

Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church

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Sermon manuscript

Come Together

(1 Corinthians overview; 11:17-34)

Introduction: Considering a “New Testament church”...

Jesus’ church is a combination of the holy and the profane, the glorious and the ridiculous

We hear stirring reports about what God is doing through treasured ministry partners and we hear scandal. We see lives changed by the power of the Spirit and we see believers who rebel, beautiful songs and heartfelt worship - or not.

Today, we’re going to visit a church, consider that church and our own - the good, the bad, and the ugly - and do what all churches do: worship the Lord of the church by taking the bread and the cup of Communion at the end.

The church is one the Apostle Paul established while he was on the second of three major missionary journeys. We find this church in the ancient city of Corinth.

Paul begins his letter by lavishing praise on the church.

A Richly Blessed Church (1:1-9)

Holy (v. 2)

[1:2] To the church of God which is at Corinth, to those who have been sanctified in Christ Jesus, saints by calling

The church at Corinth was a holy church, a church filled with people ***“who have been sanctified in Christ Jesus.”***

The word *“sanctified”* comes from the root word meaning “holy” and it means that they have been set apart for God’s purposes.

Plus, they are ***“saints by calling.”***

To call someone a *“saint”* is to say that he or she belongs to God. As the Bible uses the term, *“saint”*, it doesn’t designate a special class of Christians, or even of especially noble people.

The members¹ of the Corinthian church were saints. If you believe in Jesus, you are a saint.

And they were a gifted people.

Gifted (vv. 4-7)

Graced with speech and knowledge (vv. 4-5)

[1:4] I thank my God always concerning you for the grace of God which was given you in Christ Jesus, [5] that in everything you were enriched in Him, in all speech and all knowledge

Evidently, the Apostle Paul was not a gifted orator, maybe not even a great preacher. In Corinth, he was accused of an unimpressive personal presence and ***“contemptible speech”*** (2 Corinthians 10:10)

By contrast, the Corinthians were famous for their oratory.

And, having been personally disciplined by Paul for a year and a half (see Acts 18), they were well-versed in the Bible and in theology.

They were enriched with gifts of both speech and knowledge.

¹ By referring to “members” I don’t assume a formal membership roster of the earliest churches.

Not lacking in any spiritual gift. (v. 7)

[7] so that you are not lacking in any gift

As the letter makes clear, the church at Corinth was filled with gifted members who taught, preached, spoke in heavenly languages, and performed miracles by the power of the Spirit.

They were not lacking in any of the giftings of the Spirit.

The church at Corinth was a great church. AND, the church at Corinth was a deeply flawed church. So, after starting off with these very positive words, Paul does not continue all sweetness and light.

We'll follow along as he addresses the issues that plague the church of Corinth.²

A Deeply Flawed Church (1:10--16:9)

Factions and Immaturity (1:10-17)

Tribalism

Right off the bat, Paul accused them of dividing into tribes and cliques. There was the "Paul tribe" and the "Apollos tribe" and the "Simon Peter (Cephas) tribe". The more spiritual, of course, belonged to the "Jesus tribe."

Each group claimed to be more spiritual than the others. People were boasting about which one of the leaders baptized them.

Jesus once said that the outside world would know that we are His disciples by our love for each other (John 13:34-35). The Corinthians were known for spirituality contests.

Carnality

The problem was not that they were "*natural*" (2:14).

"*Natural*" is the term Paul used to refer to people who don't believe in Jesus. It's not a derogatory term. To be "natural" is simply to lack the Spirit of God.

The people in the church at Corinth were Christians in whom the Holy Spirit dwelt. The problem was that they were *immature* (3:1 - "***babes in Christ***") and *carnal* (3:3 - "***fleshly***").

Given their time in the faith, they had not matured to the point that they should have in their walks with Jesus.

Immorality (5:1-13)

Besides tribalism, the church was suffering because of an incident involving sexual misconduct, something with which we are familiar in 2019. The issue was painful and major.

There was a man in the church who was sleeping with his father's wife (we believe it was his step-mother). We don't know about the woman, but the man was a Christian. Yes, Christians do all sorts of things they shouldn't do.

"***Saints***" shouldn't be involved in such things. But, this kind of misbehavior was considered wrong even in the first century Graeco-Roman world.

But the church at Corinth wasn't mourning over the sin. They didn't approach and reprove the man about this sin. They didn't discipline him.

Instead, they boasted about the situation (maybe in the sense of "*Look how tolerant we are*")

² First Corinthians is often referred to as "an occasional letter" because it was "occasioned" by issues that needed to be addressed.

