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Sermon Series: *Not Business as Usual, No. 7*

Body and Blood

June 7, 2020 (video)

1 Corinthians 11:17-33

In any study of Biblical events that are not business as usual, certainly one thing that would have to be included is Jesus' institution of The Lord's Supper – the Mass, Eucharist, or Holy Communion. It's been called many different things through the ages, each with a slightly different mood or description.

But whatever you call it, in the end, it refers to the same thing - that which Jesus began in the gospels. All four of them mention it, each with a slight difference in perspective.

Of course, the gospels – the books of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John – were some of the last books of the New Testament to have been written. This means the earliest description of the Lord's Supper that we have is actually from the Apostle Paul where he refers to its celebration in the church at Corinth in First Corinthians, which is where we'll be today.

In First Corinthians, Chapter 11, after praising them for some good things that were happening there, beginning at verse 17, Paul writes these not-so-laudatory words:

In the following directives I have no praise for you, for your meetings do more harm than good. ¹⁸ In the first place, I hear that when you come together as a church, there are divisions among you, and to some extent I believe it. ¹⁹ No doubt there have to be differences among you to show which of you have God's approval. ²⁰ So then, when you come together, it is not the Lord's Supper you eat, ²¹ for when you are eating, some of you go ahead with your own private suppers. As a result, one person remains hungry and another gets drunk. ²² Don't you have homes to eat and drink in? Or do you despise the church of God by humiliating those who have nothing? What shall I say to you? Shall I praise you? Certainly not in this matter!

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

²⁷ So then, whoever eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty of sinning against the body and blood of the Lord. ²⁸ Everyone ought to examine themselves before they eat of the bread and drink from the cup. ²⁹ For those who eat and drink without discerning the body of Christ eat and drink judgment on themselves. ³⁰ That is why many among you are weak and sick, and a number of you have fallen asleep. ³¹ But if we were more discerning with regard to ourselves, we would not come under such judgment. ³² Nevertheless, when we are judged in this way by the Lord, we are being disciplined so that we will not be finally condemned with the world.

³³ So then, my brothers and sisters, when you gather to eat, you should all eat together. (NIV)

The other day, as I was in the bathroom getting ready for the day, I found that my toothbrush was not where it normally would be. After a quick look around, I discovered that I'd put my toothbrush in the little stand where my razor usually sits.

Now, when you're under 50 and you do something like that, you just think, "huh – dumb mistake."

But when you're over 50 and you do something like that, you think differently, don't you? You think, "Uh oh – is this the beginning of the softening of the gray matter? Is this the beginning of the descent into chronic forgetfulness?"

Of course, we are all vulnerable to forgetting – to some degree; that's just a consequence of the fall.

And we all handle that differently.

When we want to make sure to remember something, you know, people do different things. We write notes to ourselves; we keep calendars; we set alarms. Apparently, some people used to tie a string to their finger to help them remember something, although I have no idea how that helps anything. It seems to me that, if I had to do that, I'd likely forget what the string was there for.

We've devised a whole array of precautions that help us deal with this fall-induced weakness of forgetfulness.

Well, the good news is that God takes His precautions, too, regarding human forgetfulness, even dealing with our salvation. God knew that we would need help in remembering certain aspects of Jesus' life and character and how we are to participate in those with Him, and so He gave us the Eucharist as a way to remember – far better than a sticky note or a cell phone alarm.

It's so much more, in fact, that whole groups of Christians have joined, discussed, argued over and even split because of this – God's vehicle of remembrance. Through the ages, volumes upon volumes have been written about the Lord's Supper: how to do it, what to do it with, when to do it, why to do it, what to say before and after it, what it does and does not involve, what it does and does not signify, and on and on and on.

In fact, it has produced some of the largest divisions in the Church, which is so terribly unfortunate because it was designed to do just the opposite.

Of course, to understand Paul's words here, you have to understand that Communion in the early church was not just the bread and the wine. Today, the Lord's Supper we participate in is just a token, really.

You see, the early church met in homes – typically the homes of the wealthy believers since they were larger, and the bread and wine were only part of a much larger meal that they ate together. Originally, they very likely did things much as Jesus did in the upper room when all this was first instituted.

