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Children at the Lord's Table

a sermon on 1 Corinthians 11.27-32

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One pastor wrote about his childhood memories of Holy Communion. He and his brother would sit in the balcony. Their church celebrated the Lord's Supper quarterly, and with great solemnity. Those who were not going to participate sat separately from those who were. That made it easier for elders to "police" the table. And this was important, because they did not want anyone to eat and drink judgment unto him- or herself. Our scripture reading this morning was always read as a warning. "This meal is holy! Do not trifle with it!" He remembered the dignity of the elders, moving with military precision; the smell of the bread, which was always homemade; and the delight he and his brothers shared when all the little glass cups clinked into the pew holders in noisy unison. He was not allowed to eat and drink with the congregation until he had been through confirmation and made a public profession of faith, which happened to kids in his church around age 16. Yet he experienced the Lord's Supper as a child, as an outsider looking in, by watching the congregation.

Our children experience the Lord's Supper as insiders. The rule in our church is spelled out in our denomination's Book of Order. You know it because I've said it so many times. Officially it reads: "Baptized children who are being nurtured and instructed in the significance of the invitation to the Table and the meaning of their response are invited to receive the Lord's Supper, recognizing that their understanding of participation will vary according to their maturity" [W-2.4011(b)].

What this means in our congregation is, most children partake of the Lord's Supper from a very early age. We offer nursery through age 2. At 3 they begin worship with us, then after the children's sermon those age 3 through 8 leave for children's church. On Sundays when we celebrate the Lord's Supper, they return after the sermon in time to participate in the sacrament. I had planned for my children to wait to partake until they were 7 or 8 and demonstrated an appropriate measure of faith and understanding. The first time Joseph was in worship during the Supper, though, the bread came by and he helped himself. I decided to use the Supper to teach him that Jesus died for him. Every Saturday night before Communion, I talk with him about it. Our case is typical of Westminster families. Children here generally begin participating in their preschool years. If you listen to the children's sermons, you have heard me both explain the meaning of the Supper and instruct the children how to participate.

I wonder ... Have we lost something? The pastor who grew up watching the Supper from the balcony understood the holiness of the Supper. His experience formed a reverence in him toward the Supper that remains strong and vivid to this day. Will our children have that? Or by handling holy things at so young an age, will they lose that sense of holiness through familiarity? On the other hand, have we gained something? Will our children understand something about grace or being God's people or something else that he missed out on? Will the fact that they cannot remember a time when they did not eat and drink at the Lord's Table strengthen their faith and commitment down the road?

I suspect many of our parents do not realize what a big and controversial change was made to allow our children to eat the Lord's Supper. Some of you probably do remember the change. It was only made in the early 1980s. In that decade several Presbyterian denominations studied the issue. Ours made the change; most others did not. Those who wanted the change gave several reasons. (1) Confirmation is done later now. Not so long ago, children were confirmed around age 9. Today it is usually around 15 or 16. The reason is that by this age they have developed abstract thinking skills. They are better able to make a commitment they will stick to. If you confirm at age 9, well, that's a good enough age to begin communion. If you wait to 15 or 16, some kids will have already made a profession of faith. Why keep them from the table? (2) We baptize infants because they are part of God's people. If they are part of the covenant community, how can we deny them this sacrament that is a sign and seal of the covenant? (3) Faith is necessary for receiving the Lord's Supper, but children have faith. Not an adult faith, granted, but Jesus did say we ought to become like children in order to enter the kingdom of heaven.

Those who resisted the change had history on their side. John Calvin, the father of Presbyterianism, pointed to our scripture reading and said children should not be allowed to partake because they lack the discernment, self-examination, and understanding necessary to partake in a worthy manner. A hundred years later, the Westminster catechism made this the rule for all English-speaking Presbyterians: the Lord's Supper should be given "only to such as are of years and ability to examine themselves" [Larger Catechism Q. 177].

The whole issue hinges on the question: What does it mean to eat and drink the Lord's Supper "in a worthy manner"? And that is what this sermon is about, and that is why it is relevant to everyone here, not just parents. We all want to eat and drink in a worthy manner. We all want to participate meaningfully. And that is my agenda this morning. Helping you participate meaningfully. Helping parents to help their children participate meaningfully. I am not suggesting we change the rule we have. Neither the session nor I have that power anyway. Plus, I tend to think it is a good rule, provided we help our children understand.

So, how do we celebrate the Lord's Supper in a worthy manner? That is what our scripture reading is about. When we begin to interpret it, we need to keep its context in mind. There's a story behind this instruction. Paul wrote this because of a problem in the church at Corinth. They followed a practice that seems to have been common in the first century of celebrating the Lord's Supper in the context of a church dinner. They would gather for worship, then eat together, celebrating the Lord's Supper with the meal. They met for worship in homes anyway. There were no church buildings in those days, so this made sense.

