

**"Worship Is a Family Affair"**  
**Sermon Series on *Worship Is!* #4**  
**Dr. Peter B. Barnes**  
**February 1, 2015**  
**(1Cor. 11:17-34)**

**Introduction.**

In his book *The Dangerous Act of Worship*, Mark Labberton tells the story that a few years ago he attended a contemporary worship service, and his attention was immediately drawn to the guy who was the enthusiastic worship leader. The young man opened the service with prayer, and he asked God to meet them in the service and to draw them together into the Lord's presence. Then the leader turned around to face forward and stood just in front of the first row of worshipers with his eyes closed and the band playing, and he lifted his hands and offered his joyful praise to God.

That's when Mark really took notice, because as the leader sang so rapturously, he kept stepping all over the feet of the people behind him. Not just once or twice but repeatedly throughout the singing in the two-hour service, he kept stepping on their feet. No apology. No sign of acknowledgement. He was just praising God while oblivious to his neighbor.<sup>1</sup>

This illustration depicts a significant part of the problem in worship today. I have no doubt that the worship leader would say he did this unintentionally, and he was simply so caught up in worship that he lost track of the people around him. And that's just the problem. In our passion for God, our worship cannot simply be all about us or even just about us and our relationship with God. Biblical worship should lead us to an awareness of the other people around us, and it calls us to engage with them.

This morning we consider the notion that worship is a family affair (meaning the family of God), and I want us to reflect on the problems the church in Corinth had in regard to this struggle and see what we can learn about their situation. Perhaps this will inform our own expression of worship and our experience of it here at First Pres.

**I. The Nature of the Problem.**

The Lord's Supper was originally designed to foster Christian unity. It was a time for believers to gather together and celebrate the sacrificial love of God in sending His Son Jesus to die on the cross for our sins. Sadly, in the church in Corinth the Lord's Supper had become an occasion for division along class lines. As he had previously done in the first chapter of this letter, once again Paul refers to divisions that plagued the congregation there. And he uses the Greek word *schismata*, from which we get our English word "schism," to describe the problem.

The early church developed a wonderful custom called the Agape (or Love) Feast which was observed whenever they celebrated the Lord's Supper. It was sort of like a potluck supper in which the whole congregation came together, pooled their resources, and sat down to a common meal. (You know, there is an old saying that wherever two or three Presbyterians are gathered together there's a dead chicken in a casserole between them! It was sort of like that.) At the end of the meal, the early believers would celebrate communion together as a way of finishing the dinner. But the problem with the church in Corinth was that instead of being an opportunity for the body of Christ to come together, the Agape Feast was all too often an occasion where their socio-economic differences were heightened.

There are three things Paul specifically mentions in the text about the problems the church was having in their celebration of communion. *First, the wealthier members of the church were overlooking the poor and failing to wait for them to arrive for the meal.* It seems the rich would bring plenty of food for themselves, but they failed to share it with others who didn't have so much. And because they led a more leisurely life, they didn't wait for the poor, who often had to work late, and they started the meal without them. The *second* problem Paul mentions was that *some of those in the congregation were drinking to excess.* They overindulged in the wine to such an extent that drunkenness at the services of communion was a commonplace occurrence.

Finally, Paul concludes the list of problems by saying that *a spirit of bitterness was growing within the church because of all the indiscretions they experienced during worship*. The Lord's Supper was supposed to be the one place where believers from all walks of life and every level of society could be able to come together, but in Corinth it was the very place where their differences were magnified. People had their feelings hurt, resentment and bitterness grew, and factions developed.

Reading about all the difficulties with communion in the church in Corinth, I am relieved that the biggest problem we seem to have at First Pres is trying to figure out what's the best and most efficient way to serve communion in the worship center! There has been some lively discussion on the staff and in the Worship Committee about these things. Fortunately, the deacons have come to the rescue, and they're taking the lead on preparing and organizing the serving of communion starting today. Many thanks to the deacons!

## **II. Paul's Solution to the Problem.**

No passage in the whole New Testament speaks so clearly about the early church's experience and observance of communion as does this one in 1 Corinthians 11. Here we read what are commonly referred to as the Words of Institution for the sacrament of the Lord Supper, and in just about every church around the world, these verses are quoted in some form or fashion whenever communion is celebrated. Since this letter to the Corinthians was written before the Gospels, it represents the first record of the words of Jesus when He said, *"This is My body which is broken for you. Do this in remembrance of Me. This is the cup of the new covenant in My blood; do this, whenever you drink it, in remembrance of Me."*

The solution Paul suggests for the problems in Corinth was for each person to examine him- or herself and take a hard look at their own lives. The word that is translated "examine" is the Greek word *dokimazito*, and it means "to test and find approved." It has the sense of standing for a qualifying exam to see if one is ready and fully knowledgeable of the subject, like when you take a driver's exam. Paul encourages self-examination so people could really understand what is going on at the Table of our Lord and be ready to worship like they should.

There are three ways Paul urged the Christians in Corinth to do in examining themselves. First, he said **remember**, and the apostle reminded his readers that Jesus said, *"Do this in remembrance of Me."* The Greek language has a particular word that signifies remembrance; it is the word *anamnesis*, which implies "time travel." Whenever you and I remember, in the biblical sense of the word, we travel back in time through 21 centuries and are joined together with the Lord Himself at His Table. Jesus is our host, and we are His guests. Whenever we celebrate communion, we should do this in remembrance of Him.

