

A REALLY TERRIFIC APP

A Message on Communion
1 Corinthians 11:23-28

Tradition. In Fiddler On The Roof Tevye sang about it. People all over the world have some unusual traditions. For instance, in Germany they have one called polterabend. This is an event in which when a couple is about to get married their family and friends gather for dinner one evening, and they break a lot of porcelain. Then they have the engaged couple clean it up. I'm not sure what the message is there. You're getting married, so prepare to have to clean up a lot of broken dishes? In Denmark if a person is single when they turn 25 on their birthday all their friends throw cinnamon at them until they are covered in cinnamon. That one is also puzzling to me. Is the cinnamon supposed to make them more appealing to a potential spouse? That seems like a dubious proposition at best.

We have our own weird ones here. A bride is supposed to wear something borrowed, something blue. Again, that's pretty obscure. Another tradition is that it is supposedly bad luck for a groom to see the bride before the wedding. I was trying to figure out where that came from. I wonder if it comes from a time when marriages were arranged by parents. The suggestion is that there was fear that the prospective groom would take one look at the bride and bolt. But I can personally attest that seeing the bride before the wedding is definitively not bad luck. Laurie and I took all of our wedding pictures before the wedding in all our wedding finery, so we saw each other quite a bit. Maybe it was bad luck for Laurie because she ended up with me. But I'd have to say without any doubt whatsoever that seeing her before the wedding was not bad luck for us, for our marriage has been a rip-roaring success for 39 and a half years now. But somehow people still recognize this tradition.

Traditions are often obscure. We don't always know how they started and may not even know what they are supposed to mean, but we do them anyway because, well, it's the tradition. One of those kinds of things, I fear, can be communion. I think there are quite a few people who know you should take communion but who have at best a vague idea of what the point is. Or even worse, they think they know the point, but they have it all wrong. Today we are going to think about that by taking a look at 1 Corinthians 11:23-28.

COMMUNION IS A REMINDER

We should observe what Jesus said this whole thing that we call communion or the Lord's Supper was. He said we should "do this" in remembrance of him. According to the dictionary a remembrance is an act of remembering. Or another way of saying that is it is a reminder. Jesus said partaking of the bread and juice is a reminder of him.

Reminders are important for us. There is a function, an app, on your cell phone that is a calendar. It has a very important feature. You can enter an event, an appointment, a future meeting in that calendar. What that means for me is that half an hour before the scheduled event my phone makes this curious noise to get my attention, and when I look at it I can see on the screen a notification of the upcoming event in 30 minutes. That is such a handy function, because I forget. I forget stuff all the time.

Jesus said communion is a reminder, a bit like that app. It should come with a tone that sounds to get our attention to make us aware of the thing it represents. According to the Scriptures God has always been big on reminders. Think back to the night Jesus instituted this reminder. What was going on? It was the night of the Passover. What was the Passover?

Passover was a meal in which the ancient Jewish people ate specific foods and recalled certain Scriptures that pointed back to a watershed moment in the history of Israel. In Exodus 12 Moses explained to the people of Israel that on that fateful night they were to eat lamb with bitter herbs and bread with no yeast. This was their last night in Egypt. God was going to work a frightening miracle that would cause Pharaoh to let them leave. This was their last night in slavery. Then in verse 14 Moses said, “This is a day you are to commemorate; for the generations to come you shall celebrate it as a festival to the Lord, a lasting ordinance.” So every year the Jewish people, to this day, have a Passover celebration that reminds them of how God protected them and rescued them from slavery.

Think also about Exodus 20:8-10. “Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy. Six days you shall labor and do all your work, but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the Lord your God. On it you shall not do any work.” Every week for their entire lives the Jewish people were to take the seventh day off work.

Why did God require Israel to observe the Sabbath every week and observe the Passover every year? Was it to find out if they were qualified to be God’s people? Did observing all of those things make them more acceptable to God? Did it make them holier or better than other people? Did they, by observing the Passover, somehow participate in that original event, for instance?

No, God ordered them to do all those things to remind them of truth. He had them re-enact the events of the Passover to remind them that they were God’s chosen people. He used those rituals to help them remember how God had worked in dramatic and powerful ways to save them from slavery and to take care of them. This was crucial because it pointed toward the much more important rescue of people that Messiah would accomplish. They

observed the Sabbath to remind them that what God supplies is enough, that if they would be faithful, obey him and trust him that he would make sure that they had all they needed. Observing the Sabbath did not make them better than anyone else. It just reminded them of a truth that is at the heart of life, and that is fundamental in the New Covenant.

