

Sermon

The Controversy of Holy Communion

April 23, 2023

[First Reading: 1 Corinthians 11: 27-29] Pastor Dan Peterson

Grace to you and peace from God, the source of life, and from Jesus, who is that life in the world. Amen.

My goal in today's message is to invite you to think about Communion, not so much with regard to the bread and the wine, the elements themselves, but rather as a sacramental act of sharing. I'm indebted to a recent guest at one of our forums, the Pastor and Reverend Joshua Liljenstolpe, who shared some of these comments with us during that time.

As I move through my remarks, I will be drawing upon two primary documents. The first is *Admission to the Sacrament*, which was issued by the Lutheran Church–Missouri Synod in the late 1990s. The second is *On the Use and Means of Grace*, which was likewise published in the late 1990s by the ELCA. This sounds really exciting, doesn't it? Like a formal dissertation on the meaning of the sacrament! My goal is to help that not be the case, and again, by the end of the message, to invite you to see Communion from a different angle.

We encounter a threat, first, in 1 Corinthians 11: 27-29. I invite you to take that out if you wish, and follow with me. Paul says, and I quote,

“Whoever eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner, will be answerable for the body and blood of the Lord. Examine yourselves, and only then eat of the bread and drink of the cup, for all who eat and drink without discerning the body, eat and drink against themselves.”

Wow. These are some of Paul's harshest words. “For all who eat and drink without discerning the body, eat and drink [judgment] against themselves!” Because there seems to be so much at stake here, churches – including the Eastern Orthodox tradition, the Roman Catholic tradition, and those within the Lutheran tradition – have, understandably, adopted “standards of admission,” as it were, for Holy Communion.

For example, the Lutheran Church–Missouri Synod writes,

“This tradition teaches both

1. a genuine understanding of faith of and faith in Christ's presence in and through the sacramental elements, (again, the bread and the wine) and
2. doctrinal and personal unity among those who commune together, are necessary for admission to the Lord's Supper.

So, if you do not share the understanding of the Lutheran Church–Missouri Synod, or if you do not meet the pastor's approval of a particular congregation, you are not admitted to the sacrament. Now, it's easy here to stop and judge the LCMS. But we,

too, in the ELCA have a standard of admission, and you hear it—or read it, rather—in our bulletin every week.

“Admission to the sacrament is by invitation of the Lord presented through the church to those who are baptized.”

So, the price of admission here may be a little more relaxed, a little more inclusive, but nevertheless there is a standard. There is a requirement, if you will. And if you don't meet that requirement, then you are not welcome at the table, for your own good.

The Roman Catholic Church, likewise, talks about how in order to receive the sacraments you have to be penitent beforehand; you have to confess your sins; only then will you be worthy to receive.

Martin Luther himself likewise spoke of the need to trust in the words *for you*, which is to say, to recognize not that you are now *worthy*, but in fact *unworthy* and *that* becomes the price of admission.

So, the challenge is this: These standards, however understandable they are, can place an enormous spiritual burden on the individual, especially on those of us who can't get this little humming hive of dreams to stop talking. The problem here is this: Some experience the standard of admission as a *cognitive* burden: One must trust that Christ is truly in, with, and under the bread and the wine, and that His presence through these elements brings forgiveness; that's a burden to some. For others, the burden is *emotional*: your heart must be in the right place; you must have the right disposition to be worthy.

These requirements, these standards of admission, in turn, raise a lot of questions: Can infants and children be admitted to the sacrament? The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod says “no.” And the ELCA says, “Well, you figure it out as a congregation.”

If indeed they are *not* admitted, because presumably they don't understand or grasp the meaning of the sacrament, then when should they be allowed to be admitted, at what age? In nerd-speak, the question here is “What is the age of discretion?” And the church historically has vacillated on this; sometimes it's as low as five, sometimes it's as high as seven or eight.

And finally, what about adults who are cognitively impaired, those who are developmentally delayed, those who have dementia or Alzheimer's? If the requirement is to understand what you are receiving in the Eucharist, so that you don't receive it unworthily, can we indeed include folks who have cognitive impairment, or must they, too, be disallowed from participating in communion? As you can see, in short, there's a lot at stake, thanks to Paul's words in our first reading.

