

**Enterprise 07 May 2006**

**“What Do You Come to Church For?”**

**I Corinthians 11:17-29**

Through the years, I have thought a great deal about what motivates people to come to church and take part in our worship experiences. I cannot help but wonder if we get what we come to church for. Today I ask you that question in the context of our worship and celebration of Holy Communion.

“What did you come to church for today?”

First off, let me say in general that almost always we get from something what we expect from it. For example, if you come to church looking for something to find fault with, you will most certainly find it. If you try, you can find something to criticize and down rate. But likewise, if you come to church expectant and looking for a meaningful and blessed experience, you will find that, too. That is not to say that you will always like every hymn or always think that the preaching is wonderful. But somehow through the worship of God you will be blessed, if you expect to be and want to be.

Now to the specific question, “What do we come to Holy Communion for?” Primarily, of course, we come to worship God. The observance of the Sacrament of the Lord’s Supper is first and foremost a Christian service of worship. We praise God, we give thanks to God, we lift our prayers to God, we proclaim God’s Word, and we celebrate the salvation of God offered to us through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

We recognize that the Lord’s Supper is a special type of worship. I think we express this best when we say that it is a participation in the body and

blood of Christ. This participation is our acceptance of Jesus Christ's gift of salvation. As we accept his gift, we are reconciled to God and to one another. We feel through taking part in this service that we belong to Christ and to his Church, which we call the Body of Christ.

Closely akin to this idea of participation in Christ through Holy Communion is the idea that we come to the Lord's Table to receive God's grace. Of course, there is no magical formula whereby we are automatically forgiven or saved by taking communion. However, the Supper is one means by which God transmits to us the truth of his loving forgiveness and saving grace. Communion is a symbol we can see, hear, smell, touch, and taste; a symbol which helps us to know and experience the love of God through Christ.

There is one persistent misunderstanding about our taking Holy Communion that I want to address briefly. Many persons misunderstand St. Paul's point in our scripture lesson, thinking that one must have earned the right to receive communion by being "worthy." In writing to the Corinthian Christians, Paul was very upset about the way they were disrupting divine worship by being selfish, greedy, and exclusive. By warning the Corinthians not to receive Holy Communion "in an unworthy manner," Paul was not thinking of sins in general, but the clannishness and drunkenness displayed at the Lord's Table.

It must be stressed over and over again that we are never worthy to partake of the body and blood of Christ on our own merit or goodness. We always come to the Lord's Table as unworthy sinners, and God freely gives to

us his grace and his redeeming love. Hence we should never stay away from communion because we feel that we don't deserve it, or because we think we haven't been good enough to receive it. Rather, it is precisely when we do feel the weight of our sin or the guilt of our past that we ought to come to participate in the body and blood of Christ in order to realize the justification before God that Jesus Christ brings to us.

Nevertheless, this emphasis upon our never earning the worthiness to come to the Supper does not mean that we should come casually, mindlessly, or without any preparation. Indeed, Paul emphasizes that we should examine ourselves before partaking. Furthermore, he urges us to come to the Lord's Table with discernment. This is a good word; to discern means to recognize fully, to perceive clearly, to understand thoroughly. We will not be able to come to Holy Communion with full worthiness by our own goodness, but we can come with discernment and faith.

We ought to discern what Jesus Christ has done for us and give thanks. The Holy Communion is also called the Eucharist, which simply means thanksgiving. When we celebrate this sacrament, we are giving thanks to God for the saving power given us through our Lord. We ought to come with thankful hearts and true faith in Christ.

Also, we ought to discern the unity of Christ's Body. Holy Communion is not just between you and God. Indeed, it is a sharing with everyone here, but not only these. It is a sharing with all God's people everywhere, even those saints who have died and those yet unborn. This is why Paul was fussing at the Corinthians. They failed to discern the unity of their Church,

and they therefore set up cliques and factions. We come to Holy Communion to find our togetherness with each other and with God.

“Let a person examine himself, and so eat of the bread and drink of the cup.” These words of Paul point out that we ought to discern our own needs and prepare ourselves to receive God’s grace and forgiveness through the meal. As I said earlier, we will usually get from an experience what we expect. If we come to this Supper casually and with no preparation, we will only get a bit of bread and a taste of wine. But if we come with faith, recognizing our dependence upon God in Christ for our very salvation, we will come away from the Table with new assurance, an inner peace, and a sense of unity with God and one another.

Finally, we ought to discern our hope in this communion, for it is a foretaste of the glory to come. Holy Communion always points forward to the time when we will sit down to the heavenly banquet with Christ in his coming kingdom. This experience gives grounding to our hope, and it renews us to love and service. The Supper is the means whereby those who belong to Jesus join with him in that entire, sacrificial self-offering to the Father’s will that alone is the way to eternal life.

Today, after you leave this place, I want you honestly to answer for yourself, “Did you get what you came for?” If you come to the Lord’s Table with faith, with self-examination, with discernment, and with humility, you will be able to say, “Yes, I got what I came for . . . and so much more.” In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.