

“WHEN YOU COME TOGETHER.”

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First Christian Reformed Church

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Scripture Texts: I Corinthians 10:16-17; I Corinthians 11:17-33

Prayer Holy Father, we pause here to consider the staggering importance and opportunity that is ours in this moment. We have before us the holy, inspired, inerrant Word of God, preserved and protected and transmitted through the centuries at great risk and sacrifice, telling us everything you want us to know. And we are sinful people who have been saved and now counted righteous before you because of the incredible sacrifice of the blood of Jesus. And you have called me here to be your instrument to preach your Word and offer your sacrament. There is nothing normal, ordinary or routine about this. Holy Spirit, fall afresh on all of us and help us for the sake of the glory of the Gospel and of Jesus Christ. Amen.

Introduction.

“When you come together.” Five times Paul says this in our text. When you come together. How much have we longed for that, and many of us at home still long for that. We feel it in our souls, that the way things are just isn’t how they should be.

Where two or three are logged in together just isn’t the same as where two or three are gathered together. The novelty is wearing off of Sunday mornings in pajamas or sweatpants, with a cup of coffee, trying to sort of sing along and praying the sermon will stop buffering.

We are thankful for the gift of the internet and live-streaming and for Rob Hilverda, but this is not what it means when Paul says, “when you come together.” Online church is better than no church, but it is a poor substitute for the real thing.

And even for us gathered here, it still is lacking something when everyone isn’t here, we are split up between two services, the “As” never get to see the “Vs”, we have to sit apart and go outside without chatting in the narthex. And communion will be yet another adjustment.

I have to keep reminding myself that countless millions of Christians have suffered far greater inconveniences and for far longer. We should be slow to complain, but we also should not just settle for this without praying for a time when we will all come together. May we long for and pray for when we can all come together as the church.

One of the great mysteries of our faith is that the living God of the universe desires and seeks to have fellowship with His people and one of the great symbols of the fellowship is the joyful experience of sitting down and eating and drinking in the presence of God.

II Corinthians 11:17-34

Paul gives excellent teaching on the Lord's Supper in I Corinthians 11 to a church in the midst of disunity, division and conflict.

The two letters to the Corinthians are amazing. As you read them you get the impression that the church in Corinth was wrong on just about everything. And we can thank them for it, because if they hadn't been, we would not have the benefit of Paul's Holy Spirit inspired wisdom on how the church is supposed to be.

Along with all the other things the church was doing that was causing division, they were also making a mockery of the Lord's Supper, in ways we have a hard time even envisioning. They were getting their church potlucks and church picnics mixed up with the Lord's Supper.

They were so caught up in what they wanted to do, and they were not making even the slightest effort to think of others or accommodate others or put the interests and needs of others first. They were looking down on others.

Paul is accusing them of taking the Lord's Supper carelessly, in the wrong way. While we might not do what they did, we still can come to the table carelessly, in at least four wrong ways.

One way is by not recognizing who is invited and who is not.

There are two kinds of people who should not take this meal. It is not for unbelievers, people who are not Christians, who have not professed faith in Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior.

And it is not for Christians who are unrepentant who don't examine themselves. Who don't look for the log in their own eye, the sin in their own heart.

This is why we give a warning every time we come to this table. This is why we always are clear about who should and who should not receive the elements.

This is why we always announce the week before that we will be receiving the Lord's Supper and why we pray the week before that the Holy Spirit will convict us of our sin and our sins against each other and that we will seek to be reconciled and forgiven. We are all sinners and we all sin against each other. This is the equivalent of washing up, cleaning up before dinner.

We should have a humble, healthy fear of God, and settle accounts quickly, not let the sun go down on any of our sin.

We should be all the more motivated to repent and forgive when we consider what Jesus did for us when we hated Him, spit on Him, rejected and rebelled against Him.

Isaiah 53:4-6 Surely he has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows; ...

5 But he was pierced for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities;
6 ... the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all.

The food is holy food so it must be received with holy seriousness that we not offend our host who is God or profane the gifts of God. The seriousness of this is seen in Paul's warning of judgment, sickness and even death.

A second way of taking the Lord's Supper carelessly is by not recognizing who the meal is for.

When you come together as a church. It is for the gathered people. This meal is a family meal for the household of God.

This meal doesn't belong to individuals but to the church. This is why we didn't do communion at home while we were closed. In our individualistic, consumerist American culture everything is about us, and we can view this table as Jesus' gift to me. The pandemic exposes how we have let our individualism and consumerism and self-centeredness creeping into our view of communion.

But Jesus gave this gift to the church, to the covenant community, this is a sign and seal of our membership in the household of God, adopted brothers and sisters.

There is a personal nature to the sacraments, but they are not personal in the sense of private. They are received and taken corporately. This is the Lord's Supper not our supper. It is where we are united with Christ and with each one gathered in the Lord's name.

An essential aspect of communion is the physical act of gathering. The sacrament is not just the bread and the juice, it is the bread and the juice eaten and drunk by the gathered covenant people of God in the presence of Jesus Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit. It is a shared meal which can't happen virtually. This is why the Reformers opposed so strongly the Roman Catholic practice of private baptism and private communion.

