

THE LORD'S SUPPER

1 Corinthians 11:17-34

Eleventh Sunday after Pentecost (Series A)

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Trinity Free Lutheran Church, Grand Forks, ND

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The sermon text comes from *Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians*, chapter 11, verses 17 through 34. Please stand as you are able for God's holy Word. From 1 Corinthians 11, beginning at verse 17, we read in Jesus' name.

¹⁷ But in the following instructions I do not commend you, because when you come together it is not for the better but for the worse. ¹⁸ For, in the first place, when you come together as a church, I hear that there are divisions among you. And I believe it in part, ¹⁹ for there must be factions among you in order that those who are genuine among you may be recognized. ²⁰ When you come together, it is not the Lord's supper that you eat. ²¹ For in eating, each one goes ahead with his own meal. One goes hungry, another gets drunk. ²² What! Do you not have houses to eat and drink in? Or do you despise the church of God and humiliate those who have nothing? What shall I say to you? Shall I commend you in this? No, I will not.

²³ For I received from the Lord what I also delivered to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night when 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 also he took the cup, 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.

²⁷ Whoever, therefore, eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty concerning the body and blood of the Lord. ²⁸ Let a person examine himself, then, and so eat of the bread and drink of the cup. ²⁹ For anyone who eats and drinks without discerning the body eats and drinks judgment on himself. ³⁰ That is why many of you are weak and ill, and some have died. ³¹ But if we judged ourselves truly, we would not be judged. ³² But when we are judged by the Lord, we are disciplined so that we may not be condemned along with the world.

³³ So then, my brothers, when you come together to eat, wait for one another— ³⁴ if anyone is hungry, let him eat at home—so that when you come together it will not be for judgment. About the other things I will give directions when I come.

Father, these are your words. Sanctify us in the truth. Your Word is truth. Amen.

You may be seated.

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ.

We've been talking about worship lately. Last week we started this series talking about the nature of worship. The big point is that, in worship, Jesus is present to serve us through his Word and Sacraments. Through these means, he delivers forgiveness, life, and salvation.

Today we're going to focus on the Lord's Supper, and especially our practices regarding the Lord's Supper. We'll start with the doctrine of the Lord's Supper, because, as with everything in

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worship, our practice flows from our doctrine. So we'll start with the doctrine, and then we will move on to our practice.

The doctrine of the Lord's Supper is quite simple. In his *Small Catechism*, Martin Luther teaches it by asking four simple questions. You can follow along on page 102 of the hymnal. The doctrine is really wrapped up in just two questions. Luther asks, "What is the Sacrament of the Altar?" and, "What is the benefit of such eating and drinking?" In short, "What is it?" and, "What's it for?" First, "What is it?" Answer: "It is the true Body and Blood of our Lord Jesus Christ, under the bread and wine, given unto us Christians to eat and to drink, as it was instituted by Christ himself." Then he quotes the words of institution, which we read today from 1 Corinthians.

This is the first part of the doctrine. We confess that it really is the body and blood of Jesus. We mean that Jesus is physically present. It is not merely a symbol. It really is his body and blood.

Nearly all of our Protestant friends disagree with us. They see the Lord's Supper as symbolic, or, perhaps, they might say that Jesus is spiritually present, but not physically present. But when Jesus instituted the Lord's Supper, he said, "**This is my body,**" and, "**This is my blood.**" He could have said, "This represents or symbolizes my body and blood," but he did not. He simply said, "**This is my body,**" and, "**This is my blood.**"

Some would argue that Jesus was using a metaphor, and not being literal. But this passage from 1 Corinthians puts that idea to rest. Paul warns that "Whoever ... eats the bread and drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty concerning the body and blood of the Lord" (11:27). It's not that they're guilty of profaning a symbol, but the actual body and blood. "Anyone who eats and drinks without discerning the body eats and drinks judgment on himself" (11:29). And the consequences are severe. Paul says, "That is why many of you are weak and ill, and some have died" (11:30). And I'm not sure whether Paul is speaking of physical illness and death or spiritual illness and death. It sounds severe that God would strike someone sick or dead for misusing the sacrament, but spiritual illness and death is actually a bigger deal. Whichever it is, there are severe consequences for eating and drinking in an unworthy manner. Now, if we're just talking about a symbolic remembrance, that doesn't make any sense. But if Jesus is actually present, if it really is his body and blood, then we can see why it is necessary to eat and drink in humility, confessing our sins, and confessing that Jesus is present to forgive our sins.