God had ancient Israel doing a lot of stuff, observing feasts and keeping the Sabbath holy. None of it earned them theological credit before God. None of it made them better than other people. All of it was intended to be tangible, vivid reminders of truth that was central to their relationship with God and their identity. They were all remembrances.

These things were necessary because of one irrefutable and consistent fact about human beings. That fact is that we forget. Our car has a function that I like. It is a remote that allows me to unlock the doors and start the car just by pushing a button. As long as the remote is on me, in my pocket or in my hand, it works. But this has resulted in a problem. On several occasions where we had a lot of things going on I have forgotten my wallet and my keys. In the old days I'd figure that out fast because I needed a key to start the car's ignition. But now if Laurie is in the car and has her keys in her purse, it all works just fine. Except I realize at some point I don't have my wallet. I find it ridiculously easy to forget things. That's just an annoyance. But people forget things that are important.

If you are married do you remember your wedding? I remember ours even after almost 40 years. I was wearing a velvet tuxedo on a day in late August. I cannot tell you why. I guess I forgot. I insist it's because I'm so stylish, and that was in style then. But I do remember when Laurie walked down that aisle I got very choked up and broke into tears. I remember that the adrenaline was pumping big time, so much so that I could hardly think straight. When it came time to say our vows I was supposed to repeat phrases the pastor said first. "I, Rick, take you, Laurie, to be my wedded wife." I'd repeat his words and think, "Wait, did I say that right? I'm not sure." I was so amped. But here's something I remember with total clarity. I promised in sickness and in health, for richer or for poorer, for better or for worse, to love, honor and cherish Laurie as long as I live. Almost every couple I've ever known has promised to do the same thing. They promised that they would love, honor, and cherish each other the rest of their lives no matter what happened. Sadly, I have encountered many people who have forgotten that. Cherish, honor, and love are big words, powerful words. And somehow, people seem to forget them.

There is an obvious theological danger here. We forget what God has done for us. We forget truth about him unless we are reminded of it continually. We forget who we are in our truest identity in Christ. Sadly, God gave ancient Israel all those reminders, and they still forgot. Unfortunately ancient Israel did what humans typically do when God commands us to observe a ritual. They turned them into rules they were required to keep.

Then they decided that either the rules were burdensome and they'd rather ignore them, or they did them and thought they had performed a holy act that made them more acceptable to God. What they failed to observe was that those reminders, were for their benefit. They were all designed to help them remember who God is, what God had done for them, who they were, and what they could count on God to be and to do in their lives.

So the Lord's Supper is a remembrance, a reminder. There have been people in the church, and still are, that insist the Lord's Supper is a sort of holy rite, a thing that somehow makes us holier, that infuses us more with God's power and makes us closer to him. There are even those who say that when we partake of the elements of communion we are somehow literally partaking of Jesus.

When Jesus picked up a loaf of bread, broke it apart, handed pieces of it to his disciples and said, "This is my body, take it and eat," do you think that any of them thought he meant that literally? Did any of them think, "Wow, this is actually Jesus' body, which is kind of weird because it looks a lot like a piece of pita bread"? That's just silly. They understood he meant that metaphorically. They understood the bread wasn't literally his body, but that it symbolized his body and what was going to happen to it. They understood that eating the bread and drinking the juice symbolized believing in him and trusting him.

Do you know how we know that? Because Jesus had taught them about that in a way that was so graphic it caused problems for many people. In John 6:33 Jesus said, "The bread of God is the bread that comes down from heaven and gives life to the world." Today people would hear that and say, "Hmm, yeah, um, bread. I'm gluten intolerant, so I can't have bread." So Jesus says, "Fine, then gluten free bread comes down from heaven and gives life to the world." And people say, "Well, I'm on a low carb diet, so bread is still out for me." Fortunately Jesus lived in a time when people weren't so obsessed with diet, and they knew they wanted life that comes down from heaven. They knew that was what they wanted most of all, even if it meant eating gluten or carbs. When his audience said, "Hey, we want that bread and the life it brings," Jesus responded in verse 35 by saying, "I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never go hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty."

This upset some among his listeners who thought it was more than grandiose. They felt it bordered on blasphemy. But Jesus pushed them over the edge in verse 53 when he said, "Very truly, I tell you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you." Well that's just gross. This Jesus dude was preaching cannibalism! How disgusting. There's no room in God's world for something so horrifying as that. His statement might have been enough for them to object, "Well, I can't eat flesh. I'm vegan."

