

The Scandal of This Supper
I Corinthians 11:17-34
John 15:1-8

“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.”

I wonder if our Lord had any inkling what ecclesial disputes and divisions would ensue from his simple command to “Do this, in remembrance of me.” I cannot rehearse them all, but I think, in the first place, of Ulrich Zwingli and Martin Luther who met each other half-way in the midst of the Reformation, half-way between Zurich and Wittenberg, intending to merge the emerging communions of Swiss and German Protestants into one body. That was their intent, and they would almost have pulled it off, save for the scandal of this supper. At issue was the location of the real Presence of Christ. Luther said, “On the table,” meaning in the elements of bread and wine. Zwingli, being more radical in his rejection of Rome, declared that the real Presence of Christ was around the table—in the community of faith. On that note of discord, they parted and for centuries we remained in our own separate communions.

You could say that Zwingli’s understanding of the real Presence of Christ has underwritten the American practice of serving the Lord’s Supper in the pews, a practice to which we return for pastoral reasons this morning. While the vast majority of Christians come forward to receive the elements as an act of volition, the traditional practice of Presbyterians in this country has been to remain in the pew, ostensibly because we believe in the priesthood of all believers, a phrase that belongs to the Lutherans if the truth be told. Yet that practice has become less about the service of one another and more about my own individual communing with God in silence and relative privacy, certainly a misunderstanding of the twofold act of receiving and sharing that is communion and that is our acting out of the life of God, the communication of God in our midst. Therefore as we return to this practice, we return with one significant

difference: we will actively serve one another and receive from one another saying to one another: “The bread of heaven” and “The cup of salvation”. Some will be glad for our return to the way we have almost always done it; others will miss the act of coming forward, especially the many in this congregation who have come from traditions other than Presbyterian. The scandal of this supper!

“The Lord’s Table,” wrote Robert McAfee Brown, “is the place where [Christians] are most divided....Here denominational pride and ecclesiastical arrogance are most pronounced—just where they should be overcome by a recognition that it is the Lord’s Table to which [we] come and not[our] own table. [We] do not sit at the Lord’s Table by right,” he insisted, “nor do [we] gain admission to his banquet by producing proper denominational credentials. [We] sit there only by the gracious condescension of the One who has invited [us]....Disunion here is a scandal in the life of Christendom.”

I once accepted an invitation to worship with a friend in seminary who was in the process of leaving his Baptist roots for the Episcopalians. This should have been a clue. Having made it through the various books and pages, the prayers standing and kneeling, it came time for the Eucharist. At the invitation to the table, my friend admonished me in a whisper to remain in the pew while he and his wife rose to partake.

We call it “fencing the table” and by that the church has meant to take the sacrament of the Lord’s Supper seriously. In other words, not just any bloke who walks through a sanctuary door is invited. Baptism has always been the prior sacrament and now is the only condition placed upon those who would commune in this denomination. As we accept everyone’s baptism, no one is refused. The favor has yet to be universally returned. Only a few decades ago, in addition to baptism, confirmation was the rite by which many of us—after study, examination

and profession of faith—were admitted to the Lord's Supper. Communicants Class we called it: *Forasmuch as you have made confession of your faith, I do now, in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, the great head of the church, admit you to the Sacrament of the Lord's Supper* reads the old Book of Common Worship.

In even earlier times, the state of one's life was scrutinized each time the sacrament was offered. It was the duty of a minister or an elder to call upon each member of the congregation in order to ascertain a person's spiritual readiness and admit them to the table. "When I look back to my childhood and boyhood in the Highlands of Scotland," writes Donald Baillie in his book on *The Theology of the Sacraments*,

I can never forget that in those days and in that environment the sacrament of the Lord's Supper meant a very great deal in the life of a faithful community. It was surrounded by an atmosphere of mystery and awe and holy reverence. The emphasis on its solemnity was indeed so extreme and one-sided that only a small minority of the regular churchgoers, in Highland Presbyterianism, ever took the step of becoming communicants at all: the rest of the people, while faithfully attending public worship, and even the communion service, considered themselves unworthy to sit at the Lord's table and to receive the sacred symbols of His body and blood, "lest they should eat and drink judgment on themselves."