So that's the first part. The bread and the wine really are the body and blood of Jesus.

Now the second part: *What's it for?* Or, as Luther asks, "What is the benefit of such eating and drinking?" Again, we go straight to the words of Scripture: "It is pointed out in these words: 'Given and shed for you for the forgiveness of sins.' Through these words, the forgiveness of sins, life and salvation are given unto us in the Sacrament. For where there is forgiveness of sins, there is also life and salvation." The Lord's Supper forgives sins. That's what it's for. And this is, of course, based on the first part. If it's merely a symbol, there would be no forgiveness in it, because it would only be our act of remembrance. But if it truly is the body and blood of Jesus, and it is, then we truly receive what Jesus accomplished when his body was given for us and his blood was poured out for us. We receive forgiveness. So we should not be scared off by the warning we talked about in the first part. The same reason the Lord's Supper can be dangerous is the same reason it forgives sins and grants everlasting salvation. It's like a life-saving medicine. "Use as directed." Medicine, when used wrongly, can kill you. But when used rightly, it can save you. So do not fear. If you are an unbeliever, or if you only believe in a symbolic presence of Christ, you should not receive the Lord's Supper. But if you confess that you are a sinner, and if

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you confess that this is the body and blood of Jesus, which was crucified and raised for you, then you should come, humbly, eagerly, and joyfully to receive the gift of Jesus.

So that's the doctrine of the Lord's Supper. What is it? It is the body and blood of Jesus. What's it for? The forgiveness of sins.

Now for our practice of the Lord's Supper. And our practice is based on the doctrine.

I'll start with the difficult topic. People have asked me, "Did Jesus use wine or grape juice when he instituted the Lord's Supper?" Answer: Jesus used wine. Then they ask, "Why don't we use wine?" And my answer is that we should. Or, to be more prudent, I am proposing that we should offer both wine and grape juice. And each person can choose for themselves which one they prefer.

Now you might think this is a bad idea. Even if you don't personally have an objection to alcohol, you might be convinced already that this is a mistake. I would ask that you at least listen before you decide that. And I have seen this become an explosive issue in churches before. I hope we can be better than that. And I don't know what everyone here thinks. I know what some people think, but certainly not everyone. It may be that no one has any objection to offering both wine and grape juice. If that's the case, this could be easy. But I will not take that for granted.

Following worship today, and following the coffee time, we will have a question and answer session in the fellowship hall. You can ask any question you want. You can object to my proposal. You can tell me why you think I'm wrong. If you don't want to ask your question out loud, you can write it down on a piece of paper and hand it to me. And I will handle your question without naming you. If you're watching online, and you can't make it to the Q and A, you can call me, email me, or stop into the office. If we're going to do this, it is very important to do it right. And that means not leaving anyone behind, and not letting anyone feel unheard. I care what you think, especially if you think this is a mistake.

The first instinct we might have is to talk about it and then have a vote. I think that would be a mistake. I am not proposing that we vote on it. Suppose we vote on it, and 51% approve it, but 49% are strongly opposed. It would pass, but that would not be a recipe for success. There are many matters that are decided by a congregational vote. But there are some matters that are not appropriate for congregations to vote on, particularly matters of doctrine and worship practice. Our doctrine is set. Nobody gets to change it. I don't get to change it. There are no votes on doctrine. Matters of worship are part of what a pastor is called to do. And a pastor should handle these things in consultation with the deacons. To put it bluntly, you don't get to vote on it. You might not like that, because it makes you feel like you don't have a voice. But that is not true. You do have a voice. I do care what you think. I hope you will make your voice known to me. And, ultimately, I hope you will trust me to do what is right for you and for our congregation. I will not shove it down your throats. Pastors have authority in matters of worship practice. And if you have ever heard me say anything about authority, you have heard me say that God instituted authority in order to serve those under it. Jesus instituted the office of pastor in order to serve his congregation. I am your servant. So authority does not mean that I get to do whatever I want. Authority means that I am called to do what is best for you. I hope that you will trust me to do that. And I can tell you that if 49% of you are strongly opposed, it won't happen. If we took a vote, 51% could make it happen, but it wouldn't be good. It needs to be something that we, as a congregation, want. I'm hoping you will trust me to care about each of you and do what is good.