So, what does Paul mean when he talks about “receiving the sacrament of Holy Communion in a worthy manner”? What in short—and this is my basic question—is the “right way” to practice and receive Communion?

Well, to answer this question, we have to understand the problem – and this is an approach I like to take when I’m teaching students, say for a university course, we have to ask of the author, “What’s bugging her? What’s bugging him?” – What’s bugging *Paul* in this case?

As the Lutheran Church–Missouri Synod puts it; what was going on in the Corinthian house churches as they celebrated the Lord’s Supper? Specifically, what *sinful attitudes and practices* evoked Paul’s harsh response? So, what was going on in these house churches that would make Paul respond the way he did?

Take a look here at the first reading. What’s the problem? Can you guess? Well, if you look at verses 20-22a, you’ll have an answer:

“When you come together,” Paul writes, “it is not really to eat the Lord’s Supper. For when the time comes to eat, each of you goes ahead with your own supper, and one goes hungry, and another becomes drunk. What!?” Paul says, “Do you not have homes to eat and drink in? Or do you show contempt for the Church of God, And” – I think this is the most important – “and humiliate those with nothing.”

Again, verse 29, “for all who eat and drink without discerning the body, eat and drink judgment against themselves.”

The Lutheran Church–Missouri Synod describes the problem here quite well. They say:

“The general contours of the situation are clear. The house churches of Corinth were practicing a communal meal in connection with the observance of the Lord’s Supper. During the communal meal there was *inequitable distribution of food*, resulting in excessive eating and drinking on the part of some, and a lack of provision for others. The richer Christians who owned houses were particularly subject to Paul’s disapproval. ‘It’s not that you don’t have houses in which to eat and drink, is it?’”

This comment helps explain why Paul distinguishes the church from the world, the latter of which he condemns in verse 32. Again, the Lutheran Church–Missouri Synod clarifies the problem:

“In Roman society,” we read, “patrons often seated members of their own high social class in the best room, while others were served in plain view of this room, in the atrium, the couches in which might seat as many as 40 persons. The guests in the larger room, the atrium, were served inferior food and inferior wine, and often complained, of course, about the situation. The parallels to the setting in Corinth are revealing; the *culture* was setting the agenda for the church’s practice. Some members were eating much, and eating well, and were doing so in the very presence of fellow Christians who received less. Others were receiving precious little, if anything, at the community meal. This was life as they knew it. Some

members of society simply were more important than others, and they deserved special treatment.”

There was no need to be “as one;” divisions were a normal part of life. And the Corinthians saw no contradiction between life in the world and life in the church. Paul’s words, therefore, fit perfectly into the setting. “It’s not that you don’t have houses in which to eat and drink, is it, or are you despising the Church of God, and bringing shame upon those who do not have houses?”

As you can see here, the problem is not simply a personal one, which is to say, one’s disposition, for example, in receiving Communion. The problem was fundamentally a *social* issue. If you marginalize the poor in the process of receiving Communion in the church, you have received Communion in an unworthy manner.

The reason I’ve been citing the Lutheran Church–Missouri Synod in my remarks so far, is that because there’s actually agreement between what they’re saying, what the best scholars are saying, and what we would say in the ELCA, and I like to highlight those points of agreement, especially when we can learn from another sister tradition in order to illuminate our own. Failing to “discern the body,” which you see in verse 29, was not only about failing to believe that Christ was in, with, and under the bread and the wine *on the table*; it was also the failure to discern the body of Christ in the community of believers *at the table*. That distinction needs to fall away. Christ is present in both. When we ignore that “we are family,” (I was going to sing that, but I’ll leave it) – when we ignore that we are family as a church, which is to say, when we ignore that in spite of differing interests and gifts, we are one in Christ, we are equal before God and Christ, *we do so at our peril*. This is what distinguishes the church from the world. In the world, our society as well as the Roman one, there are hierarchies where some are better than others. In the church, those hierarchies are destabilized, and in the practice of Holy Communion for Paul, they should be dissolved.

So, what can we do? What can *we* change in *our* practice to receive the sacrament worthily? How do we properly discern the body of Christ? How do we receive Holy Communion in a worthy manner?