Now, the bread and the cup were set apart, and special words of remembrance were said over them – again, they

were just a part of a much larger meal, All of it was designed to bring Christ-followers together in fellowship – to sharpen and encourage and at times correct each other and, maybe above all, to remind them that they were not alone. It was to remind them that, in this business of following Jesus, they were, as the signs around town here in Wilmore these days say, “all in this together.” And even more importantly, they were all in this together with Jesus, who was there in their midst just as authentically and powerfully as He was there with His disciples on the night of their Last Supper.

The problem at Corinth, however, was that the very act of remembrance that was supposed to signal their unity was instead perpetuating their division with regard to the very prevalent social and economic divisions that were a part of the Roman culture of their day.

Theologian Tom Wright likens it to going on a picnic today with a big and diverse group of friends. Everyone is told to bring food to eat. And what happens is that the wealthier bring an elaborate meal with china and crystal and multiple courses of fine foods. The more modest might bring paper plates – or Chinet – and fried chicken. And the poor may not be able to bring much of anything.

But when everybody arrives, instead of mixing the foods and all sharing together, everyone simply eats what they brought in front of each other. No laying the food out to share. And so, one group – the ones who can afford it – gets stuffed and the others go away hungry.

As bad as that would be in a picnic setting, imagine what that would be like in a worship setting – having the nerve to take the bread and wine together and proclaim, “We are all one in Jesus.”

All you would have to do is look around and you’d see, “Oh no, we’re not all one – not in practice.”

That’s why Paul was so upset there in verses 17 through 22 – so much as to cause him to say “your meetings do more harm than good.”

You see, the church’s meeting together is supposed to, first and foremost, honor God and exalt Jesus, and second, promote unity in the Christ’s body – which is the church, the body of believers.

To borrow a term from our day, the church is supposed to be a place where the social and economic curves of the culture – the haves and the have nots, the privileged and the marginalized – are flattened; where everyone but Jesus is understood to be playing on the same level field – worshipping the exalted Christ.

But you see, in Corinthian worship, it was the wealthy who were exalting themselves by maintaining, let’s say, the “social distance” from those who were unlike them.

Now, whether they even realized it or not, we don’t know for sure. They were simply doing the culturally correct thing – it’s how everyone around them operated.

You see, it was entirely socially acceptable for the wealthy of Paul’s day to show hospitality to those who were less well off.

But what happened was that when the wealthy invited some poor people to their home for dinner, the wealthy home-owners and maybe a few of their wealthy friends

would sit at the dining table and enjoy finer foods, while in the other rooms of the house, the lesser people ate either what they brought or perhaps food of a lesser quality that was served to them – food that was, it was thought, more in accordance with their lesser social status.

So, you see, whether those wealthy, Christian home-owners realized it or not, their “hospitality” here just carried on the cultural sense of shame – right into the worship of the church – and only reinforced the division between the haves and the have-nots.

Which is precisely what the Lord’s Supper stands against.

The remembrance of Jesus is a call to remember the One who left the high and exalted place – the One who made himself nothing, as Paul says in Philippians, taking the very nature of a servant, humbling himself even to death.

That is what the gathering of the church is to remember, and the Lord’s Supper is designed to help us practice with one another.

The unworthy manner that Paul talks about, then, in the way they remembered Jesus, was that they were totally separating the way they acted from the faith they claimed to have – the love for Jesus they said they had.

The Eucharist, by its very design, is to help us move the very character of Jesus from here in our heads to here, in our hearts, and then to here – in our hands – from theory to reality to practice, you see?

Jesus’ life and death and resurrection show us how His followers are to live – and especially, how we’re to view and to treat others.

And as we said last Sunday, it’s the presence of His Spirit that makes this possible in His followers – in those who are willing to see their need: to believe change is possible and to receive His Spirit for the power for transformation.

This is why, you see, that no matter if the differences between people are social, racial, economic – whatever they are – the hope for reconciliation, *real* reconciliation between people who are different, comes with a recognition of Jesus.

It’s not just a saying that “Jesus is the hope of the world.” It’s the urgent truth that our society needs to hear over and over again.

But also, more than just to hear, our culture needs to see Christ-followers breaking cultural mores and barriers and meeting on the same level ground before Christ.

Did the church at Corinth hear Paul’s words here? Did they change their behavior? Were they willing to set cultural norms aside for the sake of unity – to be living examples of Jesus’ reconciliation?

We’re not entirely sure.