If alcohol presents a temptation to you, please talk to me. We will keep grape juice for those who prefer it. So we're not forcing wine on anyone. But if even being close to wine is a problem

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for you, please talk to me. Help me figure out how to accommodate you. And, of course, anything you tell me is confidential. I'm really good at keeping secrets. I could give you examples, but I won't.

All of this requires communication. If there aren't any objections, or if we can easily resolve them, we will offer both wine and grape juice the first Sunday in September. That's three Sundays from today. That's why I'm doing this the first Sunday after communion. I want to provide as much time as possible for us to discuss it together. But after opening this can, I also don't want to make people wait if they desire to receive wine. So if you have a question or an objection, please talk to me. Don't gossip about it. Don't talk behind my back. If one person comes to me and says a whole bunch of people are upset, that counts as one person. And that one person matters, but they don't count as more than one, because I don't know who the other persons are, and I can't hear their specific questions. You have multiple ways of contacting me, but you have to use them. So that's the process.

We also need to acknowledge that alcohol is a dangerous substance. We need to be careful with it. A church serving wine for communion does not legitimize drunkenness. Do not think, "Oh, my church serves wine now. I guess it's okay for me to get drunk." Nope; it's not. Not all use of alcohol is sinful, but the abuse of it is.

Intoxication is sinful. And there are a few reasons why: First, it dulls the senses, and especially the conscience. This makes us more vulnerable to temptation. It also inhibits our ability to love and serve our neighbors. We have a purpose in this life. Part of that purpose is to love and serve our neighbors around us. If our ability to care for our children or help our neighbors is diminished because of intoxication, we're neglecting our vocations.

Second, disobedience to authority is sinful. So any illegal use of alcohol is sinful. If you operate a motor vehicle while intoxicated, you are risking your life and your neighbor's life. It's also against the law. Any minor consuming alcohol, even if they're not intoxicated, is sinful, because it is against the law. Minors can, however, consume wine for communion, because it is a very small amount, and the state of North Dakota has a specific exemption for it. Still, parents should help their children decide, and children should listen to their parents' instruction.

Third, it is sinful to misuse alcohol to the point that we cause long-term damage to our bodies. And this is true for many things. We might think, *Hey. It's my body. I can do what I want with it. If I burn out my liver, that's my problem.* But that's not true. It's not just your body. Who does your body really belong to? First of all, it belongs to the Lord. He created it, and he redeemed it. We do not have the right to do whatever we want with it. If you're married, you're body also belongs to your spouse. After that, we also owe love and service to those who depend on us. So, no; we don't actually have a right to do whatever we want with our bodies.

So the abuse or misuse of alcohol is a sin. But alcohol is not inherently evil. As with most things, the misuse or abuse of something is sinful.

Alcohol is used in the Bible. In at least one place, Paul prescribes it to his friend Timothy (1 Tim. 5:23). Jesus drank wine, and his opponents accused him of being a drunkard (Matt. 11:18-19; Luke 7:33-34). He was not a drunkard, but he certainly consumed wine, as did almost every Jewish person. At the wedding in Cana of Galilee, Jesus made wine, lots of it, and it was considered the really good stuff (John 2:1-11). And Jesus used wine when he instituted the Lord's Supper. This is undeniable.

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Now, as is the case with most everything that is undeniable, if you search the internet long enough, you will find someone who denies it. But any argument they make is false. Here's why: grape juice was not developed until 1869 when a guy named Welch pasteurized the juice in order to prevent fermentation. Before this discovery, it was impossible to preserve grape juice without it fermenting. In some parts of the world, they could put it in a container and submerge it in a cold, deep lake, and this could preserve it for a little while, maybe a couple months. But Jerusalem is roughly parallel with Dallas, Texas. And Passover occurs in the spring, while the grape harvest is in the summer. This means that the contents of Jesus' cup were eight or nine months old ... at least. It was fermented. It was wine. There was alcohol in it. There's no way around it. And for Jewish people at the time, nobody had any problem with that. They used wine on a daily basis. They understood intoxication to be a sin, but the moderate use of wine was very, very normal. And they definitely used it for the Passover.

