

Sunday Next Before Advent 2018

Worthiness in the Body of Christ

1 Corinthians 11:17-32

Fr. Bill Baker

St. Andrew's Church, Jacksonville, Or

This morning is the last Sunday of the church year and we are already looking forward to the season of Advent. It will be a time of celebration and joy; a time of festive music and hot chocolate. The colors of purple will adorn our altar and the lessons we will read and hear are some of the most well known in all of scripture. It will be a most glorious time. But today's message is not one that inspires Christmas carols. It is more preparatory in its focus; more concerned with a proper foundation of belief and understanding. St. Paul pulls no punches when it comes to taking Christ for granted. I believe what we hear today is a good note to end the church year on that we might find the necessity within ourselves to rededicate our faith more directly.

My hope, on this Sunday before Advent, is to set a strong foundation in your hearts that will persist, making the upcoming church year authentically real. Our relationship with Christ is to be strengthened at the Table...may we truly begin to understand the importance of consuming so precious a gift.

As the Corinthians gathered at the Table of the Lord it was evident that something had gone wrong and unworthy reception was beginning to separate believers. The Communion became divided between those of affluence and those who had little or nothing to offer. The Supper, being consumed by the first, left nothing for the less fortunate. The practice of inequality in the body of Christ was a heresy that had to be dealt with and Paul is about to set them straight. And before he begins, he gives them warning.

“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...When you meet together, it is not the Lord's supper that you eat.... For he that eateth and drinketh unworthily, eateth and drinketh damnation to himself, not discerning the Lord's body.”

And after his chastisement he ends on a note that tells the Corinthians that he is not done yet concerning this subject, “...*And the rest will I set in order when I come*” Paul informs. Do you think they are squirming in their seats?

Today's lesson begs the question: Do we truly feel the presence of Holy Spirit within us? Do we understand the spiritual significance of the internal workings of Christ experienced through the external sources of the Sacraments? Advent begins a wonderful journey of great joy...but it also presents the truth most candidly. There is peace and comfort...there is love and great joy...but there is also the nashing of teeth.

So imagine next Sunday, the Holy Table is set...the body and the blood of our Lord and Saviour rests quietly, but with infinite power. Great care is taken in preparing this table according to the instructions give by the Lord Himself and through the guidance of Tradition passed down by the early church. The Table is a sacred place...it is Holy Ground. The Canon of the Mass is a solemn celebration! Solemn by our remembrance that He had to die for OUR sins and a celebration because we know that he is risen and we with Him. Through the grace and mercy bestowed upon us, the ultimate sacrifice of His death and resurrection is not something that is merely remembered...but a presence continuing to have the power to forgive and to punish. The Real Presence of Christ. It is Christ...working through the Sacrament of Holy communion in the elements of bread and wine, keeping us from judgment and ensuring our place in Heaven. It is at the table were we leave this world and experience a taste of the Heavenly Realm. A place, where once again, we are in Communion with God!

So, how can a table so aptly set for blessing, be the cause of condemnation and damnation? Should we even consider that this Table, these elements of bread and wine, could be dangerous as well as life giving? Paul would tell us ‘yes’! In verse 30 Paul responds to those who have become ill or even died as a result of consuming this ‘sacrifice of praise’ unworthily when he says; “*For this cause many are weak and sickly among you, and many sleep.*” Let us understand clearly on this point...it is not the nature of the sacrament itself that causes illness or even death but, it is the **attitude** of the one who comes to it. Those who come to the Lord's Table without discerning the Lord's body do not receive life...but remain in death.

The early Church Father, Chrysostom says this: “*For just as the presence of Christ, which conveyed to us those great and unspeakable blessings, condemned those who **did not receive them**, so also the Holy Communion*

becomes a means of greater punishment to those who partake unworthily”... There is punishment for not partaking in the blessings of Christ...choosing to ignore Christ and His church, but there is a greater punishment to those who partake of the blessed sacrament who have no relationship with him and remain in unrepentant sin. Trying to fake your way through as a Christian or coming to the table to take part in the ‘great show’ from antiquity should be terrifying.

Being a Christian is serious business! So, how do we come to the Table? How do we know, as we kneel with outstretched hands to accept the Body and Blood of Christ, that we are here worthily?

St. Paul gives us the answer in a previous verse *“But let a man examine himself, and so let him eat of that bread, and drink of that cup.”* (1 cor. 11:28) *“Examine ourselves.”* Next Sunday, the First Sunday in Advent, we will have the opportunity to come to the table but, before we do, we are instructed by the Prayer Book to read the Exhortation. It is a call to remind us of the seriousness of coming to the Lord’s Table. If you will remember, it begins thus: *“Dearly beloved in the Lord, ye who mind to come to the holy Communion of the Body and Blood of our Saviour Christ, must consider how Saint Paul exhorteth all persons diligently to try an examine themselves, before they presume to eat of that Bread, and drink of that Cup. For as the benefit is great, if with a true penitent heart and lively faith we receive that holy Sacrament: so is the danger great, if we receive the same unworthily. (and here’s the scary part) Judge therefore yourselves, brethren, that ye be not judged of the Lord...”* (1928 BCP, pg. 85)

We must be willing to come to the table emptying ourselves of all our impurities before consuming that which is so pure. Be alone with God in your mind acknowledging your sins. Repent of your weaknesses that have pulled you down sinful paths. Turn and clear your conscience then come to the table.

And if we are coming to the Table in fear and trembling we can be assured that our hearts are willing. And even if our thoughts cast doubts we can be confident that the Lord understands our frailty and forgives us. It is in **our** weakness that he exposes our strengths. A true desire to be pure within will be seen as righteousness because we **gained** righteousness when the sins that came between us and God were washed away by the blood of Christ. It is true...we must be willing to walk in the ways of the Lord to be acceptable to Him, but we are not left on our own in this pursuit!

Verse 32 tells us that we are chastened by the Lord so that we will not be condemned with the world. Our punishment is called by St. Paul a ‘chastening;’ more in line with being educated or admonished so to continue in the true path. We can escape the judgment the **world** will be subjected to, if we will accept the chastening of the Lord and repent. This is true healing, more important than overcoming any illness, making the burdens of today light in comparison to the Great Judgment.

I remind you once again of the third verse from our sermon hymn:

*On body we, one body who partake,
One church united in communion blest;
One name we bear, one bread of life we break,
With all thy saints on earth and saints at rest.*

The Holy Table...an incredible place of blessing and awe, where we, whether asleep or awake in the Lord, come to commune together in the life, the death, the resurrection and the ascension of our Lord Jesus Christ...

I know, today’s sermon has been a serious one, but appropriate I believe the to building a stronger foundation for a new church year. And there is no better place to build than on the Altar of the Lord where we come together to partake of His most precious body and blood. There will be time for us to lighten up and speak of hope, peace, Joy and Love. But we must understand that all the reasons for the season can only truly come by walking closely with the Father, by learning His Will for our lives and by becoming the children God has designed us to be. The Real Presence of Christ in the Sacrament of Holy Communion calls each of us into union with the Father and with each other.

Go deeper...grow closer...become more real...and come to the table as one body and Jesus will meet you there.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.