Of course, we all are unworthy, and that is what so much of so-called church discipline misses. Put in its best light, the table was fenced so that those who come to the table approach Christ's banquet in all humility and with a modicum of understanding. We should be those who truly 'hunger for this meat of eternal life and thirst for this holy drink' said Calvin. In fact, in our earliest Reformed history, when church discipline was at its zenith, Calvin warned that "Anyone who approaches the Lord's Supper heedlessly, without being instructed beforehand in the faith, arouses God's anger....It is [therefore] expedient that the church have a definite procedure so that it never fails to prevent the sacraments from being profaned." Such discipline, such fencing of this supper seems scandalous to our post-modern sensibilities that want no one to feel

excluded—a sentiment that led us to drop the fence of confirmation lest our children feel excluded; whereas, for those who have gone before us, partaking of the Lord's Supper outside the discipline of the church was the real scandal.

That said, there was a greater—and quite opposite—scandal surrounding the Lord's Supper going forward in the church's life, a scandal that has to do not with who has, by church discipline down the centuries, been excluded, but with who, by Christ's invitation, has been included.

Robert MacAfee Brown tells the story of the first communion service he celebrated as a chaplain during World War II:

The scene was a destroyer escort. Since the service was being conducted in the after gun turret, there was only room for three men to come forward at a time to receive the elements. The first three who came were the commanding officer of the ship, a fireman's apprentice and a [Black] steward's mate. In the social life of the ship, as on all Navy ships, there was a rigid hierarchy that went from top to bottom: (1) white officers, (2) white enlisted men, (3) [Black] enlisted men. At the Lord's Table that hierarchy disappeared. The three men knelt side by side in an absolute equality of need. For a moment there was neither bond nor free, white nor black, officer nor enlisted man. For a moment those men were precisely what God intended them to be, men who were united in Christ and united in one another.

"One must not become too romantic about such an experience," he concludes. "When they had finished worshipping, the men went back to a world where the old barriers remained. And yet, to whatever extent they took seriously their oneness in Christ, they could never again rest comfortably with the utter incongruity of the segregation that was elsewhere imposed upon them."

The real scandal of this supper is that it flies in the face of all of the divisions and distinctions, all the judgments and discriminations, all the classes and hierarchies we have so carefully constructed in order to order our common life. It literally would fly in the face of this every Sunday when the Lord's Table is set except that Sunday morning remains one of the most

segregated hours of the week, segregated racially, economically and segregated, more and more, politically. The only time I imagine the church as a beachhead of the kingdom, in this regard, is on World Communion Sunday when throughout the world we queue up as if in front of the kingdom's welfare office, beggars one and all on the largess of God's grace, breaking bread in an absolute equality of need.

But more significant and scandalous than the sociology of a social order that returns us to the world of haves and have nots the moment we walk out these sanctuary doors, is the theology of this supper which would transform our lives if we would allow God's grace to claim us. Martin Luther called the sacrament "a miracle of authentic transubstantiation," by which he meant that, in the supper, we are "through love being changed into each other." Through love being changed into each other! I think Luther agreed with Zwingli more than he realized!! He is saying that the reality of the miracle of transubstantiation takes place not on the table—as the bread and wine become the body and blood of Christ—but around the table, as we, through our union with Christ, are by love being changed into each other.

Meaning what? Meaning taking on the life of the other; assuming the burdens of the other; standing in the place of the shame of the other; accepting the utter difference of the other as one's own. Which is to say, whether the other be poor or rich, male or female, leaping or lame, sighted or blind, gay or straight, broken in body or healthy, black or white, free or imprisoned, old or young, in Christ we are being changed into the other whom we might otherwise never know or notice: the one we have learned to turn our backs upon, often in Christ's name. Therefore, says Calvin, "it is impossible for us to wound, despise, reject, injure or in any way offend one of our [brothers or sisters], but we, at the same time, wound, despise, reject, injure and offend Christ in him [or in her]."

That is the greatest scandal of this supper. And we, like the three men in the aft gun turret, if we take this meal seriously, can never again rest comfortably with the utter incongruity of the separations which are elsewhere imposed upon us. In this meal, we are being changed into Him who was changed into us and who “being found in human form, humbled himself and become obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross. Therefore God also has highly exalted him” writes Paul, “and has given him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord....”

The final scandal of this table, then, has to do with the foretaste we are given of the Kingdom when we will all see him face to face. “In the sacrament we are really rehearsing, or rather anticipating, the day when the whole human race will be home, gathered around the Father’s table, after Iliads and Odysseys yet to be!...with the covenant renewed fact to face.” When the first heaven and the first earth pass away and there is nothing to separate us, sheep from every flock, I do heretically believe—Jew and Muslim and Buddhist and Hindu and Shinto and secularist and seeker and Presbyterian and Roman Catholic and Mormon—will break bread together, rejoicing in the Lamb sacrificed once for all who now waits to be our host. Thanks be to God. Amen.