So what do we do with that? Is grape juice close enough? That's the big question. Some people would say, "Absolutely, yes." Others would say, "Absolutely, not." Both answers are too hasty. We know that Jesus used wine. But whether or not grape juice is close enough, we cannot say with complete certainty. It's kind of the same thing. It started as the same thing. If grape juice counts as wine, then "yes." But if grape juice is not wine, if it's not close enough to be considered the same substance, then the answer is "no."

My best guess is, "Probably." I wish I could say, "Yes." That would make the whole thing very easy. We would just stick with grape juice and not worry about it. But "probably" isn't quite good enough.

And this matters because the bread and wine are not mere symbols. If they are only symbols, and if the Lord's Supper is only a remembrance, then whatever works as a symbol is fine. But the Lord's Supper is not a symbol. The bread and wine are the body and blood of Jesus. Therefore, the elements matter.

Remember, our worship practices are based on our doctrine. If we believed that the Lord's Supper is only symbolic, it would be very easy to justify the use of grape juice instead of wine. I would never suggest wine, and I would reject even offering the option. But the Lord's Supper is not merely symbolic. We are talking about the body and blood of Jesus. And that body and blood delivers forgiveness to us. Nothing in the world is more important. Therefore, the elements matter.

That's all this is about. It's about practicing the Lord's Supper as faithfully as we can to how Christ instituted it. We should care about this because Jesus instituted the Lord's Supper, and he forgives our sins in it.

There are a few other shorter questions I want to answer. First, people have asked, "How often should we have the Lord's Supper?" Answer: that's really our choice. How often do you want it? The New Testament Church, as best as we can tell, received the Lord's Supper every Sunday. And throughout the vast majority of Church history, it was given every Sunday. The big historical change happened here in the United States, when we were being colonized and settled. There was a shortage of pastors, and travel was difficult. So one pastor might serve an entire circuit, and there was no way he could get to every church every Sunday. So it became common to have the Lord's Supper once a month, or even once a quarter, depending on how often the pastor came. My opinion is that we should receive it more often. It's a great gift. But I want to know what you want. I am not proposing any change in frequency.

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You might also wonder why it has to take so long to distribute it. Surely, there are faster ways. Yes, it would be faster if everyone just cycled through in a line. Even faster if there were two lines, one on each side. The validity of the Sacrament is the same, regardless of how we distribute it. But to come and kneel is a posture of confession and humility before God. And it allows you a moment of reflection as you wait. I'm guessing you think about something while you kneel. Do you think about your sin? Your unworthiness? That's appropriate. I certainly hope you think about Jesus. Meditate on his death and resurrection for you.

And I find it especially appropriate that, for some of you, we bring the Lord's Supper right to where you are. This is even more like Jesus' institution of the Lord's Supper. Jesus brought his body and blood to his disciples, right where they were. This is a picture of the Gospel. We don't go searching for God. We don't go up to heaven and pull him down. He comes to us. So there's something appropriate about this. And I'm actually glad that it takes longer. When we take the time to do it this way, it demonstrates the importance of it. I'm glad that everyone has to sit and wait while someone else is receiving the Lord's Supper. It should impress upon us the importance of that person receiving the Lord's Supper. It is worth the time of all of us, because that person is important, and their forgiveness is important. This waiting teaches us to love one another.

There's also a little cadence to how I place the bread in your hands. I don't just drop it your hand. I hold it before your face, whether your eyes are looking at it or not, and I say, "This is the body of Christ." And then, as I place it in your hand, I say the rest, "Given for you." So the first part is to teach what it is: it is the body of Christ. And the second part is to teach you what it's for: it is for you, for the forgiveness of your sins.

Everything that we do has a reason. When we come together for worship, Jesus is present among us, and he is here to bring us forgiveness, life, and salvation. That is especially true for the Lord's Supper. We do what we do because Jesus is present. The Lord's Supper is the true body and blood of Jesus Christ, under the forms of bread and wine. This is the same body and blood that was crucified and raised for you. So we receive it reverently. And we especially receive it joyfully, because this body and blood is our salvation. Amen.

Now may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus (Phil. 4:7). Amen.