

“Examine Yourself”
I Corinthians 11:17-28
Last Sunday after the Epiphany
February 3, 2008

“Whoever, therefore, eats the bread and 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.” I Corinthians 11:27-28

“Examine yourself.”

I read somewhere that self-examination is one of the main things that is supposed to happen in the maturing process. From infancy to childhood, through adolescence, into young adulthood, on to middle age, and even in the golden years, the hope is that individuals will increase in their self-awareness to the point that they are able to engage in some sort of critical self-examination. And when an education is thrown into the mix, as individuals move from the fundamental exercises of the elementary grades into some of the more cerebral endeavors of secondary, college, and even continuing education, it is hoped that they will one day be able to step back and take a good, hard look at the way they are living their lives. Of all the creatures of God’s good earth, only humans are able to understand the phrase: “examine yourself.”

I remember sitting in the hallway of First UMC in Lincoln, right off the Nebraska Wesleyan campus, with several other young men, one a longhaired classmate of mine with the last name of Ritter, and nervously waiting for our interview with the members of the Nebraska Annual Conference Board of Ordained Ministry. One by one we were called into a brightly lit Sunday School classroom and asked to have a seat. There, with all of our hopes and dreams on the line, each of us were asked a series of several questions designed to force us to examine ourselves: how did we understand our call to be in ministry, how do we explain our faith in God, and how do we plan to spend the rest of our lives making disciples for Jesus Christ? I can still remember the knot in my stomach and the beat of my heart. It was a very important time in my life. In and through all of those questions, those of us who were interviewed were asked to do some serious self-reflection; to step back and, as objectively as possible, take a good hard look at the

way we were living our lives. I guess I must have passed, but I'm not sure whatever happened to that Ritter guy.

There comes that time in every life when one is called to "examine yourself." If you are lucky it happens more than once. Perhaps it is that time when you realize that you are finally out on your own. Perhaps it is that moment when the nurse puts that newborn son or daughter into your arms for the very first time and says, "Have a nice life." Perhaps it is that day you face a job change or a crisis in your marriage or a very empty nest. Maybe it is that time when you watch your parent or your spouse being lowered into the grave. We all have those times in our lives when we are forced to examine ourselves; to stop, step back, and, as objectively as possible, take a good hard look at the way we are living our lives.

Today's text tells us that one of the times that we are supposed to examine ourselves is before we eat of the bread and drink of the cup; before we receive the Lord's Supper. We are to do so because the apostle Paul did not want anyone who believes in Christ to receive that special meal in an "unworthy manner." Now that's a phrase that has really been misunderstood down through the years, much to the detriment of a whole lot of good people. I may have told you before about a dear sister in one of my churches that would never come forward and receive communion because she thought that she was "unworthy." Apparently, she had done something she thought to be so terrible in her past that she believed that she was permanently disqualified from the table. Despite my efforts to convince that she misunderstood that verse, despite my telling her that if everyone waited until they were worthy no one would ever come forward, she would not come to the table. This is a verse that we really need to understand. So let me try my best to take a stab at explaining it. Before I do, however, let me read those two verses again, this time from the translation known as the New Century Version:

"So a person who eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in a way that is not worthy of it will be guilty of sinning against the body and blood of the Lord. Look into your own hearts before you eat the bread and drink the cup."

That passage, of course, comes from the 11th chapter of Paul's first letter to the Corinthians. If you remember your Sunday School lessons, the church in Corinth had many problems that, in turn, were causing divisions to rise up in that congregation. Talk about a strange bunch of people! They had problems with immorality, idolatry, marriage, and differing styles of worship, just to name a few. One of the worst problems was their particular and, to be quite honest, peculiar understanding of the Lord's Supper. In discussing that understanding, one commentator wrote: "The precise nature of their problem remains unclear; nonetheless, it is reasonably certain that they understood the Lord's Supper in a rather magical way. As the Christians of Rome has said, in effect, 'Baptism has saved us, therefore let us continue in our old way that grace may abound,' the Corinthians said, in effect, 'The Lord's Supper saved us, therefore let us continue to eat as we always have so that grace may abound.'"¹

Now the way I read those lines is that there were some people in Corinth that had misunderstood what Paul had taught them. One of his unique contributions, you may remember, was the way he used the metaphor "the Body of Christ" to describe the church. He used it as an image of how it was united. Just as the body consists of many individual members, all of those members—big toes, little fingers, elbows, and ears—come together to work as one. So it is with the church. And what happens at the Lord's Supper is an example of that unity. Through their eating of that common loaf and their drinking of that one cup they could not only see that they were given the gift of God's amazing grace, but that they were also intimately related to one another through that grace. Through their eating and drinking together, all sorts of people had fellowship "with the Body." In his translation, J.B. Phillips (the Scottish Bible translator, not the Nebraska tight end) rendered Paul's thinking about the Supper like this:

The Cup of blessing which we bless, is it not a very sharing in the Blood of Christ? When we break the Bread do we not actually share in the Body of Christ? The very fact that we all share one Bread makes us all one Body.