In Corinth, apparently those who had plenty were feasting and even getting drunk, while the poor members went hungry. All this comes earlier in chapter 11. What they were really doing was treating the Lord's Supper like a pagan dinner party. Their behavior came straight out of their pagan culture, and it did not fit with Christianity at all. That church was divided into many factions, with a big fault line running between rich and poor. Paul was disgusted and angry. The Lord's Supper remembers Jesus' death, a death he died selflessly, for the sake of others, and they were using it as an occasion for selfishness. So he reminded them what the Lord's Supper is supposed to be. And then he gave them the warnings in today's passage.

Verse 27 has a sad history among English speaking Protestants. The King James Bible translated it, "Whosoever shall eat this bread, and drink this cup of the Lord, unworthily, shall be guilty of the body and blood of the Lord." That's not just sobering; it's scary. It's also wrong; at least, it lends itself to a wrong interpretation. People read that and asked, "Am I *worthy* to eat and drink the Lord's Supper?" Many decided, "No, I'm not." So they never participated in the Lord's Supper. Presbyterians tended to have the Lord's Supper very infrequently, maybe only once or twice per year. Why? They were afraid of it. No kidding. They knew, if you eat unworthily, you are guilty of killing Jesus. Paul used a legal term there. You are liable or answerable for the body and blood of the Lord. No one wants that. So many stayed away, because they were not worthy. And you sure didn't let kids near the Table. Others came to the Table, in the hope that they were worthy. And I don't know which is worse: to stay away out of fear, or to decide "Yes, I am worthy." Of course, that decision was up to the session of the church.

In any event, they read Paul wrong. "Unworthily" does not refer to the inner moral condition of the person. Rather, it refers to the manner in which the Lord's Supper is eaten. The key word "unworthily" is an adverb in Greek. It actually means "in an unworthy manner." On this practically all modern translators and scholars agree. Paul was talking about the Corinthian's practice of the Lord's Supper, not their personal level of holiness.

And this makes sense. After all, who is worthy to eat this bread or drink this cup? Who is worthy of God's grace? No one! By definition, you cannot be worthy of grace. Grace

is undeserved. And grace is what we receive in the Lord's Supper. If it were otherwise, I would have been struck down long ago for having dared to preside at the Lord's Table. And every one of you would have been struck down too. We are not worthy, but we can eat and drink in a worthy manner. That's what Paul is teaching us to do.

How do we eat and drink in "a worthy manner"? Paul identifies two ways: Examine yourself and discern the body. As I have explained, "examine yourself" does not mean you judge yourself to determine if you are worthy. It is not soul-searching introspection. Instead, it means make sure you are coming to the Table in the right frame of mind and with the right attitude. Do you have faith in Christ? Do you come seeking his grace? These are the questions you need to be asking. If you recognize your need for grace, and cling to the promise that Christ died for you, you are ready to receive what God wants to give you through this meal. As we examine our relationship with God, we need also to examine our relationship with our brothers and sisters in Christ. Remember the problem Paul is trying to fix. He has already told us, back in chapter 10, "Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body." I preached on that last month. Do you love your brothers and sisters sitting around you in this room? Do you believe you are all equally precious to God because of Christ's death for you all? If so, you are ready to eat in a worthy manner.

Examine yourself: Are you coming in the right spirit, for the right reasons, with the right attitude? Do you come seeking Christ? Do you love his people?

What does it mean to "discern the body"? Scholars are divided on this. Some think "body" means the church, that it point back to chapter 10, "We who are many are one body." Others say it more likely means recognizing that this meal is different from any other because the elements represent Christ's death for us. One commentary I read claims it has a double meaning, so both are true. For several reasons, I agree with the view that discerning the body means recognizing the connection between the elements and Jesus' death. Either way you go, however, you end up in a similar place. Discerning the body is either about your relationship with Christ or his people—or both. That's just what we were talking about when we were examining ourselves. Bottom line: If you love Jesus Christ, and you seek his grace, and you love his people, you are ready to eat and drink in a worthy manner.

Paul's warning should not keep us away from the Table. After all, God gave us this sacrament to reassure us and strengthen our faith. It is for the weak, and we are all weak. At the same time, the warning does remind us not to come casually. We handle holy things at this Table, and share intimacy with God.

So what about children? I have a lot to say about this, and not enough time to say it all. The Lord's Supper can be a source of strength and faith to our children, if we help them participate in a worthy manner. That means, at the very least, making sure they know

the story of Jesus, what the Lord's Supper means, and how to participate. I try to do this in the children's sermon, but that's not enough. They need teaching at home too. I understand that many parents might not feel capable of doing that. That's where we as a church need to help our parents. My preaching about the Lord's Supper is only a start. We need to do more.

Let me conclude now ... the Lord's Supper can open our children to the gospel. A child asks, "Why do we do this?" A parent or grandparent answers, "Because Jesus died for us." "Why?" "So we could be forgiven." "What does that mean?" You see how it can go. If a child understands the basics of this meal, he or she also understands the heart of the gospel. Jesus died for you. He offers you eternal life, not because you deserve it, but because God loves you. At the Lord's Table, a child can learn by doing – and not just in a cognitive way. We all can. With our heart, mind, soul, and body, we will know the love and grace of God. Amen.

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