Paul rebuked the church for not dealing with the man in a God-honoring way and proceeded to exercise apostolic authority - long-distance! - in hopes of his eventual restoration.³

Sadly, there is more.

Lawsuits (6:1-8)

When Christ-followers have disagreements with each other, we are to find ways to love each other, despite differences. We are to work things out.

That would apply to all kinds of disagreements and disputes. The point is not that we always agree, but that we always love and live in unity.

In Corinth, this hope of loving unity had been crushed because, when one church member had a grievance against another church member, he would skip the hard work of “working things out” and simply file a lawsuit in the secular court of the day.

This was a terrible thing, as Paul points out - ***[7] Actually, then, it is already a defeat for you, that you have lawsuits with one another. Why not rather be wronged? Why not rather be defrauded?***

Better to suffer personal loss than to damage both a fellow-Christian AND the church’s testimony to the watching world.

And speaking of that “watching world”, Corinth was located in the idol-worshipping Graeco-Roman world. And the city Corinth was famous for idolatrous excesses.

This made it tough for Christians.

³ See 1 Timothy 1:20 where Paul used the same terminology in dealing with others. My understanding is that - at the least - this (delivering someone over to Satan) means that Paul was removing them from the supportive and protective fellowship of the Christian assembly (See Matthew 18).

Idolatry (8:1-13)

However, the issue facing the Corinthian Christians was not whether to worship idols or not. They all knew to not do that.

The issue was whether or not it was OK to eat meat that had been sacrificed to idols. This was a big deal in the early church.

The problem here is that some Christians, having been saved out of idolatry, could be tempted to revert to idolatry if they saw another Christian eating meat that had been sacrificed to idols.

They would associate that other Christian’s eating with idolatry and could easily slide back into worshipping idols. (Paul characterized these Christians as “weak”).

But other Christians (Paul calls these “strong”), knowing that there is no such thing as an idol, felt free to eat the tainted - and less expensive meat - saved money and used the extra cash to support missionaries.

The question before the “strong” Corinthian Christian was whether he should exercise his freedom to eat the tainted meat if doing so would cause his “weaker” brother to stumble.

Evidently, this was something that the strong Christians were doing, leaving in their wake the wreckage of damaged “weaker” Christians.

Paul said that to do this was to sin against love. He said to not eat meat or do anything that would make a fellow-Christian stumble.

Abuse of Spiritual Gifts (12:1--14:40)

And then, the single largest section of the letter is devoted to problems the church at Corinth had with respect to the exercise of spiritual gifts.

Remember that at the beginning, Paul affirmed that they were a VERY gifted church. The problem, though, is that the members of this very gifted church were abusing the gifts God had given them.

They honored people with the more spectacular gifts (like tongues and miracles) and under-appreciated the less showy gifts, without which no church thrives (like serving, helps, mercy).

Paul pointed out that, just like the human body, every person in the church is essential. The human body doesn't work right without all the parts, and neither does the church.

He gave the solution to the problem of "gift abuse" in the greatest meditation on love ever written. (1 Corinthians 13)

We've hit some of the low points of life in the church at Corinth. Not all, though. There were more problems in Corinth.

etc... - There and Here

For instance, they were guilty of a lack of financial generosity when it came to supporting the on-going ministry of Paul, the man who had brought them the message of Jesus. (9:1-14; 16:1-9)

Plus, Paul had to remind them of the centrality of Jesus' literal, physical resurrection from the dead, as they had been "spiritualizing" this teaching, evidently denying that it REALLY happened. (chapter 15)

And on and on and on we could go. The church at Corinth was a richly gifted, deeply flawed church - as are all churches, present company included.

Here at Northwest, beautiful stories are being written of people who are growing in Jesus, some for the first time in decades. Others are stuck and seem to be content to stay that way.

There are people here who invest time and energy pouring Jesus into those who are far from God. Some of us don't.

Some are generous in supporting God's work around the world and here at church. Others, not so much.

Many people here are walking in holiness and love and I praise God for that.

Are there some here who -

- have strayed into sexual misconduct?
- relate only to those in their own clique/tribe?
- don't resolve conflicts the way they should?
- fail to appreciate others in the church who are "different"?

It's heart-breaking, but very possible.

Yes, many in our church are doing some great things for Jesus. And, together, we are accomplishing more than any one of us could do.

And we agree that we could do more when it comes to disciple-making, evangelism, serving the poor, ministry to children and youth, helping the under-served parts of our city.

