that the believing communities would meet in the homes of wealthier believers since they would tend to have larger homes and more servants to be able to accommodate the group.
- Apparently the hosts would tell their friends, "Come early to get a good spot, and we can enjoy some pre-service hors d'oeuvres."
- And apparently they would hit the buffet line pretty well, and the wine bar, too, to the point that when the rest of the folks showed up, the community meal was decimated and the early birds intoxicated. The folks who showed up at the prescribed time were left with nothing to eat or drink.

That's the reason Paul scolded them in Chapter 11 of 1 Corinthians. He wrote: "What do you expect me to say to you about this? Shall I praise you? Of course I don't!"¹

He then wrote words that are so familiar to us that we miss some of the passion of his deliberately spelling out what he had taught them previously:

²³For I received from the Lord the teaching that I passed on to you: that the Lord Jesus, on the night he was betrayed, took a piece of bread,²⁴ gave thanks to God, broke it, and said, "This is my body, which is for you. Do this in memory of me." ²⁵In the same way, after the supper he took the cup and said, "This cup is

¹ 1 Cor. 11:22c Good News translation

God's new covenant, sealed with my blood. Whenever you drink it, do so in memory of me."

Paul's next words explained why observance of the Lord's Supper was incompatible with selfish, rude behavior. He wrote, "This means that every time you eat this bread and drink from this cup you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes."² Paul implied that by our actions and our character we should convey the message that our trust in God brings us together and opens our hearts to the needs of others. Does drunken, selfish, boorish behavior convey that kind of message? Paul didn't think so, and we wouldn't, either. So Paul explained to the Corinthians, "It follows that if one of you eats the Lord's bread or drinks from his cup in a way that dishonors him, you are guilty of sin against the Lord's body and blood."³

Okay, we don't come to church on the first Sunday of each month to gorge on food that should have fed the masses; we don't seek to intoxicate ourselves and call it a tribute to our Lord. But is it possible that, in some more subtle way, we are dishonoring Jesus as we prepare to receive from the Lord's Table?

Paul had a recommendation. He wrote:

²⁸ So then, you should each examine yourself first, and then eat the bread and drink from the cup. ²⁹ For if you do not recognize the meaning of the Lord's body when you eat the bread and drink from the cup, you bring judgment on yourself as you eat and drink.

Examination time.... Paul challenged us to challenge ourselves to "come clean" before the Lord, engaging in self-examination before we receive the elements of communion. After all, "Only the individual person is capable of testing and knowing why he or she did ([or] avoided) an action."⁴

For Roman Catholics self-examination takes the form of an act they call Confession or Reconciliation – to them it's so significant that they consider it a sacrament. But I remember reading that as late as the 19th century the Presbyterian Church here in this country required congregants to meet with their pastor in the days before a communion service to engage in confession. Once you had satisfied that requirement, the minister gave you a token that "admitted" you to the upcoming service of communion. The remnant of that practice is retained in our custom of a weekly prayer of confession – we seek to become more mindful of our imperfections and our absolute dependence on God's grace.

When we engage in self-examination as part of our spiritual preparation to participate in our Lord's Supper, we know we'll not pass the examination with flying colors.

- We have missed too many opportunities to come to someone's aid.
- We harbor too many resentments and jealousies.
- We stroke our egos with self-serving thoughts and assure that our lives are filled with abundant comforts.

We fall short of perfection. Jesus knows that. He wants to be sure that we realize it, too. Because it's when we're aware of our limitations and our imperfections that we are able to surrender our wills to serving God's will.

And so, sisters and brothers, let the examination begin.

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² 1 Cor. 11:26 Good News translation

³ 1 Cor. 11:27 Good News translation

⁴ New Interpreter's Bible, Vol. X. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2002, 937a