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“Examine Yourselves” – More Thoughts on the Meaning of the Lord’s Supper

(Matthew 22:36-40 NRSV) "Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?" 37 [Jesus] said to him, "'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.' 38 This is the greatest and first commandment. 39 And a second is like it: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' 40 On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets."

(1 Corinthians 11:23-28 NRSV) For I received from the Lord what I also handed on to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took a loaf of bread, 24 and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, "This is my body that is for you. Do this in remembrance of me." 25 In the same way he took the cup also, after supper, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me." 26 For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes. 27 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. 28 Examine yourselves, and only then eat of the bread and drink of the cup.

There are several different references to the Lord’s Supper in the New Testament. There are the accounts in each of the gospels, and there is Paul’s account of what he has received and, in turn, hands on to the Corinthian church and which is our scripture for the morning. You may also recall that a few weeks ago I also preached on the Lord’s Supper, and in that earlier sermon I looked at the same scripture from Paul as is our reading for today. But in that previous sermon, I concentrated on the first part of Paul’s words, focusing on what it means to “*remember*” Jesus in the ritual of the Lord’s Supper. I talked about how it was that no experience is completed, really, until we remember it, savor it, share it with others. And so, I said, part of the meaning of the Lord’s Supper is that through it we are brought near to all those countless Christians in

every place and time who have also remembered him through this simple taking of bread and cup.

But today, I want to focus on the **last** few verses of Paul's words. In particular, I want to focus on those hard and troubling two verses that say: "*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.*" More ink and electrons have been spilled on these two little verses than on any other scripture concerning the Lord's Supper, and they have occasionally been the source of some very regrettable practices. Up until as late as the mid-19th century, for example, some Protestant denominations still required what they called an "examination" prior to receiving communion. In fact, our own Disciples of Christ wider church family was founded nearly 200 years ago partly in revolt against one of the Presbyterian denomination's practices of having the elders of the church "examine" each person before he or she was allowed to receive communion. They would, as it were, grill each person who was going to attend worship on that Sunday and demand to know the sins that the person had committed and what the person intended to do about those sins. And if, in the judgment of those elders, the person was suitably fit, had appropriately owned up to their sins, and convincingly showed that he or she was sorry and intended not to do those sins again, then the person was given a small "token." Something like the tokens you might get at an old-style arcade. And then in order to receive communion you first had to present your token to the minister. No token, no table; no coin, no cup. And one of our Disciples of Christ founders, by the

name of Alexander Campbell, increasingly convinced that this practice was theologically wrong, one Sunday came to the communion table, token in hand, and threw that token on the table and walked out.

Now, it must be said that the practice of what came to be called “fencing the table” had its roots in good intentions: the intention of those who began this practice was not to insult, demean, or intrude on people’s lives; their **intent** was to honor the sacredness of the table and the magnificence of Christ’s gift and sacrifice by making sure that those who came understood the sacredness of this encounter with Christ. But they ended up going terribly wrong. How? Well, notice what Paul’s words say: *“Examine **yourselves**, and only then eat of the bread and drink of the cup.”* Examine yourselves. They **don’t** say *“Examine someone else!”* It’s an easy mistake to make, isn’t it? When our children were small, as all siblings do, they sometimes took delight in pointing out the transgressions of their brothers or sisters. We would be seated at the dinner table and one of them would say in the most perfectly haughty and superior tone *“Andrew, you’re not supposed to have your elbows on the table.”* And do you know what? Andrew – or whichever child it was – never, ever responded with *“Oh thank you, sister; you are so right and I appreciate your correcting me.”* No, it usually led to a squabble of course, and then parental intervention and reminder to the child who was doing the chastising that that wasn’t his or her job. And then the chastising child would pout and usually say a sentence that began this way, “Well, I was **just** trying to tell him....” That happened so often that I developed a rule for them: *“Any sentence that begins with ‘I was **just** trying to tell him’ or ‘I was **just** trying to tell her’ is not a sentence*

that you should say and it refers to an action that you don't need to do.” Why?

Because it's not your job. It's their job.

Paul is saying the same thing here: It IS **your** job to “examine” yourselves. But the verse **doesn't** say that someone *else* “examines” and pronounces you worthy of receiving the grace of God in this or any aspect of your religion. That, in fact, was what the Protestant Reformation 500 years ago was about in its insistence that finally and ultimately our relationship to the grace of God is between us and God. But there is so, so much sometimes in our culture that would try to tell us otherwise, that would want to lay claim to being able to examine you and judge you wanting. There are those strident voices that insist, for example, that unless you have the “right” views on this or that social issue, you aren't truly worthy to receive God's grace. It's easy to get those voices inside your head and let them set the terms of the “examination” and thereby find yourselves wanting and unworthy. Or maybe the voice inside your head that is setting the terms of the examination for you is really not your voice at all but the voice of a parent or a family system or a cultural expectation that would set the standards so high that you always are fearful and worried that you can never do enough, be enough, achieve enough, to count yourself worthy. And, likewise, there is so much in our culture that insidiously urges you to be about the business of examining others and determining if they are “worthy” or not.