Jesus wasn't preaching cannibalism. He had already told them back in verse 35 what this partaking of him meant. He said, "Whoever believes in me will never be thirsty." Coming to him, eating his flesh, drinking his blood, all were symbols for believing in him. That was the theme of that whole discussion. In John 6:27 Jesus had talked about the fact that they should want the food that produces eternal life. They essentially said, "Yeah, we want that. So what work do we have to do to get it? How do we earn that?" In verse 29 Jesus said, "The work of God is this: to believe in the one he has sent." Believing in Jesus is the theme of this whole conversation throughout John 6.

So let's return to the Lord's Supper. Jesus wanted to give us something to do, a hands-on, active action, that would vividly remind us of a life changing central truth. God knew that we all learn through visual means, audio means and tactile means. God knows that, so he has given us various ways to learn of him. Communion is a tactile way to learn, to be reminded of him and even to worship him. It tells us this crucial truth about Jesus. He is the bread of life. It is partaking of him, which means believing in him, that gives us true life, eternal life.

Jesus gave us this thing to do, a thing that is an everyday act necessary for and common to every human being. It is the act of eating. He gave us that act to do because of that one frustrating truth about us. We forget. Somehow we have a terrible time remembering simple but crucial truths about life.

What do you have to do to keep living physically? You have to breathe. You have to sleep. You have to eat and drink. Stop any one of those things and you'll die. Jesus decided to use the last two as an image to remind us. If you don't eat, what will happen? If you're Laurie in about 2 or 3 hours your blood sugar level will drop and you will go into a big time slump. Okay, but let's think on a bit longer time frame. You might be able to survive for six or seven weeks, even if you're Laurie. But within a couple of months you're going to die.

If you don't drink anything what is going to happen? You can survive for a few days. But in a week you're going to be dead. There is no substitute for food and drink. Jeff Bezos might have billions of dollars, but if he doesn't eat and drink, he's going to die. No amount of money, power, fame or pleasure can substitute for food and drink. You cannot live on those things, but only on food and drink.

Jesus was saying so it is with him. It is depending on him, believing in him, that will provide you with life. Without him, you won't have it, with him you will. Nothing can

substitute for him. No amount of money, or pleasure or fame or power can give you the life he gives.

Last week we had Valentine's Day. I got Laurie a card, got her some See's chocolates, and took her out to dinner. I am good for a while because I checked the box of required tasks on Valentine's, right? I did what I have to do to stay out of the dog house with Laurie. Is that how that works? If it is, then we have a terrible relationship that's going to fall apart at some point. No, we observed Valentine's Day, which we all know is nothing more than an event cooked up to make money off of us, not because it is required to be accepted by our spouse, not to earn some kind of spousal credit, not to build up points so I can watch football even in the spring now, but to remember. It is to remind our spouse of how much we love them, and to remind ourselves of that same thing. **So it is with communion. It is a reminder that we find life only in Jesus and nowhere else. We need to be reminded of that, because the moment we leave this room we will start to forget it.** We will start believing that life comes from the approval of people, from status, from success, from wealth, or from power. That is our human default, and we need to continually be reminded that it is simply not true. So we partake of the bread and juice and remember, "That's right, life is found in Jesus, not in that other stuff."

COMMUNION IS A PROCLAMATION

In verse 26 Paul said an interesting thing. "Whenever you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes." What is interesting about that is he said that eating and drinking are a proclamation. How does that work? They are actions, but how are you proclaiming something when you do them?

If you go to a sports event in the USA it typically will be preceded by the playing or singing of the national anthem. If it is, then you will be asked to stand for the performance of the song. Some people may place a hand over their heart. If there are members of the military present in uniform they will salute the flag and hold that salute during the song. Without saying a word all of those actions proclaim something. Standing proclaims respect for the symbol of our nation, our flag. The hand over the heart and the salute communicate not only respect but loyalty. That is why there was so much upheaval in the NFL over people refusing to stand for the national anthem. But you get the point. We can proclaim things without a word.

Paul said that we proclaim the Lord's death. That was a shorthand statement that meant we proclaim the death of Jesus on the cross was the sacrifice that made it possible for anyone and everyone to be forgiven of all their guilt, to become children of God and have eternal life. When we partake of the bread and juice of communion we are making a visible statement that Jesus is the Son of God, that his death was sufficient payment for

our wrong, and that we know that we are accepted and loved by God purely by trusting in Jesus and nothing else.

