

August 7th, 2022

1 Corinthians 11:23-34 “Celebrate With Thanksgiving”

Last week I said that we were going to end our worship service with the Lord’s supper but this week that’s where we’ll begin. Our call to worship this week includes the sixth stanza from our affirmation of faith.

At the Table of the Lord
we celebrate with thanksgiving
the saving acts and presence of Christ.

If you haven’t figured it out yet, communion is a big deal in our church. Other churches criticize us because they think we make *too* big a deal of it. Some will say, “If you take communion every week, it loses it’s meaning.” Other less-ecumenically minded traditions will say, “That’s too Catholic” or “too high-church.” “They’re just doing it for show.” Truth is, the majority of churches in the Christian tradition take communion and take it at various frequencies throughout the year. Some take it monthly. Some take it quarterly. Some take it whenever there’s a fifth Sunday kind of like how the *Upbeats* lead music on fifth Sundays. Some only take it on World Communion Sunday which is always on the first Sunday of October. I know of two traditions that offer it once a

year, but you get in trouble if you actually take it. And yes, that's as weird as it sounds. I'll get to that later.

Churches across the denominational spectrum place different priorities on communion depending on the meaning it has to the those who practice the tradition. For some, it's necessary for salvation. For others it's tied directly to the last week of Jesus' life or the "Passion" and is relevant only around Lent and Easter because that's when Jesus had a final meal with his closest disciples before he was crucified. What day was that again? Oh yeah, Thursday. That would be a good service to have during holy week. We could call it "Maundy Thursday" and people can spend the next few centuries debating about what the word "maundy" means.

The theme of "worthiness" comes up in some traditions and for good reason. You'll notice that sometimes the words of institution that our elders use at the table every week come directly from our text in 1 Corinthians 11. But we usually stop at verse 26 where it says, "For as often as you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes." Where we run into some trouble, though, is when we go on to read *past* verse 26 where Paul writes - "Whoever, therefore, 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."

Okay, that's a little ambiguous. Exactly what is "an unworthy manner?" (Thursday night Bible study people – shhh don't spoil the answer!) Is "being answerable for the body and blood of the Lord" another way of saying, "if you don't do it right, his blood will be on *your* hands?" Paul goes on to say – "*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 *judgement* against themselves."

This sounds very serious. It sounds like you better "know thyself" before you take communion, or you will be judged, and it will be your own fault. That's *why* there are a few traditions that offer communion once a year but nobody takes it. We in the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) are so accustomed to hearing about the open table and how we are all invited and how we are in the presence of Christ when we share communion with each other. Maybe it's because we rarely make it past verse 26 when it comes to talking about communion. This is definitely something worth considering when one approaches the Lord's Table. Self-examination and self-reflection are important when one accepts the invitation to come into God's presence at the Table. But as you know, we humans can take things too far, especially when it comes to how we practice our religion in public and how it relates to our understanding of God's grace and mercy.

I can never express in mere words how much I learned about ministry from my clergy mentor Jack Musick. You can take upper division theology classes in seminary until the cows come home, but unless you've been through a quality supervised ministerial experience you, as a minister of the gospel of Christ, will fall hard, fast and continuously. The best kind of clergy mentors are the ones who are salt-of-the-earth types who don't sugar coat things. My mentor, Jack Musick was a hard-living, hard-drinking truck driver until he came to know Jesus. After he became a Christian, he received his call to ministry and became a Disciples pastor a decade before we became an official denomination in 1969. These days a person has to have a minimum of a Master of Divinity degree to be considered for ordination and standing in the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ). Jack was grandfathered in. He had a four-year undergraduate degree from a Bible college and had very little time or patience for ministers, scholars and theologians who used ten-dollar words to try to impress people. My seminary Emmanuel School of Religion and the Committee on Ministry in the Region of Virginia reluctantly allowed Jack to be my supervised ministerial mentor because at the time, I technically had more education than he did. But I didn't have his experience which is what counted most. Jack made it his mission to help me survive my first pastorate and not get fired for, as he put it, "some stupid rookie mistake that

they didn't teach you about in seminary." Now, please understand that any time I talk about Jack Musick, I'm sharing trade secrets that some pastors believe ought not to be shared with their congregations. Kind of like a magician or a professional wrestler who unveils the curtain of mystery to reveal the tricks of the trade. I don't mind being transparent though. It keeps me honest and keeps things real.

