

The Story Is Not Over Yet
Sermon for Maundy Thursday
Sermon Text: 1 Corinthians 11:17-34



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. ¹⁸For, 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, ¹⁹for there must be factions among you in order that those who are genuine among you may be recognized. ²⁰When you come together, it is not the Lord's supper that you eat. ²¹For in eating, each one goes ahead with his own meal. One goes hungry, another gets drunk. ²²What! 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. ²³For I received from the Lord what I also delivered to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night when He was betrayed took bread, ²⁴and when He had given thanks, He broke it, and said, "This is My body, which is for you. Do this in remembrance of Me." ²⁵In 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." ²⁶For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until He comes. ²⁷Whoever, 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. ²⁸Let a person examine himself, then, and so eat of the bread and drink of the cup. ²⁹For anyone who eats and drinks without discerning the body eats and drinks judgment on himself. ³⁰That is why many of you are weak and ill, and some have died. ³¹But if we judged ourselves truly, we would not be judged. ³²But when we are judged by the Lord, we are disciplined so that we may not be condemned along with the world. ³³So then, my brothers, when you come together to eat, wait for one another— ³⁴if 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.

When Jesus rode into Jerusalem, there was great unrest among the people. Everyone asked themselves, "Who is Jesus?" Some awaited a political savior, others wanted to be healed from their illnesses, and still others simply wanted to hear what Jesus had to say. And there they all sat again, together around a table. As so often before, Jesus had something extraordinary in mind, and everything turned out differently than the disciples had expected. Jesus solemnly lifted up the bread, broke it, and said: "This is My body!" In the same way, He solemnly took the cup and said, "This is My blood of the new covenant." Then He passed these gifts around the table. For the first time, they tremblingly partook of the Lord's Body and Blood. Perhaps one or two of them had doubts: "What is this all about anyway...? We're not used to doing Passover like this! We've always done it differently!" Jesus' story is not yet finished because even today, people still argue about who Jesus is. And still today, we partake of the body and blood of our Lord and ask ourselves: "What actually happens here?" Just like then, Jesus speaks to us: "This is My body. This is My blood." Jesus doesn't give us a reminder or anything else, but He is giving us His very self. And if He gives us life and salvation through this, then it is not for any other reason than the fact that He Himself is there in the bread and wine. Of course, this is not always visible to our eyes. It was just after the institution of Holy Communion that Jesus was torn from the disciples' immediate fellowship. The disciples fled in all directions because Jesus was suddenly no longer there for them in all His power. We see that Jesus intentionally instituted the Lord's Supper for us so that we can be strengthened and connected to Him in this day and age. Someday, we will see Jesus face to face and celebrate the Lord's Supper with Him in heaven. But this time has not yet come. Paul refers to these Words of Jesus in the Last Supper and makes a shocking statement: it could be that we come to communion unworthily. Now the question is, "What then is unworthy and what is worthy? And how do I receive the Lord's Supper worthily?" The Apostle Paul takes Holy Communion very seriously and already in his time, insists on an important community-building tradition that he didn't invent, but which the Lord Himself instituted.

We also have a great responsibility when we administer communion – what we receive and impart is from the Lord Himself. But Paul was often terribly misunderstood. For example, some Christians thought "worthy" meant that you had to be "holy" or "good enough" and only then could you receive the body and blood of Christ. So they said: "My life should be in perfect order before I can take part in Holy Communion." So, of all people, those who suffer greatly from feelings of guilt and shame were excluded from the Lord's table. The precise place where grace and forgiveness are made available to them is instead withheld from them. The place where they can taste and see the goodness of the Lord and where they would be visibly united with the Lord and where they could experience being part of the Christian community, is denied to them.

If we were to say that we had to be "worthy" before we could go to Communion, that would mean that everyone would have to stay away and then none of us would be allowed to partake. Then we would all be left out. This would be fatal because we would be saying that the Lord's Supper depends on our actions. Holy Communion

is not based on our so-called holiness or our faultless moral conduct, but Jesus Himself creates the meal and we celebrate Communion because we need forgiveness. The Lord's Supper is a place where the unworthy come together and receive forgiveness.