But what matters more is the question, “Are we willing?” Today? To follow Jesus in humility? That’s the question to ask as we take into ourselves the body and blood of the One Who was willing.

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I’ll lead us through the liturgy of the table – where Jesus meets us and offers the grace for transformed minds and hearts. Would you hear the invitation?

*You who truly and earnestly repent of your sins,  
who live in love and peace with your neighbors,  
and who intend to lead a new life,  
following the commandments of God and walking in His  
holy ways,  
draw near with faith,  
and take this holy sacrament to your comfort;  
and humbly kneeling, make your honest confession to  
Almighty God.*

Let's pray the General Confession together:

**Almighty God, Father of our Lord Jesus Christ,  
maker of all things, judge of all people,  
we confess that we have sinned,  
and we are deeply grieved as we remember  
the wickedness of our past lives.  
We have sinned against You, Your holiness and  
Your love,  
and we deserve only Your indignation and anger.  
We sincerely repent, and we are genuinely sorry  
for all wrongdoing and every failure to do the  
things we should.  
Our hearts are grieved,  
and we acknowledge that we are hopeless without  
Your grace.  
Have mercy upon us.  
Have mercy upon us, most merciful Father,  
for the sake of Your son, our Savior, Jesus Christ,  
who died for us.  
Forgive us.  
Cleanse us.  
Give us strength to serve and please You in  
newness of life,  
And to honor and praise Your name, through Jesus  
Christ our Lord.  
Amen.**

We continue our confession as we pray together the  
prayer Jesus taught His disciples.

**Our Father which art in heaven, Hallowed be thy  
name.  
Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done in earth, as it  
is in heaven.  
Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us  
our debts, as we forgive our debtors.  
And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us  
from evil:  
For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the  
glory, forever. Amen.**

I'll pray the Collect:

*O Almighty God, our Heavenly Father, who with great  
mercy  
has promised forgiveness to all who turn to You  
with hearty repentance and true faith, have mercy upon  
us,  
pardon and deliver us from our sins,  
make us strong and faithful in all goodness  
and bring us to everlasting life, through Jesus Christ our  
Lord. Amen.*

Let us pray together for inner cleansing:

**Almighty God, unto whom all hearts are open,  
all desires known, and from whom no secrets are  
hid:**

**cleanse the thoughts of our hearts, by the  
inspiration of the Holy Spirit,  
that we may perfectly love You and worthily  
magnify Your holy name,  
through Christ our Lord. Amen.**

*Almighty God, our Heavenly Father, who gave in love  
Your only Son, Jesus Christ,  
to suffer death upon the cross for our redemption,  
who by His sacrifice, offered once for all,  
did provide a full, perfect, and sufficient atonement for the  
sins of the whole world,  
we come now to Your table in obedience to Your Son,  
Jesus Christ,  
who in His holy gospel commanded us to continue a  
memory of His death until He comes again.  
Hear us, O merciful Father, we ask, and grant that as we  
receive this bread and this cup,  
may take into ourselves His most blessed body and blood.  
Amen.*

On the night of His betrayal, Jesus took bread, and  
when He had given thanks,  
He broke it and gave it to His disciples, and said,  
"Take and eat; this is My body – given for you; do this  
in remembrance of Me."

And then, after supper He took the cup, and when He  
had given thanks,  
He gave it to them, saying, "Drink of this, all of you,  
for this is My blood of the New Testament,  
which is shed for you and for many, for the remission  
of sins;  
do this as often as you drink it, in remembrance of  
Me."

This is the body of our Lord Jesus Christ, given for you.  
Take it and eat, remembering always that Christ died  
for you.

Feed upon Him in your heart, by faith with  
thanksgiving.

[Eat]

This is the blood of our Lord Jesus Christ, which was  
shed for you.

Drink this in remembrance that Christ's blood was  
shed for you and be thankful.

[Drink]

Father how we thank you today for the grace You've  
shown to the world through your Son, Jesus;

The grace that invites repentance,

The grace that brings transformation of viewpoints,  
values, priorities – and even cultures and nations.

We invite your transforming grace to rule in our lives.  
Show us where we are blind, where we exalt ourselves,  
where we make others feel ashamed, where we are simply  
following culture instead of transforming it, that we might  
more perfectly represent you and may more completely  
bring your kingdom to reality in our world.  
In Jesus' name, amen.