

Taking Communion Unworthily

1 Corinthians 11:17-34

Series: Tough Texts of the Bible

August 1, 2004

© William G. Carter

As some of you know, I lead a monthly communion service at a local nursing home. Some time last spring, a Roman Catholic nun in a big, black habit dropped by our worship service. I saw the door open, and an aide pointed her toward a lady in the back row. It was the Wednesday of Holy Week, and the good sister had come to pay a pastoral call on one of the faithful.

Halfway across the room, it suddenly dawned on her that she was interrupting a Protestant sermon. She glanced at me, noticed my coat and tie, saw the bread and cup and wooden cross with nobody on it. A look of modest panic came over her face. As I'm still preaching, I can hear her say, "Josephine, this is a Protestant communion service."

"Yep," said Josie, "it's where I belong. Why don't you stay and join me?"

I sneak a glance at the elder who had accompanied me. His lips form into a slight smirk. I finished my brief sermon. The nun remains respectfully. When I get to the Eucharistic prayer, I pray "in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit," so that the nun and the other half-dozen Catholic interlopers will sense that I am not a false prophet. And then we hand out bread cubes and grape juice. Everybody partakes of the body and blood except for the nun.

When the service is over, she nods respectfully in my direction. As I take the tray of crumbs out to the kitchen for cleanup, I can overhear her say, "You know, Josephine, we must be careful not to take communion unworthily."

I'm still chewing on that comment, wondering what she meant by that. You heard the advice from Paul's letter. You know that the admonition comes from that text: "*Whoever 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.*" Not only is it a tough text of the New Testament. It is a text that has frequently built a fence around the Lord's Table.

Some people don't think they are worthy of communion. There might be some problem in their life. There might be some unresolved issue. Whatever the case, they examine themselves – or someone else sizes them up – and they decide to pass on the bread tray when somebody gives it to them. The grape juice goes unsipped.

Sometimes it happens here on Communion Sundays. Attendance usually improves on the First Sunday of the month. The curious thing is that not everybody takes the bread and the cup. I don't know if you knew this, but after communion, Shirley McLaughlin usually counts the number of empty cups and writes the number on a sheet of paper in the kitchen. There's often a gap between the number of adults here, and the number of adults taking communion. Some of you didn't think I had noticed, but I did. What's with the gap? Maybe there are some people here who don't think they are welcome, or don't think they are good enough, and they don't want to take the Lord's Supper "unworthily."

The apostle Paul warned about that. "'Examine yourselves. Don't take the Lord's Supper in an unworthy manner. You might get sick!"

Following his cue, churches through the ages have scheduled preparatory worship services. Our Puritan forebears required attendance at such experiences. There was usually a long, long sermon, and a lot of silence. People were supposed to repent of their sins before they came to communion. If they were successfully

penitent, they were given a round token which would admit to the Table. Some of you can still remember this practice.

Over at the nursing home, however, there is no such preparation. Nobody ever asks the residents about their religious affiliation. We don't even inquire if they are baptized. About all that happens is that the activity staff works the halls about an hour before the service, asking if the residents want to go "to church." Anybody who wishes to sing old hymns, listen to an eight-minute sermon, and ingest small servings of Wonder Bread and Welch's Grape Juice is welcome. Now, that is radical grace.

In the words of one theologian, "The people of the Table are the same people to whom grace has been proclaimed at the Font. If this is not affirmed, an unfortunate sorting out process occurs such that the people at the table are welcome there by virtue of something other than divine goodness."¹

Or as Josie puts it, "It's where I belong. Why don't you stay and join me?"

It's a wonderful thing for her to say. But that's not always the way it's been, has it!

The lady who cuts my hair returned from Las Vegas with a wedding ring on her finger. After I spoke some congratulatory words, she said, "You know what this means, don't you? I'll never be able to have communion ever again."