We come to a Sunday morning where we hear a tremendous, honest report from our ministry partners - Ken and Denise Case - and rejoice in what the Lord is doing in them and through them in Thailand.

That's the church: good, bad, and ugly.

It's always been the church. Richly blessed. Deeply flawed.

To the church gathered today at 8900 Guilbeau, the Lord of the church offers the same invitation He extended to the church at Corinth.

"Come" and *"Come together."* Worship and love. Take the bread and the cup as a group, and - glorious wrecks that we all are - remember Jesus.

Paul leads us into our time in worship as he led the Corinthians.

First, though, he wants us to prepare. And, after all we've seen so far, we're not surprised that there were problems in Corinth even when it came to Communion.

A Richly Blessed, Deeply Flawed Church at Worship (11:17-34)

A New Testament Worship Service - How Awful! (11:17-23)

Prelude to a slap (11:17-19)

At the beginning of 1 Corinthians 11, Paul had praised the Corinthians for keeping *"the traditions"* (v. 2) of the faith they had received. With respect to taking the Lord's Supper, he offers no praise.

Instead, he scolds them for what may be the most egregious failure mentioned in the letter.

[17] But in giving this instruction, I do not praise you, because you come together not for the better but for the worse. [18] For, in the first place, when you come together as a church, I hear that divisions exist among you; and in part, I believe it.⁴

He tells them that based on reports he has received, the church would be better off not even taking the Lord's Supper.

As they observed this time set aside for worship, they had taken, not "next steps", but backwards steps, away from maturity, away from faith and obedience, away from love.

What was supposed to have been a time of equipping and building up had become a time of tearing down.

In many places today, and especially in the early days of the church, the Lord's Supper was preceded by a shared meal. This meal plus the concluding taking of the bread and the cup was among the highlight worship experiences for the church.

⁴ Paul recognized that there might be exaggerations about the divisions that existed. But he knows the church well enough to at least believe the bulk of the reports.

But what they were doing in Corinth made a travesty of worship and made true fellowship impossible.

Corinth and the Lord's Supper (11:20-22)

The whole event was call "the agape" (*αγαπη* - love-feast). The idea was to provide a pot-luck supper and then to move toward a simple, but meaningful remembrance of Jesus' death and resurrection.

But in Corinth, that wasn't happening. It was neither holy nor loving but was both abusive and humiliating.

[20] Therefore when you meet together, it is not to eat the Lord's Supper, [21] for in your eating each one takes his own supper first; and one is hungry and another is drunk. [22] What! Do you not have houses in which to eat and drink? Or do you despise the church of God and shame those who have nothing? What shall I say to you? Shall I praise you? In this I will not praise you.

Try to imagine this. The rich ate their fill of the food they brought, while the poor looked on, hungry. People actually got drunk while eating the meal prior to Communion.

They were behaving in a manner unworthy of the event of the Lord's Supper. So, Paul warns them - and us - about the dangers of taking the Lord's Supper *"in an unworthy manner."* (v. 27)

How NOT TO Take the Lord's Supper (11:27-34)

Taking the Lord's supper in an unworthy manner (11:27-29)

[27] Therefore whoever eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner, shall be guilty of the body and the blood of the Lord. [28] But a man must examine himself, and in so doing he is to eat of the bread and drink of the cup. [29] For he who eats and drinks, eats and drinks judgment to himself, if he does not judge the body rightly.

To make certain that those who partake of the Lord's Supper do so "worthily," Paul urges that there be a pre-Lord's Supper time of self-examination. This allows each of us a chance to evaluate the state of our hearts before the passing of the elements.

I'll list a couple of ways (and there are no doubt other ways) in which we might take the Lord's Supper "***in an unworthy manner.***"

One way would be to approach the bread and the cup with an UNBELIEVING heart.

It would be a wrong thing to take the Lord's Supper while not believing that Jesus died and rose again for you. It's more than food and drink. It's remembering what Christ did for us.

To take part in Communion with an UNLOVING or REBELLIOUS heart is another way to eat and drink unworthily. Only you know the state of your heart.

And if you are in active disobedience to God or if you find yourself in an unreconciled relationship with a brother or sister here, it would be wrong to eat and drink. Let the elements pass.

Letting the bread and the cup pass is one way to deal with an unbelieving, unloving or rebellious heart. There is a better way.

For instance, if you have never placed your faith in the Lord Jesus for eternal life, turn to Him now.

