

**Sermon preached by Dr. Neil Smith at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,
Kingstowne, Virginia, on Sunday, December 4, 2016**

UNTIL HE COMES

1 Corinthians 11:23-26

Our Scripture reading this morning from 1 Corinthians 11 is part of a larger section dealing with the Lord's Supper and the practice of the Corinthian church, in which they were guilty of "Communion malpractice." They abused and misused the sacrament and the "love feast" meal they regularly ate along with it, creating disunity in the church between the "haves" and the "have nots." The "haves" – the richer members of the church – showed a lack of love and caring for the poorer members by starting their "love feasts" or fellowship meals (think "pot providence") without waiting for the poorer members, who had to work long hours, to get there. Not only that, the richer members would eat and drink too much, actually getting drunk and leaving not enough food for the "have nots" among them.

Paul addresses their un-Christ-like conduct, warning them against partaking of the Lord's Supper "in an unworthy manner" (11:27). As part of his teaching, Paul reminds the Corinthians of the institution of the Lord's Supper by Jesus on the night before His crucifixion. Let us give our full and reverent attention to the reading of God's holy Word from 1 Corinthians 11:23-26.

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If you have a fortune to spend, you can easily spend it on some of the world's most expensive restaurant dishes. For example:

- A restaurant in Philadelphia has a \$100 cheesesteak with a glass of wine on its menu.
- A restaurant in New York City offers a New York strip-style steak made with Kobe beef for \$350.
- A Las Vegas restaurant has a chocolate cupcake topped with Tahitian gold vanilla caviar and edible gold flakes for only \$750.
- Another New York restaurant boasts a golden opulence sundae that comes with a bowl of caviar for \$1,000.
- Also in New York, for \$1,000, you can get a pizza topped with lobster tail and four types of caviar.
- Still another New York restaurant boasts the world's most expensive omelette (according to the *Guinness Book of World Records*), a lobster frittata containing one pound of lobster covered in egg on a bed of fried potatoes and topped with ten ounces of caviar.
- For \$35,000, the Lindeth Howe Country House Hotel in England offers a chocolate pudding that contains gold leaf, champagne, caviar, and a diamond – though I don't think the diamond is meant to be eaten!
- Most expensive of all, a restaurant in New Orleans has a dish of strawberries served in a marinade of port, red wine, spices, and citrus with vanilla ice cream. And, O, by the

way, it comes with a 7.09 carat pink diamond. Not surprisingly, according to one of the restaurant's owners, "it is our worst-selling dessert." Go figure! (Source: Amy McKeever, www.eater.com, January 29, 2013)

All of this is to say there is virtually no limit to how much you can pay for a meal, especially if it includes caviar and/or diamonds. None of these, however, compares to the cost of your salvation and mine. It doesn't even come close to the price paid by Jesus when He freely, lovingly, sacrificially offered up His life and shed His blood on the cross to save us from our sins and to reconcile us to God. It is His costly death, His vicarious death (which means He took our place and died as a substitute for us), His redeeming death that we remember and celebrate whenever we observe the sacrament of the Lord's Supper, as we will do this morning.

Though it is easy to overlook, there is a significant connection between the Lord's Supper (or Communion) and the season of Advent. The word *Advent*, which means "coming," comes from the Latin *Adventus*, which translates the Greek word *Parousia*, which refers both to the incarnation of the Son of God in His first coming in history and to the promise of His coming again. We rejoice in the first coming of our Savior, born in a stable in Bethlehem, "born (His people to deliver, born a child and yet a king)" (Charles Wesley, *Come, Thou Long-Expected Jesus*). And we await His coming again in glory, "when the King's reign shall be on earth as it is in heaven" (Ryan Reeves, *The History Behind Advent*, The Gospel Coalition blog). In the season of Advent, we look back to remember and celebrate the coming of Jesus and His suffering and death for us, and we look forward in hope. We look forward in the confident assurance that what we hope for *will come to pass* in the fullness of God's time.

The Lord's Supper has the same kind of twin focus. In Communion we look back to what Jesus did for us in His suffering and death on the cross, when His body – His life – was given for us and His blood was shed for us. And we keep on doing it. We keep on observing the sacrament. We keep on doing it, as Jesus instructed us, "in remembrance of (Him)" (1 Corinthians 11:24, 25). We keep on doing it as a way of proclaiming what Jesus has done for us to one another and to everyone who has eyes to see and ears to hear.

How long are we to keep on doing it? How long are we to keep on observing and celebrating the sacrament? How long are we to keep on eating the bread and drinking the cup? How long are we to keep on proclaiming His saving death? "Until He comes" again (11:26). Until He returns. Until His second Advent.