Every Tuesday morning at 10:00 I would drive ten minutes to the neighboring town of Narrows, Virginia so that Jack could impart his wisdom on me. He'd ask me how I was doing, what I planned on preaching on Sunday, and if what I was learning in class was helping me "in the real world." Then the weekly lesson would begin. It usually started with the words, "Boy, let me tell you something about ministry." On one occasion I told him about how the elders in my church kept asking one of our faithful active members if he would consider being an elder. But the guy always said no, because, in his words, he wasn't *worthy*. He always made it a big deal to refuse communion when the tray was passed to him. On the occasions where the church would go forward for communion, he would go ... but he always managed to, as visibly as he could, refuse the bread and cup of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

Jack said, “Well, you’ve got to understand that in this part of the world there’s always one person in every church who makes a big deal out of *not* taking communion. It’s usually a man and it’s always someone who lives an overly-pious life shall we say. You know how Paul says the church is the body of Christ and everyone has a part in it? Well, these people are usually from the lower posterior side if you get my meaning. Some of these people come from old-timey traditions where communion is offered, but nobody takes it. Or, who knows, maybe this guy just doesn’t want to be an elder, and if that’s the case then count your blessings that you dodged that bullet.” I said, “But you know, I get what he’s saying because Paul says that if we take communion in an unworthy manner, we’re bringing judgement on ourselves.” Jack said, “Boy, ain’t *none* of us worthy. But that’s the whole point of coming to the table in the first place. Reaching out for that bread and cup is the first step in making things right. Nothing *we* do is gonna make us worthy. It’s Christ that makes us worthy. This guy’s refusal to take communion is false humility. It’s a humble brag. It’s for show, but the only thing it shows is that he doesn’t get what grace is all about.” This is why most seminaries require supervised ministerial experience. I was just lucky enough to get Jack.

For years we in the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) have struggled with what to do about communion almost

as much as we struggled with what to do about baptism. Are these sacraments something that we keep to ourselves and only allow those who have passed our tests of fellowship to partake? The “ah-hah” moment that inspired Alexander Campbell to part with the Old-Light Anti-Burgher Scottish Presbyterian Church was when he was in Scotland attending his church and it was time to receive communion. In that church, you had to recite a creed that was particular to that tradition. If you passed the test, you received a lead token that you took to the table when communion was offered. You’d place the token in container at the altar at which time the minister would give you the bread and cup. Legend has it that Campbell, who had a vision of a table that was open to *anyone* who confessed Christ, took his token, slammed it on the table, refused communion, turned his back, and walked out of the church never to return. I don’t know if that’s how it really went down, but it sure makes for a good cinematic moment doesn’t it? Campbell then went to America and joined his father to establish our church ... a church that declared an open table for all who confess Christ. Except that over time, we humans made the table smaller and smaller again. We made it about us. “Are we worthy? Are you worthy? What do you have to do to prove you’re worthy?” Pretty soon fewer and fewer people were able to come to the table. We started coming up with barriers that made it so that humans once again became the ones who determined a person’s worthiness to

come to the table. In Bible Study Thursday night we learned that the reference point for “unworthy” in the Corinthian church had nothing to do with one’s private morality or whether the church administers the Lord’s Supper “correctly.” The “unworthiness” had to do with how the Corinthian church was *excluding* people.

In our Affirmation of faith, we say, “At the Table of the Lord we celebrate with thanksgiving the *saving acts* and presence of Christ.” We forget that we aren’t the ones who makes us worthy, it is Christ. Thankfully folks like Jack Musick come along every so often to remind us. Here at First Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in Chico, as well as many other Disciples congregations in the world, practice an open table where all are welcome, and all can be made worthy by the saving acts and presence of Christ.