Receive the gift of forgiven sin Jesus died to give you. Tell Him "Thank You!", trust in Jesus - and then eat and drink with gusto as a brand-new son or a daughter of God.

If your heart is rebellious, if you harbor ill-will toward someone here, turn to the Lord Jesus Christ, your Savior, in repentance.

Confess your hard-heartedness to God, resolve to address the fractured relationship, commit to walk in holiness - and then eat and drink with joy and gratitude.

Discipline awaits those who eat and drink unworthily (11:30-32)

And in case any of us are wondering if this self-inspection prior to taking a bit of bread and a bit of grape juice really necessary, listen.

[30] For this reason many among you are weak and sick, and a number sleep. [31] But if we judged ourselves rightly, we would not be judged. [32] But when we are judged, we are disciplined by the Lord in order that we may not be condemned along with the world.

Paul explains that part of the reason some of those in Corinth were laid up in local hospitals - and the reason for some premature funerals - was because they had NOT examined themselves prior to taking Communion and had partaken unworthily.

Mental and emotional ills may result in physical ailments. Modern psychology tells us that. That, though, is not Paul's point.

His point is that God's discipline has fallen on some Christians in Corinth. Paul wants us, today, to beware of the possibility of such discipline if we don't examine ourselves before we eat and drink.

Because of the significance of the Lord's Supper, we should take part thoughtfully, prayerfully, and lovingly.

Remembering Jesus *honors* the One who gave Himself for us and it *unifies* us who follow Him.

In this passage, Paul has told us how to NOT take Communion. He also tells us how to observe the eating of the bread and the drinking of the cup.

It is not very detailed. And besides the assumption that it will be observed regularly, he doesn't tell us how frequently to do this.

Paul gives instruction to us as he had received instruction from Jesus.

How TO Take the Lord's Supper (11:23-26)

According to Paul, according to Jesus... (11:23a)

[23a] For I received from the Lord that which I also delivered to you...

I believe that 1 Corinthians was written before any of the Gospel accounts were written. That means that what is in front of us in 1 Corinthians is the earliest account we have of the Lord's Supper.

Paul says that he himself personally received this tradition from the Lord Jesus.

So, sometime after his conversion, the resurrected Jesus appeared to Paul, gave him instruction about Christian truths, blessed him with visions of glory and, evidently, gave this description of how the church is to re-enact the Last Supper.

There are two parts to any Communion service, and Paul takes them one at a time. With or without a preceding shared meal, there is the distribution and eating of the bread.

Taking the bread (11:23-24)

[23b]...that the Lord Jesus in the night in which He was betrayed took bread; [24] and when He had given thanks, He broke it, and said, "This is My body, which is for you; do this in remembrance of Me."

We remember that the Lord's Supper itself is a reminder of the meal Jesus and His disciples enjoyed on the night before He gave Himself as a sacrifice for our sins.

This morning, we'll listen to and then sing "What Wondrous Love is This" as we take the Lord's Supper.

As the song plays, remember that it is truly "wondrous love" that at the same time of night that Jesus and the eleven were taking the "bread", Judas, the twelfth apostle, was betraying Jesus.

Since the Last Supper Jesus hosted for His disciples was during the Passover season, the bread that was available at the first communion service was likely unleavened. The church has celebrated Communion with unleavened bread ever since, affirming that Jesus is our Passover.

As we take the bread, we remember that His body was broken "for us."

Some church traditions hold that the bread and the drink turn into the body and blood of Christ during the Communion service. We believe that at the Lord's Supper nothing happens to the physical elements.

We do believe, though, that in taking the bread and in remembering Jesus' death, something profound happens in us.

We worship. I do. You do. All of us are worshiping Jesus. We are drawing near to God and the Bible tells us that when we draw near to Him, He draws near to us (James 4:8). We are joined with each other in the worship of our Savior.

To conclude the Passover meal, Jesus would have passed the third cup to His disciples. So, we, too, end the Lord's Supper by drinking the cup.

Taking the cup (11:25-26)

[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.

The shedding of Jesus' blood inaugurated the New Covenant (See Jeremiah 31:31ff), which replaced the Mosaic Covenant.

This "New Covenant" provides forgiveness of sins and opens the way for the ministry of the Holy Spirit in the heart of the one who believes in Jesus.

The whole Jewish system is replaced by the Jesus system.

Now, our faith looks back to the death and resurrection of the Lord and looks forward to His return.

The Lord's Supper is an acted out sermon. In the eating and drinking, we worship a Savior Who was crucified and resurrected and Who will one day return.