

**Sermon preached by Dr. Neil Smith at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,
Kingstowne, Virginia, on Sunday, June 3, 2007**

COMMUNION INSTRUCTIONS

1 Corinthians 11:17-34

Babette's Feast is the title of a short story by Danish author Isak Dinesen about a strict, ascetic religious community in a small village on the coast of Denmark. Babette comes to work as a cook for two elderly sisters, Martine and Phillipa, daughters of the founder of this austere community. The sisters have no idea that Babette was once a chef to nobility back in her native France. Her dream is to return to her beloved Paris, so every year she buys a lottery ticket in the hope of winning enough money to go back to Paris. And every night, week after week, year after year, the elderly spinsters demand that she prepare the same dreary meal of boiled fish and potatoes because, they said, Jesus commanded them to "take no thought of food and drink." To actually enjoy a meal, to indulge their taste buds, would be sin, they thought.

One day the unexpected happens. Babette actually wins the lottery! The prize is 10,000 francs, a small fortune. The sisters assume that Babette will now leave them and return home to France, but Babette, knowing the sisters had been planning a small anniversary celebration in honor of the birthday of their father – "no food, just tea and coffee," asks permission to prepare and pay for a real French dinner with all the trimmings for the entire village. It is a request the sisters are unable to refuse, though they are at first reluctant, believing it would be a sin to indulge in such rich food. They relent, but the people of the town secretly vow not to enjoy the feast and instead to occupy their minds with spiritual things. They reason that God will not blame them for eating such an extravagant meal as long as they don't enjoy it.

Babette begins her preparations. Caravans of rich, exotic food arrive in the village, along with barrels of fine wine. The big day finally arrives, and the entire village gathers. The first course is an exquisite turtle soup, which the people force down without enjoyment. Then comes the wine, the finest vintage in all of France. And the atmosphere begins to change. Someone smiles. Someone else giggles. By the time the main entrée of quail is served, these austere, pleasure-fearing people are laughing and joking and slurping and praising God for their years together. This "pack of Pharisees," as Vic Pentz refers to them, becomes transformed into a loving community through the gift of a meal.

One of the sisters goes into the kitchen to thank Babette, lamenting that they will miss her when she returns to Paris. But Babette says: "I will not be returning to Paris, because I have no money. I spent it all on the feast."

Can you think of someone else who gave all He had, who shed His blood and expressed His love for us through the gift of a meal? Is this not a picture of what Jesus has done for us in His death on the cross for our salvation, the once-for-all sacrifice we both commemorate and proclaim in the Sacrament of the Lord's Supper?

The Lord's Supper – or Communion – was instituted by Jesus Himself on the night before He died and, as our EPC Book of Worship says, it is to be celebrated until the end of the world as a perpetual remembrance of what Jesus did for mankind on the cross.

The Lord's Supper held a central place in the life of the New Testament church. But leave it to the church in Corinth to make a mess, even a mockery, of it. The Corinthians, like other churches of the New Testament, observed Communion as a part of what they called an "*agape* meal" or love feast. These *agape* meals were like our pot providence dinners where everyone brings something to share with others. We call them "pot providence" dinners instead of "potluck," because as Christians we don't believe in luck or some other kind of impersonal force that influences or governs our fate. Instead, we affirm and take heart in the sovereignty and providence of God in every area of life. Ray Stedman liked to call these meals "multiple choice dinners."

These "multiple choice dinners" were intended to promote fellowship among the followers of Christ, to both demonstrate and foster unity in the church. But in Corinth the exact opposite was happening. The church in Corinth had taken a good thing and spoiled it. Their *agape* meals and their observance of the Lord's Supper had been poisoned by clique-ish divisions, by selfish insensitivity, by discrimination on the part of the rich against the poorer members of the church. Instead of sharing a pot providence dinner together and making sure that everyone, rich or poor, got plenty to eat and drink, some of the Corinthians were gorging themselves, even getting drunk, at the expense of those who arrived later or had less. The effect of it all was the splintering of the church and the profaning of the Lord's Supper itself.