We fasted from the sacrament until we could gather. And this is a picture of how Jesus fasts from the sacrament until the church is gathered at the marriage feast of the Lamb.

A third way of taking the Lord's Supper carelessly is by not recognizing the importance of our unity.

One of the most important aspects of this meal is that it is meant to be a sign of Christian **unity**, of being together in the body of Christ.

The Lord's Table is meant to celebrate our union with God through faith in Jesus made possible by His blood, and it is meant to celebrate our union with each other as the covenant adopted brothers and sister in the body of Christ.

It is obvious this was a serious problem in Corinth. There was serious pride and division going on. They were despising each other, acting in superior ways toward each other, going ahead of each other. They were not loving each other, taking care of each other, putting others first.

Do you remember Jesus' prayer in John 17, the real Lord's prayer, as He prays for all who will believe in Him. What does He pray for? That we will all agree with each other and play nice? No, He prays that we will all be one as He and the Father are one. As different as they all were and as different as we all are, that we might be one in Christ Jesus.

This call for and need for unity doesn't mean they all had to agree on everything, it doesn't mean they all have to have the same political party affiliation, or their kids go to the same school. It has to do with the spirit of their gatherings.

Do we love and respect and trust each other, whatever our differences? Do we speak to each other and about each other with tender regard and affection? When we disagree do we do so in a manner that takes care of each other? Do we honor one another?

This is the place to lay down our differences, where we die to ourselves as Jesus did. Are we united in our love for each other and in our love for God? Are we united in our desire to come together to worship the same God and His Son, our only Savior Jesus Christ?

When we come together to worship, and to worship in this specific way, are we showing that Jesus is the greatest treasure, the greatest value, priority, object of our love and affection? When we come together does our unity show?

Do our words and actions proclaim Jesus, proclaim the beauty and value and worth of His life and death, of His laying down His life for us?

Is Jesus infinitely more precious and important to us than any of our petty differences, than any of the things that divide brother against brother, divide families, churches, nations? Would we lay it all down for the sake of Jesus? Would we say with Paul, it is all rubbish, worthless compared to knowing Jesus and suffering with Him and rising with Him?

This has been my earnest prayer for our flock during this Covid season. I have been begging Jesus to hold us together, to keep us from separating from each other, that He would enable us to love one another now more than ever, especially in the face of our many differences that are being exposed.

What a timely opportunity these next two Serve weekends are for all of us who have been cooped up to show some love and unity to our community.

A fourth way of taking the Lord's Supper carelessly is thinking we are not worthy.

One more thing to say about coming to the Lord's Table. When Paul gives these serious warnings and tells us to examine ourselves, some of us can feel like we are completely unworthy. What if we are so fearful of God's wrath and judgment that we stay away?

What should we do? Come to the table and eat. This is our hope and help, this is our redemption, our salvation, this is the Gospel spelled out for us, this is Jesus' offer of life. If you know the depth of your sin, if you are truly sorry for your sin and grieve your offenses against God, then the worthiness of Christ is yours, it is what makes you worthy. Your unworthiness is what qualifies you to come. Find your joy in His salvation. Find your healing in His mercy.

II Corinthians 10:16-17

Paul writes some amazing words about our eating and drinking with our God. Paul is making a very bold declaration here and a very powerful theological truth about what we believe about God and the sacraments.

I Corinthians 10:16 The cup of blessing that we bless, is it not a participation in the blood of Christ? The bread that we break, is it not a participation in the body of Christ? **17** Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread. **18** Consider the people of Israel: are not those who eat the sacrifices participants in the altar?

Jesus tells us we are eating His body and drinking His blood of the new covenant. This is no ordinary eating and drinking. This is real spiritual nourishment. Just as the people of Israel shared in and benefited from what happened on the altar, so we share in and benefit from what happened on the cross, the forgiveness and restored fellowship with God.

This passage declares that there is a real participation in or partaking of Christ Himself, and it is as real as the tasting and drinking of the bread and cup.

Implications and application.

Brothers and sisters, we have waited a long time for this opportunity. And for health reasons some are needing to wait even longer.

May we all wait patiently and with *longing* and expectation for that glorious day when we can gather together in a wonderful display of unity and celebrate the feast. Remember Jesus and how long He is waiting to eat with us again.

What should you do as you receive the elements and as you wait to take them?

Waiting here and waiting at home. Those at home reflect, pray, remember. Jesus said do this in remembrance of me. Remember Him, think about Him and who He is and what He did, remember His humbling Himself to become one of us, remember Him suffering and dying for

us, remember His cross, remember His victory over death and the grave, remember His forgiveness, His grace, His perfect righteousness,

Remember, the bread and cup are important, but they are not the most important thing, the gift is not more important than the giver. Reflect on and remember Christ, who is our advocate and intercessor, seated at the right hand of the Father.

For us here, come joyfully, thankfully, expectantly, with faith and repentance. Come hungry in your souls for spiritual food and nourishment. Come and receive one of Christ's most precious gifts He has given to the church on earth.