

Sermon, November 6, 2022

1 Corinthians 11:23-34
"Do This in Remembrance of Me"

To better understand today's reading we need a little background information.

To begin with, in the earliest days of the church's history congregations did not meet in a church building such as we are in now. They met in someone's home late in the day. And the Lord's Supper was not celebrated in the same way we do. It was observed in the context of a regular meal. It would begin with the blessing and breaking of bread, with the reminder that it was being broken in remembrance of Jesus, and more specifically, his sacrifice on the cross. This would be followed by a meal. Then, notice in the reading and in our own liturgy, it says, that he took the cup "after supper". At the end of the meal, they would drink the wine, again, in remembrance of Jesus.

Also, if we read through the book of 1 Corinthians, we are aware that this was a congregation in great conflict. This is apparent in the passage that precedes today's reading. In it Paul writes, "I hear that there are divisions among you; and to some extent I believe it. Indeed, there have to be factions among you, for only so will it become clear who among you are genuine". He then goes on to point out that there is some partaking of the Lord's Supper who actually are there for the meal and not there in remembrance of the Lord. That's what he means when he refers to those who are not genuine.

He is also pointing out that there is a lack of unity as far as the meal is concerned. Some are arriving first and partaking of the meal and drinking the wine before others arrive. Some are even getting drunk on the communion wine. There is also a bit of a social clash going on. Paul writes, "What? Do you not have homes to eat and drink in? Or do you show contempt for the church of God and humiliate those who have nothing?". In other words, it is the poor and less fortunate who are being left out of the meal.

In our reading he is referring to those who are sharing in the meal unworthily. He goes on to say, "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 judgement upon themselves". What does he mean when he says, "without discerning the body"? Well, it can actually have two meanings. First, discerning the body of Christ in the breaking of the bread, but, secondly, failing to recognize that they are the Body of Christ when they come together as a congregation - that if they continue on with the divisions within the church, the Body of Christ itself is broken.

Then, I think Paul takes it a step too far when he says, " For this reason many of you are weak and ill, and some have died". He sees the illness and death as God disciplining them for

the divisions that lead to eating the meal unworthily. That may have made sense in Paul's day, but not in ours.

So, what does celebrating the meal unworthily mean today? Well, I have served in congregations that were mired in conflict. I'll give you one example. As a student intern I served in a church where the pastor was gay. The majority of the congregation had no problem with it, but the pastor started receiving death threats in the mail. No one knew who was sending the letters, but, soon, people started pointing fingers as to who they thought was doing it. At one point I was even accused. Eventually the divisions grew stronger and angrier, and a lot of people were deeply hurt. In time the real culprit was found, but it took a long time for that congregation to heal. Obviously, there, the Body of Christ was broken, as was the unity that should be discerned in the Lord's Supper.

But we can also consider this on a much larger scale when we look to the church universal - a church divided into so many denominations - a church where many are barred from the table because of their denominational affiliation. Sadly, on a universal scale, the Body of Christ is broken.

Now, let me conclude with Jesus' statement, "Do this in remembrance of me". What does that mean? It means more than having affectionate thoughts and memories of his person. It also means remembering all that he stood for. But, even more than that, it means living what he stood for within the context of our own lives - of living lives of mercy and compassion, of reaching out to those in need, of advocating for righteousness, just and peace, and, for preserving the unity of the Body of Christ! Amen.

Let us pray: Eternal Spirit of the universe, we thank you that you do not leave us alone but place your Word in the midst of our life together. You are no statue made of silver or gold, but a living reality on the face of the earth. Give us courage and commitment to let your Spirit flow within us and let your life be revealed among us. Empowered by your Spirit, May we care for the needs of all people, break Bread together with joy, and praise you day by day. Grant us your peace; through Jesus who lives among us....Amen.