But what Paul says is this: “*Examine yourself.*” And we are invited thereby to remember that indeed the *terms* of that examination are set by God, not our culture, not those with the loudest voices, not those with an agenda for us that is not our own. And

what are those terms? One can, of course, spend a lifetime studying the hopes and desires of God, seeking through prayer and study to learn of God, but when push comes to shove, we can do no better than to remember Jesus' words when he was asked what it was that God most wanted, what it was that was the greatest commandment. Do you remember what he said? *Love the Lord your God with all your heart, and strength, and soul and mind and love your neighbor as yourself.* And yet, I don't know about you, but I confess that sometimes I immediately want to respond: *Lord, there are some days, some weeks, that I find it hard to love myself, much less my neighbor. And, Lord, there are some days, some weeks, when I think I have loved something else far more energetically and passionately than You. Lord, I have found myself seduced by wanting to buy more stuff; I have given in to the temptation of using my tongue to make a sharp reply to someone who didn't deserve it; I have found myself so busy keeping my head above water in just trying to get by in all the complexities of life and schedule and to-do lists that I realize that I haven't given you much time; I have found my mind so focused on a problem or an opportunity that I didn't use very much of my mind at all on you; I have not loved my neighbor sometimes and in fact instead of loving them have assumed the worst about their actions or their motivations.*

Are those thoughts anything like your thoughts? If so, we can begin to despair about ever being "worthy" to receive communion. But that would be a mistake. For we would have again misinterpreted Paul's words, adding something that just is not there. For Paul says *"Examine yourselves."* He doesn't say, *"Examine yourselves and if you pass the exam with an A+ only then you can come to the Table."* No, Paul is reminding

us that what God wants of us when we come to this Table, is not perfection but *acknowledgment* and *intention*. We are asked to *acknowledge* where we have fallen short and to *intend* to more fully follow God. It is the **fact** of the “examination,” the honesty of it, the honest intention of not trying to deceive God or ourselves about either our shortcomings or our successes that matters. Is God pleased when we have been able to do a good job of loving both God and neighbor, or when we have resisted the temptations to sin that come to all of us? Of course. Does God withhold grace from us, or bar us from the divine presence when we have failed to live up to a certain standard? No. Does God judge us when we have done hurtful things, wrong things? Yes, absolutely. Does God then love us less? No! Does the fact of having done those things mean that we aren’t allowed or shouldn’t come to God seeking forgiveness, or come to God at this Table where we receive the sacrament of grace and forgiveness? No. No. No.

Forgiveness and Grace. That is finally what Holy Communion is about. The forgiveness of what we have done that has hurt ourselves, others, and God, and the grace to be transformed and renewed that we might be better Christians this week than we were the last.

When Barbara and I lived in Indiana we used to drive to go visit her parents in Iowa. And on one of those trips we did something that we didn’t know would become a tradition. We stopped at the Golden Corral restaurant near Peoria. Now that was back in the day when we had four children under the age of nine and money was always tighter than we wished. And as much as we enjoyed going to restaurants, we could

only afford taking them about once a month. But that was enough so that they knew the drill. You go into the restaurant, behave yourselves, look over the menu, decide what you want, ok it with Mom or Dad, politely give the waitress or waiter your order, and then behave yourselves while waiting for your food. But the Golden Corral, of course, is an all-you-can eat buffet. And after the waitress came to take the drink orders, we told the kids that they could now go to the buffet and explained how it worked. One of our children whom we later realized had never been to a restaurant buffet, with wide eyes went and soon returned with a plate piled with enough food to feed the county. As I recall both Barbara and I relieved him of some of the food so it wouldn't slop everywhere, and we told him that he could go back for more but to save room for dessert because there was an ice-cream machine where he could fix his own sundaes. Again, his eyes got wide, and he asked, *"I can go back as many times as I want? I can eat as much as I want? Even ice cream?"* Well, please don't make yourself sick, we replied, but yes you can. *"Awesome, just awesome"* he replied.

The Table before us is awesome, just awesome. All you can eat. Return as many times as you like, as many times as you need to. For here you will find the food of grace and transformation and hope. Awesome, awesome. Amen.