What does Paul mean by his insistent statement that one can receive the Lord's Supper unworthily? From the context of the letter to the Corinthians, we can see what is meant by this. The congregation in Corinth thought that they were already in heaven. Yet the opposite of heaven was happening in their church – some examples: they were arguing among themselves and the rich received communion first, while the poor only received what was left over. Paul was outraged by these conditions. In their community, they received the body and blood of Christ and denied this same Jesus Christ through their actions. It is in this context that Paul writes words that still shock us today for he says that there is a terrible possibility that we could not receive the body and blood of Jesus for blessing and life but could come to judgment and thus be unworthy to take Communion. In essence, the error of the Corinthians lies in the fact that they celebrated the Lord's Supper without Jesus. Jesus Himself is the one who established Holy Communion. If we celebrate the Lord's Supper as if He weren't even there, it is unworthy. If I go to Holy Communion and am firmly convinced that I just need to think very hard about Jesus at this point, I have turned the Lord's Supper into a work of man. We would therefore be making a mockery of Jesus' words when He says: "Given for you."

We don't become children of God by deciding to become children of God, but instead by Jesus, the Son of God, coming to our side and dying for us. Only in this way is sin rendered harmless and everything that separates us from God is removed. When we say that we celebrate the Lord's Supper in remembrance of Jesus, it means more than just thinking about Him. The word "in remembrance" comes from a Hebrew word that has the meaning of not just thinking about an event but actually experiencing the reality of the event in my life. That means that what happened in the past becomes the present. It is about much more than just recalling a fact. This is exactly how the Passover was understood among the Jewish people. Generations should know that the Exodus from Egypt is real and present in every generation. In the same way, God's covenant with mankind was not thought of as a singular event, but as something that is present in people's lives day in and day out.

This is also the meaning of Jesus' words: "in remembrance." A while ago, a person said to me, "Don't get me wrong, I'm not against the church – I also accept that Jesus died for my sins. But I don't need to hear the whole story over and over again, because I know it now! Can't the church come up with something new for once? Why do they have to repeat the same things over and over again? It's all too boring for me." Those who speak like this think that the work of God must first pass through a censorship of the mind before it can take effect. Anyone who speaks like this also thinks that the Lord's Supper is dependent on our intellect. They haven't understood that Christ really and truly comes to us. If the real Christ comes to us through these words, I can repeat them a million times over because the Christ who comes to us in this way is not boring, but alive and loving and has a personalized and imaginative effect on our lives. This is exactly what we need. None of us are what we are because we think in a certain way in a moment. My story is one of the characteristics of my past. What I think and do today has a long history. When I come to the Lord's Supper, Jesus comes with His story and superimposes it over my own story so that we become one in a mysterious way – Jesus' story and my story. Jesus Christ becomes part of my life and my story both with His humiliation to the point of death on the cross and with His exaltation to the right side of God. That's why the Apostle Paul can also say in another passage: "It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me."

The depravity that happened among the Corinthians ultimately also led to a division within the church. The reason was not that they were unloving towards one another, rather, the reason was that they didn't really believe who was among them. They didn't understand what it means: "Eat and drink, this is My body and this is My blood." Sharing in Jesus also leads to true fellowship with one another. Fellowship with one another also comes from love and fellowship in Christ. Being in touch with one another doesn't allow us to experience fellowship, but Jesus in us and among us provides all of this. Jesus gave His disciples Holy Communion and did so in the knowledge that He would then send them into the dark night – into the night in which there would be temptation; into the night in which there would be division, discord, and even doubt. Yet He gave them Holy Communion. He does this in the knowledge that His words have power against all these things. With this in mind, He also sends us into the darkness of night too – into a scary night, a night in which betrayal and denial are evident. Yet at the end of this night, the Lord will remain and His words will remain the same: "For you and for me." Amen.