This is a form of worship, of declaring the truth about the Lord Jesus. When we declare that truth we honor him. And so we are worshiping him, honoring him by proclaiming this truth in a visual way. How often are we to proclaim this truth in this way? There are a lot of different ideas about that. Some churches do it every Sunday or even more often. Some do it once a month. Some once a quarter. There is a difference of practice because the Bible doesn't say. I could make a case for doing it once a year on Passover, doing it every single time you eat or drink, or doing it once a week.

There is no divinely ordained and ordered schedule for communion. I personally think whenever we eat or drink we should remember that just as the food and liquid is necessary for us to live, so believing in Jesus is necessary for us to experience true life, eternal life. Beyond that, we can have this as a part of our worship times as we see fit.

COMMUNION IS A SERIOUS CELEBRATION

My experience for most of my life is that communion is typically regarded as a very solemn, super holy event. This has had some less than sterling effects on me personally. One is that communion usually comes off as so serious that you hate doing something stupid during it. I guess we all hate doing stupid things no matter what's going on, but the stupidity is magnified when we are in the middle of some solemn ritual. And I unfortunately have committed some faux pas during communion. When I was a kid I remember being nervous that when they passed the plates that held the little cups of juice that I was going to fumble it and spill juice all over, not to mention the racket that it would make. It was a self-fulfilling fear. Sure enough I did it. It wasn't a full on drop it on the floor, but I did fumble it a bit and some of the juice spilled. And of course, grape juice is bad about stains on your church clothes. It was mortifying.

As an adult I had to deal with leading communion for hundreds of people. It's part of a pastor's job. Unfortunately to this day I am uncomfortable with ritual and ceremony, communion included. On two different occasions I messed up by doing the ceremony backwards. I started with the juice rather than the bread. The poor guys who were serving the elements looked confused and almost panicked while I calmly waited for them to just pass the stuff out, blithely unaware that I was making a rookie mistake that no one else in the church would have made.

The fact that I have made embarrassing mistakes during communion is not the worst thing in the world. The problem is with what the solemnity of the ceremony can do to us. It makes us self-conscious. Why was I nervous about the possibility of dropping the

communion plate? Because it would disturb people and make them upset at me. It was about me. Why was I sensitive about messing up the order of the communion service as an adult? Because I looked dumb. It was about me. And if I am conscious of self, I am not primarily worshiping Jesus. If I am thinking mostly about myself, the whole thing is a charade.

The other problem with the solemnity of communion is that, at least for me, it tends to make me feel like I have to work up some sort of serious reverence. This is a holy thing, so I have to feel the holiness. It tends to make me try to work up some sort of holy emotion. This probably says a lot about me, but usually I don't feel that. But that doesn't stop me from acting like I do. I may not actually be all that reverent but I can make it look like I am. Once again, the focus is on me and it is about how I look. And it is about acting, not being.

As I said, the early church worship, including communion, involved a meal. People would bring food and they would eat it together. Oh, so that's how potlucks got started. Well, actually, in Corinth they weren't potlucks. People would just bring whatever meal they had planned to eat that day from home and they'd eat at the same time. The problem in Corinth was they weren't sharing. It was BYOM, bring-your-own-meal. In verse 21 Paul said, "When you are eating, some of you go ahead with your private suppers. As a result, one person remains hungry and another gets drunk." Wait, what did he say? Some of them were getting drunk at the worship service? You got it. So how solemn does that sound do you? Pretty sure it was kind of rowdy. Now I would not hold up the church in Corinth as the model for us to follow, but it seems clear that their communion probably more closely resembled our annual church barbecue than some solemn ritual tacked on to the end of a service. And that was true throughout the early churches.

Yes, of course, there is a serious aspect to communion. We are proclaiming the Lord's death, after all. It is grievous that Jesus had to die to rescue us, and we must never forget that. But please notice what Paul quotes Jesus saying about the cup in verse 25. "This is the new covenant in my blood." Jesus came to bring a new covenant.

