

**Who Is Worthy?
1 Corinthians 11: 23-34
Don Lincoln**

I initiated an Ash Wednesday service in the new church development I served in Annapolis, prior to coming to Westminster. They had never done anything to mark the beginning of Lent. Out of the hundred or so members of the congregation, about fifteen showed up for the evening Ash Wednesday service.

It was no surprise to me that most who showed up had a Roman Catholic background. We sang, prayed, read scripture and then before ashes we came and stood in a circle around the communion table for the Lord's Supper.

We had a member who always baked our communion bread, and she made a very special bread for the service. It was about 15 inches long, about 8 inches wide, and less than a quarter inch thick. It was a beautiful, lightly browned, crisp flatbread.

When it came time I lifted the bread and said, "Our Lord Jesus on the night he was betrayed, took bread, and when He had given thanks, He broke it....." And as I always do at that time, I broke the bread assuming it would just snap in half. I thought it would snap in half. Instead, it shattered into a million pieces which flew into the air, onto the table and all over the carpet.

I watched blood drain out of the fifteen faces, and heard the audible gasps as the flatbread exploded in front of me. I got my composure, passed the two larger pieces remaining in my hands to the person on either side of me, and invited them to each break off a small piece and pass it to their neighbor. That's how this congregation celebrated communion every time they celebrated it with a regular loaf anyway – in the circle passing it – so they knew what to do.

Meanwhile, I bent down, picked up as many of the pieces off the floor as I could and gathered those on the table and put them all on the plate. When the bread returned to me, I broke off a small piece, and invited us to eat together. I said something like "Jesus is probably smiling. It's OK."

If you've seen our communion bloopers in Westminster's pandemic videos, you'll know the bread doesn't always behave. One loaf, instead of breaking in half because it was still partially frozen, broke into three pieces. I only have two hands so the third just dropped onto the plate and rolled onto the table. Sometimes it's hard to tear the bread apart. Sometimes we take and break it and a piece dangles and we hope we can put it down before it drops off. A little disconcerting, but "It's OK!"

The Second Helvetic Confession teaches us how to consider the bread. “We do not so join the body of the Lord and His blood with the bread and wine so as to say the bread itself is the body of Christ, except in a sacramental way. Or that the body of Christ is hidden under the bread so that it ought to be worshipped under the form of the bread. The body of Christ is in heaven, at the right hand of the father; and therefore our hearts are to be lifted up on high, and not fixated on the bread. Yet the Lord is not absent from his church when she celebrates the Supper.”

This was a central debate of the reformation – what exactly happens at the Lord’s table? Do the bread and wine actually become flesh and blood as Rome taught? “NO!” says the Second Helvetic Confession. What is signified is not bound to the sacrament. In other words, Jesus is not contained by or stuck in, with and under the bread. Which is, for me, why a communion faux-pas, albeit disconcerting, does not cause a theological crisis. It’s OK! It’s bread. Sacred and holy in what it signifies, but not holy in and of itself.

On the other hand, at the time of the Reformation others taught the Supper was just a memorial to Jesus’ death, with no real significance. “NO!” says the Second Helvetic. Jesus is really present with us at the supper, the bread and the wine kindling our faith as we are refreshed by the spiritual food with which we are fed by Christ Himself at this meal.

Debates about communion were nothing new. Our text from First Corinthians indicates the debates about this sacred meal started right from the beginning at the early church. Evidently, when they were coming together to eat, some folks in Corinth wouldn’t wait for the rest of the congregation to show up and just start in. Some were coming hungry and making a meal of it – not leaving enough for anybody else to partake of this holy supper. Paul wants them to know this is a community celebration with spiritual significance. Eat first – at home – then come and wait for others to gather.

Then there’s this interesting part of the text: “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 judgment against themselves.”

That text has been used by churches through the ages to “fence the table” if you will – close off the table to those who might eat or drink “in an unworthy manner.” The KEY word? **UNWORTHY**. Two weeks ago in a sermon I mentioned the Missouri Synod Lutheran Church, and the fact that along with their debate as a denomination over the historicity of Jonah and the Whale story, the denomination was, at the same time, wrestling with whether or not to allow non-Missouri Synod Lutherans to partake at the Lord’s table in the congregations in that denomination.

In other words, if you’re not one of us, we don’t know what you know about the Gospel or think about the Gospel. We don’t know if you know what happens in this sacrament. You might, therefore, eat and drink in an unworthy manner. Therefore you shouldn’t receive. It was serious conversation for them.

Like in the Roman Catholic Church. Only Roman Catholics allowed. I've been married to someone who was Roman Catholic much of her life. I get that; the family still is. And, of course, you are supposed to go to confession before you go to communion as well. If you're not Catholic, there's no way for the church to guarantee you have been instructed; have the right frame of mind, the right spirit, the right preparation, the right understanding. I get it. I don't agree with it – but I understand the reasoning. The church doesn't want to provide any opportunity for the untrained, unschooled, to eat and drink in an unworthy manner.

Once again, the Second Helvetic speaks. And about BOTH the celebrants and the recipients. It says, "God is the author of the sacraments, and the minister's faults (even if they be very great) cannot affect them, since the integrity of the Sacraments depends upon the institution of the Lord. And as we do not estimate the value of the Sacraments by the worthiness or unworthiness of the ministers, so we do not estimate it by the condition of those who receive them."

In other words, the efficacy of the sacrament – its ability to do what God has ordained it to do, to be a sign and seal of God's grace in our midst – **the efficacy of the sacrament is not dependent on the sanctity of the minister or the sanctity of the congregant.**

Thanks be to God!!! Because as you and I know, from our prayer of confession today – "we acknowledge the innate corruption within us" – not a one of us is "**worthy**" to come to this table. Not one. Actually, if you take the Apostle Paul seriously in the rest of his writings – "all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God" – about the only way to come to the table in an unworthy manner is for you or me to come thinking **we ARE worthy – that we DESERVE this!!**

That's what I thought of when I read Thursday's email from Mikie. Mikie's Funnies comes to my inbox every single day. I've been reading his stuff for years. Periodically you'll hear one of his funnies in a sermon and today is one of those days. Thursday's email had this:

The salesman at the furniture store told me, "This sofa will seat 5 people without any problems."

I said, "And just where am I going to find 5 people without any problems???"

The church continues, and will likely always continue with debates over communion. What it means, exactly; who can or who can't receive and why.

But as one of my colleagues said this week, "If Judas got to take communion, everybody gets to take communion." AMEN.