Well, for me, the answer is simple. In our church when you are at the railing for Communion, I want to invite you this morning to look to your left and to your right, and to discern the body of Christ by recognizing Christ in your neighbors. In other words, and this is point one, remind yourself that there are no distinctions at this table regarding status, period. All are one before God and each other, whether, as Paul says in Galatians 3, Jew or Greek, whether slave or free, whether male or female, or, and I would add this 2000 years later, whether black or white, whether Republican or Democrat, whether citizen or immigrant, whether straight or gay, *all are one in the body of Christ at this table*. That’s point 1.

Point 2: Change your focus. Change your focus. Recognize Christ not only in the elements, which is to say the bread and the wine, but also in the *sharing* of the bread

and the wine with one another. You see, we get caught up associating God's presence with *things*. The Gospel of John thinks that way; it treats the bread and the wine as spiritual things, you might say. And there's nothing wrong with that. But for Paul, in a more Hebraic way of thinking, I want to add to that, that we miss the full implication of Communion when we ignore that it is fundamentally a sacramental *action*, that it's an act of sharing with a sacramental quality.

Take a look again at the First Reading, verse 24. (You should have seen me at the eight o'clock service. This was a complete disaster up here. I have notes everywhere, documents, dissertations, all kinds of things. I'm actually giving you the pared-down version, because, like God, I try to be merciful to people! So, bear with me for just another moment...) Verse 24. What does it say? It says,

"When Jesus had given thanks, He broke it" (namely, the bread) "and said, 'This is my body that is given for you. Do this in remembrance of me.'"

Now I have to get into the weeds just a little bit here. So again, bear with me. Here Paul recites early Christian tradition in which Jesus says, presumably referring to the bread, "this is my body," right? We assume that he's referring to the *bread*. The trouble is, that *cases* in Greek are not the same. That's a fancy way of saying, every noun in Greek has a grammatical gender.

Here's the problem: The word for "bread" is a masculine term. It's a masculine case ending. But *this* is not a masculine term, which means it's *not talking about the bread*. It's neuter, which suggests grammatically that Paul is referring to something *other* than the bread. Indeed, he's referring to *the act of sharing* the bread. This explains why in the next sentence, he says, "Do this in remembrance of me." The sacramental quality for Paul is in the *sharing*, not just in the things; Paul is referring not to a thing but to an *action*. And the same is true, I discovered in preparing these remarks, of Matthew, Mark and Luke. What action could this be, but sharing?

Consider 1 Corinthians 10: 16-17. Paul writes, "The cup of blessing that we bless, is it not a sharing in the body and the blood of Christ? The bread that we break, is it not a sharing in the body of Christ? Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread."

The same thing is true, finally, in our Gospel reading for today, verse 30. Luke writes,

"When he was at the table with them, he [Jesus] took bread, blessed and broke it and gave it to them. Then their eyes were opened and they recognized him, and he vanished from their sight."

Here, sharing is more than caring. It's a *subversive act* that distinguishes the church from the world! Remember what I said with regard to Paul: poor and rich, black and white, Jew or Greek are all one at the table.

Next, it's a *communal* act that manifests the upside-down kingdom of God so central to the ministry and teachings of Jesus by flattening hierarchies and erasing status before God in Christ.

And finally, and I use this in the best sense of the word, it's a *charitable* act. Listen closely. Here, those who have nothing are given something. Here the poor are fed. This is not just an equality of status, but *actual sustenance* that's provided, *actual food* for empty hungry, bellies.

Dear Friends in Christ, the way to enact the kingdom of God is by *sharing* what we have with others in the name of Jesus Christ. We practice that every week, so that after service, you can go out into the world and perform what we've practiced. This is the true meaning as well, of the feeding of the 5000, where the miracle was not simply Jesus the Magician producing food enough for 5000 people. It's inviting people to share with one another so that everyone has enough.

And this is the message finally of Paul, not only to the Corinthians, but to us: Take what you have and share with each other. Not that all may have the same, but that all may have enough. When you come together to eat, Paul says, wait for one another. Only then, when you share the bread and the wine, and see Christ in the act of sharing, as well as in the community of those equals around you who share; then, and then only, will you commune in a truly worthy manner.

And all God's people said: Amen.

Thanks be to God.