Why? "My new husband refused to pay for an annulment from his Catholic parish, so we couldn't get married in our church. I got my annulment a few years ago, but Ron is still classified as a divorced man."

"Not only that," she added. "My boyfriend and I lived together for seven years, and I could receive communion whenever I wanted. Now that we're married, my church will never again give me the sacrament."

But don't you cut the hair of your priest? Haven't you become friends with him? Couldn't you sneak in for a little sacrament when nobody is looking?

"That's the problem," she replied. "Everybody is looking, and half of my customers go to our church. And God would know if I sneaked in. The bottom line is I don't want to anger the Lord by going for communion."

Now, she gets an A+ on self-examination, but she needs a remedial class on grace.

We take the bread and break it, and God remembers us. As we remember God in Christ, he remembers us. We take the cup of forgiveness and drink it. God remembers us, and forgets our sins. All the hard work has been done by Jesus on the cross. We are loved by God, and by the power of the Spirit, we are gathered in the grace of his Son.

Over at the nursing home, however, we have formed a distinctive spiritual community. We offer Christ's broken body to a woman who cannot remember her name, to a mute diabetic who has lost his legs, and to a near-blind schoolteacher who knows second and third verses of hymns by heart. Whenever we pray, that small flock can never agree on whether they are debtors or trespassers. Even if I tell them that today we're going to say "debts," some go trespassing. Yet these people keep coming. And they keep belonging.

"Don't take communion in an unworthy manner." What is Paul warning against? Well, in the city of Corinth, the little Christian church was divided into factions. There were rich over here, and needy over there. The rich brought a lot of bread to eat among themselves, and the poor went hungry. The rich brought a lot of

¹ Laurence Hull Stookey, Eucharist: Christ's Feast With the Church (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1993) 133.

wine and got drunk, and the poor were ignored. The same divisions of the world outside had infected the New Creation of Christ.² And Paul says, “This isn’t right.”

“Call it what you want,” said the apostle, “but that isn’t the Lord’s Supper. When you come together, discern the body of Christ.” Look around the room – WE are the Body of Christ. Look into one another’s eyes. Take one another seriously. Bear one another’s burdens. Put up with one another’s crazy habits. If you want to pig out on wine and bread, do that at home. But here, in the church, we will look out for one another, as members of the Body of Christ.

This is one of the ways that the grace of God becomes real. God shows mercy in the self-sacrifice of Christ, and we extend that mercy by our tolerance and welcome of one another. Over at the nursing home, if a wayward nun wanders in on the wrong day, she is welcome to stay. A couple of divorced members of the nursing home staff stop by for a piece of bread and a sip of grape juice. And it never fails: on the days when I feel tired or reluctant to keep the appointment, I am always renewed by the hospitality of Jesus and the love of that community.

The Lord’s Supper is a community expression of grace. If sin is the pervasive force which infects and undermines all that is good, then God’s redemption begins through a gracious initiative by which the stained are cleansed and the unqualified are deemed welcome. Those who could not enter a second floor church sanctuary (like ours) on their own steam are given a Table as a gift. Those who are moving between home and home are given something to eat and drink. This is how God works it out at Abington Manor.

“You prepare a table before me,” says the psalmist, “in the presence of my enemies.” Sometimes at the nursing home, the enemies are clear: decline, infirmity, confusion, infection, influenza, neglect by family, and demons that cause your roommate to howl. But the Table gets set right in the middle of all these things. And we remember the self-giving love of Jesus.

The last time I was there, it was a few weeks ago. My deacon assistant served the bread from her wheelchair, and said, “Broken for you.” An elder from our church held the common cup, and said, “Poured out for you.” In the absence of a pianist, I banged out a few quiet hymns. And I watched as those modest saints took Christ into their hearts, souls, and minds.

A few may have looked feeble and weak, but everybody there looked so ... *worthy*.

² This is the astute conclusion of Charles Talbert, in *Reading Corinthians* (New York: Crossroad, 1989 (pp. 73- 80).