What do we know about the Old Covenant? Well the Old Covenant as we know it was a corruption of the actual covenant God made with his people. The true covenant actually contained the concepts of the new covenant, but they got lost in the structure of the Old Covenant. The Old Covenant was an arrangement in which people could try to gain approval and acceptance by God and all the rewards that went with that in the way that makes perfect sense to us. There are rules and standards, and the people that keep the rules and meet the standards are approved and get the rewards. It was a discouraging message, because none of us pass! The standards are just too high. But Jesus instituted a new

covenant. It was a covenant in which he paid the penalty for us failing to pass, and that penalty was his body being broken like a loaf of bread and his blood being spilled.

Jesus has already done it. He has paid the penalty. It's all done. Now he says all we need to do is trust what he has done for us. We can refuse what he offers us. But we can also accept what he offers us and say, "Thank you." That is the sum total of our contribution to the project, which is a good thing because that's really all we can contribute. People freak out because in verse 28 Paul said, "Everyone ought to examine themselves before they eat of the bread and drink from the cup." The concern is with partaking "in an unworthy manner," says verse 27.

So people tell us to examine ourselves and see if there is any sin in our lives before we partake. This is serious business. Go ahead and examine yourself. If you are honest, you will find sin in your life. You will discover that you are unworthy to partake of communion. That's why Jesus had to die! The whole point of communion is we are unworthy but God has rescued us anyway.

The problem in Corinth wasn't with the fact that they had sin in their lives. It was with the manner in which they were doing communion. It was selfish and hurtful to some in the church, and that's what Paul said was unworthy. It is pretty hard for us to commit that error today. You'd have to go eat all the crackers and drink all the juice so some people couldn't have any to do what he was concerned about.

What we need to remember is this is a new covenant, a new deal for us that is not just good news, but great news for everybody. It was good news for the woman of ill repute who wept at Jesus feet during a dinner at the home of a religious leader. It was good news for the scandalous woman at the well in Samaria who went through men like some people go through library books. It was good news for Matthew who was a low life outcast despised by everyone in his society. It was good news for a bunch of fisherman who were good Jewish boys, but who were blue collar guys who could never measure up to the standards of the religious establishment. It's good news for us, because it says no matter what may be true of you, no matter what stains there are in your life, Jesus paid for all of it, and his gift to you is just that, a gift you need only accept.

Am I worthy? No, absolutely not. And that doesn't matter one little bit. Because the new covenant of Jesus is not about my worthiness or lack of it. It is about the fact that he is totally worthy on my behalf, and no one, and nothing in all of creation, can take that from me. So, is this ceremony serious? Yes, to be sure. But it is seriously joyful. It is a celebration that God has saved us, he has set us free, he has given us life, he has done for

us what we never could and never will be able to do for ourselves, and nothing can ever change that.

APPLICATION

REMEMBER

Communion is a reminder. It is like that app on your phone that reminds you of that appointment you have, only this is a far better app that reminds us of something incredibly great. So the most important thing we can do as we participate is to remember... specifically, to be reminded of two things.

First, Jesus has done the work and it is fully complete. Last June we attended a ceremony at UCSD. It was the graduation ceremony for the UCSD medical school. This is an imperfect analogy, because those grads had earned their degree with a lot of hard work. That's not the point I wish to make. The point I wish to make is that the work was done. There was nothing left for those grads to do to gain their degree. Communion is a bit like a graduation ceremony because there is nothing left to do. The work has been done. The big difference, of course Jesus did the work. But the similarity is the work is complete. Communion is like receiving that degree. There is nothing left to do to earn it.

But the second thing to remember is Jesus' analogy of the bread and drink. He is the bread of heaven that brings life. Is there anything in this world that can bring us eternal life? No, only Jesus can do that. Only partaking of him by believing in him can give us that life. But understand that this life he gives us begins impacting us right now. It makes possible for us a life of true peace, of great joy and hope. So communion reminds us to keep drinking of Jesus and not to keep trying to find the life we really want in something that can never give it to us.

REJOICE

I want you to think again about that graduation ceremony we went to. How happy do you think that day was? It was glorious! It was a time of joy and celebration. So it is with communion. It is serious, for sure, for it meant God made an inconceivable sacrifice to rescue us. But the rescue is done. We have been given a gift that is valuable beyond imagination, and the reasonable reaction to that is to be happy and profoundly thankful.

Before you leave today, I want to ask you to do a couple of things. Tell someone some way you have seen Jesus produce life in you. Maybe it is peace in some situation, maybe it is having hope, maybe it is being alive to God, maybe it is joy. But tell them. Then remind them, "Remember, Jesus is the bread of life. Nothing else is that bread."