

The Table of Grace
1 Corinthians 11:23-29
October 6, 2019

If I ask you, “What is the most important part in a worship service to you?” what would you say? Music? Liturgy? Your participation? Sermon? Genuineness of people? Sacraments? What would you say?

A few years ago, a man wrote to the editor of the *British Weekly* and raised a question whether sermons were really important in worship services. His point was that he could not remember any of the sermons he heard from the churches he had attended. He wrote, “I have been attending a church service for the past 30 years and I have heard probably 3,000 sermons... (But) I cannot remember a single sermon!” So, what good is the sermon? That was his point. The editor published this letter in the “Letters to the Editor” column, and many readers responded to that letter. Some agreed with him and some disagreed. The editor also published those letters. It attracted a lot of readers.

One of the letters countered the original argument. It stated: “I have been married for 30 years. During that time, I have eaten 32,850 meals - mostly of my wife’s cooking... (However) I cannot remember the menu of a single meal. And yet, I received nourishment from every single one of them. I have the distinct impression that without them, I would have starved to death long ago.”¹ In other words, “Yes, sermons are important.”

Every week, ministers around the world preach sermons. Preachers pray for a divine inspiration as they prepare for their messages. Ministers are not equally gifted. Some are better equipped than others. Some have better communication skills. Depending on the preachers’ ingenuity, knowledge, and skills, their sermons could be gravitating or somewhat dull. But I believe that despite human inadequacies, God still uses the preachers to deliver his message week after week.

I also believe that each time we have Holy Communion the Lord uses the elements to comfort us, heal us, and strengthen our commitment to him. Today is World Communion Sunday. Not every church participates in World Communion, but many churches around the world do participate. The Church had decided to have World Communion Sunday to experience and proclaim that the Church is one; it is united in Christ.

¹ From Edward Chinn’s sermon, “Sermon in the Supper”, www.esermons.com.

World Communion Sunday was started by a man named Jesse Moren Bader (1886-1963) in 1940. Actually, it was launched on October 6, 1940 – exactly 79 years ago. It was an effort to bring all the churches together in Christ.

But even today, many churches do not participate in it for various reasons. Some churches don't even have Communion at all. So, rather than demonstrating unity, the World Communion Sunday could actually heighten separation within the Church.

So, the question is, “Why bother to have such a day?” It is to send a message to the Christian community at large, that if there is anything that could and should bring us together, it would be the Sacrament of Holy Communion.

Holy Communion is the table of grace. It symbolizes forgiveness and renewal. It symbolizes our covenant relationship with the Lord.

The verses 27-29 in our passage are often misunderstood. This is what it says:

“Whoever, therefore, eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty of profaning the body and blood of the Lord. Let a man examine himself and so eat of the bread and drink of the cup. For anyone who eats and drinks without discerning the body, eats and drinks judgment upon himself.”

This passage needs to be understood in its context. In the first century, the Lord's Supper was often held as part of a regular meal, a love-feast. It was a potluck. The rich and the poor would both bring something to share. This was the time when the poor people could eat the rich people's food without being intimidated, and vice-versa. Some poor people, especially the slaves could not bring anything to share, but what other people brought was enough for all to share. It was truly a time of fellowship without differences. It was around these love-feasts the early Christians were reminded that they were united not because of any other factor than Jesus Christ himself! After the meal, they had Holy Communion together. It was a beautiful thing.

Then something happened. Many times the poor people could not get there in time for the start. Many of them worked for other people. Some of them were slaves and had to work overtime. Some of the rich people became impatient and went ahead and started the meal without waiting for the poor people.

By the time the poor people arrived, the rich people had already eaten all the food they brought. There was nothing for the poor people to eat except the food they themselves had brought.

So, instead of that meal enhancing the unity, it highlighted their differences as the poor people ate their own poverty food by themselves. Not only that, some slaves could not bring anything to share because they did not have any food of their own. What they ate in their home was what their masters gave them. They could not bring their master's food. And these slaves arrived later than all others because they had to work overtime. By the time they arrived there was no food left.

That was the situation in Corinthian church. So, when Paul said, "Whoever eats the bread and drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner" he was referring to the rich people who did not have any compassion for the poor.² The Holy Communion is a meal of unity. It is a meal of grace. The partakers not only should experience the grace of our Lord, but they also should exercise their grace for one another.

In his book, *Letters to a Young Evangelical*, Tony Campolo shares a story that happened when he was very young. He was six or seven years old at the time. He was sitting with his parents at a Communion service. He noticed a young woman in the pew in front of them who was sobbing and shaking. The minister had just finished reading 1 Corinthians 11:27 which says, "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." Evidently this young woman saw herself as unworthy to take the bread and the cup.

As the Communion plate with its small pieces of bread was passed to this young woman, she waved it away and then lowered her head in despair. It was then that Tony's father leaned over the young woman's shoulder and said, "Take it, girl! It was meant for you. Do you hear me?"

The young woman raised her head and nodded and then she took the bread and ate it. Tony Campolo writes, "I knew that at that moment some kind of heavy burden was lifted from her heart and mind. Since then, I have always known that a church that could offer Communion to hurting people was a special gift from God."³

² Knofel Staton, *First Corinthians*, (Standard Publishing: Cincinnati, OH) 1991, p. 203-204.

³ Pete Kontra, <http://oaklandchurch.org/pdf/sermontexts/OS-04-10-11-If%20You%20Share.pdf>.

The Lord's Table is a table of grace. The unworthy, the broken, the grieving may come to the table and find comfort and peace. Consider the people who were there at the Lord's Table when Jesus himself shared the Passover meal. Judas, who did not deserve to be there, was there. Peter, who would deny Christ three times that night, was there. All the disciples, who would abandon Jesus, were there. None of them deserved to be there. Neither do any of us. No one is worthy to take the communion. Yet it is offer to all of us, so that we may find comfort and peace.

There is Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington D.C. The Vietnam Veterans Memorial is a tribute to the brave members of the U.S. Armed Forces who fought in the Vietnam War and were killed or missing in action.

Lee Teter, an American artist, painted a memorable picture depicting a man standing at the Memorial touching the wall grieving a loss. Perhaps he is grieving for his father, or brother, or friend. The reflection in the polished granite, however, is not the man who is visiting there. It is of the soldier who is reaching out his hand to touch the hand of the visitor. It is as if the soldier is comforting the visitor.

That is what happens at Holy Communion. We bring our brokenness, our sins, our sorrows, to the Lord and find him reaching out to us. May your brokenness and mine be redeemed for the glory of God and for the good of others!