

Two Communion

Exodus 12:1-14 | Psalm 116:1, 10-17 | 1 Corinthians 11:23-26 | John 13:1-17, 31b-35

1 CORINTHIANS 11:23-26

²³ For I received from the Lord what I also handed on to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took a loaf of bread, ²⁴ and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, "This is my body that is for you. Do this in remembrance of me." ²⁵ In the same way he took the cup also, after supper, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me." ²⁶ For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes.

INTRODUCTION

This evening, we shall take a look at the 1 Corinthians reading we just heard. We are doing so for two reasons. First, by this point, I think most of you will know how I feel about feet. They are gross. They should be less disgusting after they get washed a little later—and let's not miss that the whole point here is that they are dirty and have to get cleaned—but they are still gross. My wife texted me this morning: *"How beautiful are the feet of the one who brings good news,"* which is the Apostle Paul quoting the prophet Isaiah.¹ I replied: "Maybe. But I still don't want to touch them." The 1 Corinthians passage doesn't mention feet. Secondly, the Holy Communion or Eucharist or Lord's Supper is arguably pretty important, even central to our worship together. But we rarely look at how 1 Corinthians talks about it—with our liturgy focusing on the versions found in the Gospels. So, I want to dive a little deeper in how Paul talks about the Communion for a few minutes, focusing on the both the vertical and horizontal dimensions, and making sure we avoid a particular pitfall that comes with any ritualized activity like this, or foot washing, or even baptism—namely focusing on the sign and missing the thing signified. So, let's take a little deeper look at the Communion.

1. VERTICAL COMMUNION

Of course, the context of 1 Corinthians is important. Paul is writing to a struggling church—a church that struggled with arrogance and taking advantage of one another in profoundly unloving ways. And so, he writes to them about how they behave when practicing the sacrament of communion, relaying to them his Word from Jesus Christ. *"For I received from the Lord what I also handed on to you..."*² This is important. He's referring to his personal encounter with Jesus on the road to Damascus when he was converted. He's relaying something he got directly from Jesus. And what did he hear? He heard the words of institution. Body broken and blood outpoured—Jesus tells what is about to happen to him. He is about to go to the cross and be killed, just like a Passover lamb, to make atonement for the sin of all God's people. This is the central act of our religion, the central concept of our faith, the one thing that must be believed. We, despite our good intentions, are separated from God by sin, our evil and rebellious thoughts and deeds that dishonour God. It takes a sacrifice to make us right with him again. And Jesus, here, tells his disciples that he is about to go and make that sacrifice—but not just make it, but be it. He becomes the sacrifice. This is the thing signified. Bread and wine are signs. Don't miss the thing signified.

¹ Rom 10:15. Cf., Isa 52:7.

² 1 Cor 11:23.

This is a memorial, but it is not only a memorial. We might think of it as vertical communion. In the act of coming to the table for bread and wine, we are renewing our relationship with God, we are communing with God through Christ Jesus, experiencing his grace anew. And it is a serious thing. Listen to how Paul continues after our passage:

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. 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.³

Don't miss the thing signified. This is more than a mere ritual. It is discernment and judgment and requires introspection, because it is fundamentally a spiritual activity. The *Book of Common Prayer's* catechism calls it, along with baptism, an "outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace given unto us."⁴ In other words, something spiritual is happening as we recall our sin, repent again, are reminded of Christ's atoning sacrifice, and experience grace in all of this. Don't let it be a mere meal, a nibble of bread, ritualized but without meaning. Remember Christ Jesus and, in partaking of this meal, proclaim the good news of his gospel until returns.

2. HORIZONTAL DIMENSION

Having looked at the vertical dimension of the Communion, let us also consider the horizontal. It is not just communion with God through Christ Jesus, it is also communion with one another in Christ Jesus. Paul, in the previous chapter of his first letter to the Corinthian church, notes:

The cup of blessing that we bless, is it not a sharing in 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.⁵

Communion is not just with Christ, but it is the binding together of God's people as one body who partake together. In our chapter of 1 Corinthians, Paul is clear that the unloving disunity of this church is actually undermining the sacrament for them. The section in which our passage is found begins like this: "*Now in the following instructions I do not commend you, because when you come together it is not for the better but for the worse.*"⁶ Don't miss this. He'd rather they stay home than continue practicing the Lord's supper in a disunified way. Now let me be clear, I'm not suggesting you should stay home. Too many of you are doing that at the moment. Rather, I'm suggesting that we should be unified. And indeed, our respect of the sacrament demands it.

Liturgically, in case you were wondering, this why *the peace* occurs right before Communion. It's a way of reminding us to be at peace with one another that we may be unified, not just with God, but with each other, when we present ourselves at the Table.⁷ But, and this is also important, Paul is talking about more than a mere handshake or nod of the head. He's about to

³ 1 Cor 11:27-29.

⁴ *Book of Common Prayer* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1969), 356.

⁵ 1 Cor 10:16-17.

⁶ 1 Cor 11:17.

⁷ For more on this and a possible antecedent in the Levitical law, see Robert S. Kinney, "Leviticus and Liturgy," Center for Pastor Theologians, March 2, 2021. See: pastortheologians.com/articles/2021/3/2/leviticus-and-liturgy.

challenge them to love one another in about the most beautiful passage on love every composed. Likewise, this is exactly what Jesus is getting at in the end of the Gospel reading:

I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.⁸

Even there, his symbolic act of washing feet was a sign pointing to the sacrificial death he was about to endure for the sake of his people. So, we too, should live to sacrificially serve one another in such a way, to love one another in such a way, that our communion may not be with just God through Christ Jesus, but with one another in Christ Jesus.

CONCLUSION

Don't miss the thing signified by getting stuck on the sign. But as you prepare to partake of the bread in just a few minutes, approach it in a renewed way, perhaps in a fresh way, communing with God as you ponder your need for his redemption, the sacrifice of Christ Jesus to reconcile us, and the resulting call that we should be unified, together as we come forward. *"For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes."*⁹

Let me pray: *Heavenly Father, in serving on another, help us to remember not only the sign, but that to which the sign points, the salvation that comes through the death and resurrection of your Son, our Saviour. In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.*

⁸ John 13:34-35.

⁹ 1 Cor 11:26.