In Communion, as with the season of Advent itself, we look back and we look forward. We look back with joy and thankfulness for what God has done for us. And we look forward in faith. We look forward in the confident hope of Christ's return, being fully assured that God will keep His word to us. He will do what He has said.

You see, then, that both Advent and Communion keep one eye focused on the past – specifically, on the events of Jesus' first coming to us at Christmas, His becoming flesh and blood and "mov(ing) into the neighborhood" (John 1:14, *MSG*), His earthly life and suffering and death on the cross and His resurrection from the dead. And both Advent and Communion

keep one eye focused on the future – on the time still to come when Jesus will come again and will, as we say in the EPC *Essentials of Our Faith*, “judge the living and the dead, and consummate history and the eternal plan of God.”

The same Lord Jesus who came to us at Christmas *will come again*. Not to die for us again. Not to procure our salvation. He has already done that in His once-for-all, all-sufficient sacrificial death on the cross. There is no need for His sacrifice ever to be repeated. When He gave His life for us on the cross, Jesus said: “It is finished” (John 19:30). And it is. Totally. As it says in Hebrews 9:27-28, “Just as man is destined to die once, and after that to face judgment, so Christ was sacrificed once to take away the sins of many people; and He will appear a second time, not to bear sin, but to bring salvation to those who are waiting for Him.”

If that is true – and it is – here is the question: Are you waiting for Him? Are you looking forward to His coming again? Are you ready to see Him face to face?

I don’t know when Jesus is coming again. No one knows. Be skeptical of anyone who thinks they have it figured out, anyone who thinks they know when Jesus is coming back. Jesus said: “No one knows about that day or hour ... but only the Father in heaven” (Matthew 24:36). Got that?

In both Advent and Communion, we look back to what God has done in the incarnation and suffering and death of the Son of God for us. In both, we look forward to what God will yet do in the promise of the return of our Savior and Lord. What about the present?

Of course, it is in the present, in the here and now, that we look back and look ahead. But as we look back and remember with gratitude what God has done for us, and as we look forward in hope to the fulfillment of His promises to us, there is something else for us to do in the present.

We are, as Paul says in verse 26, to “proclaim the Lord’s death until He comes.” Priority one for us as followers of the Lord Jesus Christ is to spread the message of His saving love. Priority one is to tell others of His power to save sinners through His death on the cross for us. Priority one is for us to introduce unbelievers to the Savior and to invite them to become followers (disciples) of Jesus. That is our mission.

As with Communion (whenever we observe the sacrament), the season of Advent provides us with an opportunity not only to remind ourselves of “the meaning for the season,” but also to share with others what and why we celebrate. Don’t do it in a mean or angry or judgmental way. That does more harm than good. Do it in a winsome, loving way.

There is something else we can do. This applies more directly to Communion than to Advent, but maybe there is a connection to both. In our understanding of the Lord’s Supper as Christians in the Reformed tradition, we do not believe, as Roman Catholics do, that the bread and wine (or juice) used in Communion actually become the physical body and blood of Christ in the celebration of the sacrament. We believe the bread and wine are symbols of the

body and blood of Jesus, symbols that point beyond themselves to what they signify, which is the saving death of Christ for us. The symbols (bread and wine) do not change in substance. They remain what they are – bread and wine. They are merely symbols that enable us to see the gospel visually and to taste the goodness and grace of God.

Thus, we understand Communion to be a commemoration, a memorial meal observed to remember and proclaim the death of Christ, and to look forward to His coming again. But we also believe that the Lord Jesus Himself is spiritually present in the sacrament, enabling us by faith to feed on Him spiritually in our souls, and so to be nourished and renewed in His grace.

The real spiritual presence of the Lord Jesus in the sacrament is an important part of our belief about the Lord's Supper. One theologian, however, thinks we may have it backward. The question with which we may have to wrestle, he says, is not: "In what way is *the Lord* present in the Supper?" Instead, the question may be: "In what way are *we* present?" (Gordon Mikoski, "Bringing the Body to the Table", *Theology Today*, October 2010, pp. 24-25)

In what way are you and I present when we observe the sacrament and partake of the bread and cup? Are *we* – are *you* – fully present? Are you fully present in the present, right here and now? Or is your mind somewhere else? Are you distracted by other thoughts, other desires or things you want to do later today?

The Lord is present. I'm sure of it. How about you?

May we be fully present, and give our full and reverent attention to the spiritual feast the Lord Himself has prepared for us, worth infinitely more than the most expensive meal in the most expensive restaurant in the world. Throughout Advent, and whenever we observe the sacrament of the Lord's Supper, may we remember with great gratitude all that Jesus has done for us in His incarnation, in His suffering and death on our behalf, and in His resurrection from the dead. May we look forward in joyful hope to His promised coming again. And may we proclaim His saving death until He comes.

Lord, let it be so in us. Amen.