A second way Paul urged the Christians in Corinth to examine themselves was to **recognize** the body and blood of our Lord in the meal. The elements of which we partake - the bread and the cup - represent the broken body and shed blood of Jesus Christ, and communion is a time when we consider and recognize afresh the sacrifice that Christ made on the cross of Calvary in order to accomplish our salvation.

A final way Paul encouraged his readers to examine themselves was to **reach out** to their brothers and sisters in the family of God. There's an organic spiritual connection you and I have with other believers in the Body of Christ, and whether we like it or not, we're called into relationship with other people whenever we embrace the Christian faith.

## **III. God's Call To Be Family.**

You can pick your friends but not your family. Right? None of us gets to choose the people to whom we're related by birth in our biological family. We don't get to pick our parents or our siblings, and unless we adopt a child we don't even get to pick our children. The same is true in the family of God. You and I don't get to choose to whom we will be related as brothers and sisters in our spiritual family of faith. And sometimes it's a great shock to come to terms with the dissonance we feel in some of the relationships we have with other Christians.

Jesus taught His disciples that we can't be in right relationship with God without being in right relationship with our neighbor, and we can't worship the Lord while we're at odds with someone in the family of faith. In the Sermon on the Mount Jesus said, *"Therefore, if you are offering your gift [in worship] at the altar and there*

*remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled to your brother; then come and offer your gift” (Mt. 5:23,24).* Worship of God should lead to reconciliation with our neighbor.

When Lorie and I were in seminary, we attended a church on occasion in the town of Beverly Farms on the north shore of Boston. One Sunday morning during the worship service just before communion, we noticed that the pastor went around to a number of people and gave them notes. It seemed an odd gesture to us. Later on we learned that the leaders of the church had had a difficult meeting of the Session a few nights before, and harsh things were said to each other. The pastor realized that he couldn't celebrate the sacrament of communion unless he was right with the elders of the church - hence the notes of apology. That's a great example of reaching out in reconciliation which is motivated by worship.

I've always thought the cross is such a great symbol for worship. Just as there are vertical and horizontal aspects to the cross, there are also vertical and horizontal aspects to worship. It's about God (the vertical), but it's also about others (the horizontal). This horizontal dimension to worship calls us to accountability and engagement with the people around us. Worship can never simply be about me and my relationship with Christ. It must also involve my relationship with others, for when we worship we should recognize that the Body of Christ really is the Church. Some time ago I heard someone say, "Christ does not have a harem; He has a bride. And anytime I denigrate some part of the Body of Christ, I am denigrating a part of the one He loves, the one for whom He died and gave His life."

If you're at odds with a brother or sister in Christ, at some point in this service I'd like to encourage you to jot down a note asking forgiveness. And then I want to encourage you to seek that person out today before you leave the sanctuary or the worship center and give it to them. If they're not here, then mail or email the note to them. Remember, Jesus told His disciples, "*...if you are offering your gift [in worship] at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled to your brother; then come and offer your gift” (Mt. 5:23,24).*

There are other aspects of this notion that worship is a family affair, like worship should be intergenerational, and children as always welcome in worship. But we don't have time to look at these today. I'll have to leave that for another sermon.

## **Conclusion.**

In his book *Church: Why Bother?* Philip Yancey says he learned an enduring lesson about what worship in the family of God should look like from his church's response to a young black man named Adolphus who had a wild, angry look in his eye.<sup>2</sup> As part of their worship services in Chicago, Philip's church had a time they called "the Prayers of the People." During this time they would all stand, and spontaneously people would call out a prayer - for peace in the world, or healing for someone who was sick, and they would all respond in unison after each request, "Lord, hear our prayer." Pretty soon Adolphus figured out that the Prayers of the People provided a pretty good platform for him.

One Sunday morning, Adolphus prayed, "Lord, thank You for creating Whitney Houston and her magnificent body!" After a puzzled pause, a few chimed in weakly, "Lord, hear our prayer."

He continued, "Lord, thank you for the big recording contract I signed last week, and for all the good things that are happening with the band!" Those who knew Adolphus realized he was fantasizing, but others joined in with a heartfelt, "Lord, hear our prayer."

Regular attenders came to expect the unexpected from Adolphus. Visitors weren't quite sure what to think.

Against all odds, Adolphus' story has a happy ending. Through the faithful and patient ministry of that church to him, Adolphus calmed down, got some professional help, and he even got married. No one had ever invested that kind of energy and concern into him before like the LaSalle Street Church did, and it became for Adolphus the one stable place in his otherwise troubled and confused world. The people accepted him despite all he had done to earn their rejection.

Grace comes to people who don't deserve it. People like Adolphus, and people like you and me. In some ways, we're all Adolphus. We all need grace, don't we, just like him?

May our celebrations of worship be the beginning of a new appreciation for the connection you and I have with fellow believers in the family of God. And may we come to worship with a renewed commitment to keep short accounts with each other, to give the benefit of the doubt to one another, and be committed to reconciliation where there are broken relationships.

Paul Tournier once said, "There are two things we cannot do alone. One is to be married, and the other is to be a Christian." You see, worship is a family affair. Amen.

---

<sup>1</sup> Mark Labberton, *The Dangerous Act of Worship*, p. 21.

<sup>2</sup> Philip Yancey, *Church: Why Bother?* pp. 34-37.