¹ William Willimon, The Service of God, Abingdon Press, Nashville, 1983, p. 119

Well, the best anyone can guess is that there were some in that crowd who heard those words and didn't hear Paul's call to unity at all. Rather, they thought that the more they ate the better off they would be. Now you need to remember that at this time in church history the Lord's Supper was not just a scrap of bread and a bit of juice as it is today. It was literally the "full meal deal." The church would meet on the first day of the week, usually in the home of one of the wealthier members. Those who could afford it brought food and shared it with everyone. All the others came as soon as they got off work. It seems that those who arrived first gobbled up so much of the food and drink that when the others arrived there was nothing left for them—sort of like what happens when you're the last one through the line at a potluck. Not only was that unfair, but those latecomers were usually the less fortunate—those who needed something to eat more than anyone else. They received practically nothing, while those who came first, those who didn't have to work those long hours, absolutely stuffed themselves. So rather than a demonstration and example of their common salvation, rather than that model of fellowship and unity that it was intended to be, some of the Corinthians understood the Lord's Supper to be a personal affair between them and Jesus. Bishop William Willimon suggests that their thought process might have gone something like this: "The supper is an affair between me and the Lord; why should I worry about you? I shall ingest as much of this saving substance as possible; too bad about you."²

Now don't get me wrong. There is a time for private religion. There is a time for personal devotion. When I stood alone at Ooh-Aah Point just off the Kaibab Trail in the Grand Canyon and looked around and saw nothing but the beauty of God's good creation, it was a grand moment of private religion. When I sit in my office preparing my weekly sermon and lose myself in God's word and my thoughts, I experience wonderful moments of personal devotion. It is important that you develop that personal relationship with Christ. There is nothing wrong with finding that quiet time with God. But the apostle Paul made it quite clear that the Lord's Supper was not one of those times. It is not a time for personal devotion. The Lord's Supper is a social occasion; a time not only

² Ibid, p. 120

to remember that “for God so loved *the world*” that he sent the beloved Son, but also to recall how the love that Son so clearly demonstrated has caused all of us to become intimately related to one another. Any time we make that Supper anything other than the social event that it was meant to be, anytime we act in a selfish, gluttonous, “it’s all about me” kind-of-way, anytime do anything that tends to divide the church then, according to Paul, we eat the meal in an unworthy manner. By thinking only of themselves, the Corinthians created divisions in the church and destroyed the basic meaning behind this very special meal. As a matter of fact, Paul felt so strongly about this that he wrote to those peculiar people the following:

“When you come together, it is not really to eat the Lord’s supper. For when the time comes to eat, each of you goes ahead with your own supper...”

What about you? Do you partake of your own supper or the Lord’s Supper? Do you eat this very special meal in an unworthy manner? Do you do those things that divide the body of Christ rather than unite it? On this day that we will celebrate this most important meal, you are called to “examine yourselves.” The scriptures call you to step back and take a good, hard look at the way you are living your lives. While we are not having a potluck this morning, and while I’ll try my best to make the piece of bread you receive the same size as your neighbors’, you are still called to take a good look at what you do. So test your motives. In relationship to Christ’s body here on earth, do those motives build up or tear down? Do they unite or do they divide? Do they focus on self or do they focus on others. I read somewhere this week that the Lord’s Supper should never be a “self-ish” act. It should always be an “other-ish” act. That may not be the best English in the world, but it is absolutely true. John Wesley reminded the early Methodists that unworthiness does not apply to the people who are to consume the meal, but to the way that meal is consumed. It is when you come to the table thinking more about your own needs than you are about your neighbor’s needs that you find yourself eating the bread and drinking of the cup in that unworthy manner that Paul described.

Back in the 1600s, many Protestant churches developed an interesting practice based on Paul's words from today's lesson. Elders of this or that congregation would go to member's homes and examine each person to see if they were qualified to receive the Sacrament of Holy Communion. The elders would test their knowledge of the faith, review the way they were living their lives, check to see if they were causing any division in the church, and then decide whether or not each individual or family was worthy enough to receive the Lord's Supper. If they met with the elders' approval, then the congregants were given a small lead token that looked like a coin, which permitted them to come forward during the service of Holy Communion. This particular practice was known as "fencing the table." Now while it is always good to have others help you in your faith journey, while mentors and spiritual directors definitely have their place, those churches back then made a very fundamental mistake. The passage, if you remember, says "examine yourself," not "examine others." Let God do the judging of others. You worry about yourself. Take a good, hard look at the way you are living your life and see if you are worthy to come to the table.

And let's start right now as we bow our heads in silence.