

Last Friday, we celebrated the Fourth of July which marks our independence and freedom as a nation. I hope you enjoyed the day and celebrated it with family and friends or just relaxed and watched baseball games like me. I also hope that you realize how truly blessed we are to live in the greatest nation in the world and to enjoy the freedom that is the envy of the rest of the world. One of our basic freedoms is the opportunity to worship as we are led. This morning, we will celebrate this freedom as we partake in Holy Communion. The first recorded account of the Lord's Supper is by the Apostle Paul in his first letter to the church at Corinth. It is interesting to note that it was written prior to the four gospel accounts. I will be reading from the eleventh chapter of 1 Corinthians, verses 17 through 33.

Read 1 Corinthians 11:17-33

Our country was founded by people just like you and me who came here searching for religious freedom – the freedom to worship God as the Spirit led them. Unfortunately, as we discussed last Sunday, while many have given their lives in service and ministry to this great nation, many of us are still not truly free: free from the chains of guilt, free from the bondage of sin, and free from feeling unworthy. I wish I had a dollar for every time I have invited someone to church and they said that they were unworthy to come to church.

When I was in Socorro, I kept inviting Karl Moore to come worship with us. Karl lived just up the street from the church and told me if he entered the doors of the church, the roof would fall. I kept asking and praying, and then one Sunday Karl came walking into the church, wearing a hardhat just in case, which by the way, he wore from then on when he came to church.

Some people have also told me that they have done so many bad things that God could never forgive them. And some even believe that God could never love them. How untrue and unfortunate it is that people really believe this. Because this is one of the reasons that Jesus Christ came, to break these chains of misconception and to set us free. In a way, Easter with the Resurrection, like the Fourth of July, is the Independence Day for Christians.

In the same way that on last Friday people all over this State and nation gathered around picnic tables with friends and family to celebrate our national holiday, so we as Christians gather on the first Sunday of each month to celebrate our independence when we come to the communion table in remembrance of what our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ has done for us. But unfortunately, many still feel that they are unworthy to partake in this blessed sacrament of the church.

The misinterpretation of verses 27 through 29 in our scripture text this morning may have contributed to this misconception. Paul states: "Therefore, whoever eats the bread or drinks

the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty of sinning against the body and blood of the Lord. Examine yourselves, and only then eat of the bread and drink of the cup. For all who eat and drink without discerning the body, eat and drink judgment against themselves.”

To properly understand and interpret this passage, we must understand the problem that Paul was trying to address at the church in Corinth. What was the background for this statement? Believe it or not, the ancient world was in many ways more social than we are today. It was a regular custom for groups of people to meet together for meals. The Early Church had a custom called a Love Feast. All members of the church would come together, bringing what food they could. They pooled their resources and sat down to a common meal.

It appears that we Methodists did not invent the potluck. Did you hear about the Methodist Church in South Carolina where 26 people showed up with a green bean casserole for the potluck? A lot of people left early and headed for McDonalds.

Apparently in the early church, the Love Feast and the Lord’s Supper were normally celebrated together. However, as described by Paul in this letter, this had led to some abuses by the participants; things had gone sadly wrong with their Love Feast. In the church, there were those who were rich and those who were poor. There were those who could bring plenty, and then there were the slaves and servants who could hardly bring anything. Unfortunately, at Corinth the art of sharing had been lost. The rich did not share their food but ate in exclusive groups by themselves; eating quickly so they would not have to share, while the poor had next to nothing to eat. From our text, it appears that each person ate what food they had brought and basically held a private meal, totally missing the purpose of the fellowship and Christian unity of the Lord’s Supper. The result was that the social barriers that Jesus had come to remove were being re-established in the church founded in His name.

The reverence of the Lord’s Supper had been lost. The remembrance of the meal instituted by our Lord was being tarnished by the selfish desires of the congregation. The people were coming to the Lord’s Table without making a distinction between the elements of communion and common food; they were forgetting what the bread and the cup really meant. Thus, in this passage Paul is trying to address this improper conduct, and in verses 23 through 26 presents the proper procedures for the sacrament which he says he personally received from the Lord Jesus Christ Himself, and which are now the basis for our communion service.

Paul is saying in effect, approach the Table of the Lord with reverence, understanding that the bread represents the body of Christ and the cup represents the blood of Christ that was shed for our sins. It is not a supper to be devoured like hotdogs on the Fourth of July, but a sacrament to be shared in a community of love and fellowship.

Communion is a time of remembrance; when we remember and thank Jesus Christ for all that He has done for us. We must never let the communion service become a mere formality, but an opportunity to experience the Lord's presence in our lives. We must never forget that when we come to the table that the bread and the cup point back to the work that Jesus has already accomplished on our behalf and point forward to our salvation. Let us never forget that He did all of this out of His love for each one of us.

Unfortunately, many people have misinterpreted Paul's words and have missed the opportunity to come to the Lord's Table. Others have convinced themselves that due to their current lifestyle and past sins they are unworthy to share in the bread and the cup. I had a lady at our church in Grants who felt this way, but after several discussions and prayer she came to realize that everyone is welcome at the Lord's Table, and that as John Wesley pointed out, communion is a way of experiencing God's grace; the freedom to live the life He has promised to each of us.

Let me make one thing clear. This passage does not and should never hinder anyone from coming to the Lord's Table. Listen to the invitation from the communion liturgy that we will use in a moment: "Christ our Lord invites to His table all who love Him. Anyone, everyone has a place at the table of Christ." All, there is no exclusion. All who love and accept Him. All who want to know Him better and lead a better life. All who want to change their lives and live at peace with their neighbors.

If coming forward for communion depended on being worthy, none of us would be welcome, and there would be no one to serve. But by looking at the participants at the first Lord's Supper, we are shown that all are welcome no matter where they come from or what they have done. Look who was there. There was Judas who was stealing from the money bag and who would betray Jesus before the night was over. Then there was Peter who would deny knowing Jesus three times before the rooster crowed. There was also Thomas the doubter, and James and John, the ambitious sons of Salome. And not only did all of them participate in the Lord's Supper, but Jesus even washed each of their feet prior to the meal.

One day the Duke of Wellington was at the communion rail when an old and extremely poor man took his place beside him. An usher was about to ask him to leave, but the Duke, sensing what was going on, grasped the elderly gentleman's hand, and whispered: "Do not move, friend, we are all equal here!"

The point that I think Paul is trying to make here is that we should approach the Lord's Table with a proper attitude. One of thanksgiving and remembrance instead of thinking that communion is just another church ritual that you need to participate in, rushing through it, and just going through the motions. In the same way that we celebrated last Friday and remembered those who made the freedom that we enjoy this morning possible, we must take

time and remember the One who made it possible for our sins to be forgiven, for us to receive God's amazing grace, and for the opportunity to have a personal relationship with our Lord. We must never forget the significance of this sacrament. Just like the cross, it is a sign of our freedom. Jesus came to free us from the bondage of sin, from guilt, from our failures and regrets, and from feeling unworthy.

An old Scottish minister saw a young man hesitate to receive the cup during communion on Sunday morning. He stretched out the cup to him and said: "Take it Laddy; it's for sinners; it's for you and for me." We are not special; we're all sinners saved by the grace of God and set free by the blood of the Lamb. If the Table of Christ was for only perfect people, no one could approach it. But because of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, we are all worthy and welcome at His table. Don't ever let anything or anybody hinder you from accepting His invitation. Let us now prepare to come and celebrate our independence and freedom as Christians! Amen.