Paul minced no words. He said: "Your gatherings do more harm than good" (11:17). The callous insensitivity of the wealthier Christians toward those who had less in their gatherings was making things worse, not better. The church in the New Testament was the one place where the barriers that ordinarily divided people were broken down. It was the one place where people from every race and class and background and social status could come and meet together as equals in the family of God. But the Corinthians were destroying that ideal or picture of unity and loving community by their selfish disregard of the poorer, more needy members among them. So Paul said: "Whatever you're doing when you come together, it is not the Lord's Supper you are observing. Instead, each of you is going ahead with your own supper, with no regard for those who don't have enough. If you are so hungry, eat at home before you come so you won't dishonor the Lord or other members of the church, and so you will have the right focus in your celebration of Communion" (11:20-22, 34a).

Our tradition, of course, is different from that of the New Testament church in that our celebration of Communion is usually not connected to an *agape* meal or fellowship dinner. Here at Faith we celebrate the Lord's Supper regularly on the first Sunday of each month and, sometimes, on other special occasions. We do it in the context of our corporate worship because it is an act of worship, a visible expression of the worthship of Christ. It is a vivid reminder of what Christ did for us. In both actions and words, it is a proclamation of His saving work on our behalf.

In Paul's account of the institution of the Lord's Supper in verses 23-26 (which is actually the earliest account we have, since 1 Corinthians was written before any of the four Gospels), the apostle reminds the Corinthian believers – and us – of Jesus' instruction to “do this in remembrance of (Him)” (11:24, 25), and in so doing, to “proclaim the Lord's death until He comes (again)” (11:26).

So, in the Lord's Supper we both remember the Lord Jesus and His sacrifice for us, in particular. His body given and His blood shed for us and our salvation in His death. And we proclaim to each other and to all who have eyes to see and ears to hear what Christ has done for us.

As John Piper points out, these two aspects of the Lord's Supper support each other. Remembering enables us to proclaim, since we cannot proclaim what we don't remember. And proclaiming it helps us to remember, because not everyone remembers at the same time and with the same intensity, and it is imperative for His death to be proclaimed in words and with the bread and the cup lest we forget the preciousness, the meaning and sufficiency of His death.

But the sacrament is not just about remembering and proclaiming. In the act of remembering and proclaiming the Lord's death for us, we find our souls nourished in Christ and His grace. Though we actually eat and drink in the Lord's Supper, it is not about physical nourishment. If you come to Communion physically hungry, your hunger will not be satisfied by a bite-sized piece of bread or a wafer and a tiny cup of juice. But it is not about physical nourishment. It is about spiritual nourishment, the nourishment of our souls in faith.

Our Roman Catholic friends believe in what is called the doctrine of transubstantiation, which teaches that, when consecrated by the priest, the bread and wine actually and miraculously become the literal body and blood of Jesus. The logical consequence of this belief is that every time the mass is celebrated, Christ is being re-offered as a sacrifice for our sins. But in Hebrews 9 and 10, the Bible declares that the Lord Jesus sacrificed His life once for all (Hebrews 9:26; 10:10, 12, 14), and His once-for-all sacrifice was totally sufficient to atone for all our sins.

Our Lutheran friends hold to the doctrine of consubstantiation, which teaches that the bread and wine do not cease to be bread and wine in the sacrament, but that the physical body and blood of Christ are literally present in, with and by the bread and wine.

The view we affirm in the Reformed tradition is that the bread and wine used in Communion are symbols of the body and blood of Christ, symbols that point beyond themselves to what they signify – the saving death of Christ for us. But the symbols (the bread and wine) do not change in substance. They are merely symbols that enable us to see the gospel and to taste the goodness and grace of God.

Communion, then, is a commemoration. The Westminster Confession of Faith says it “commemorates Christ’s offering up of Himself, by Himself, on the cross once for all, and it spiritually offers up to God every possible praise for that sacrifice” (WCF, 29.2).

It is a memorial meal, done both to remember and to proclaim the death of Christ and its meaning. But we also believe that the Lord Jesus Himself is spiritually present in the sacrament, so that we may feed on Him spiritually in our souls – by faith, and so be nourished and renewed in His grace.

The Corinthians, it seems had lost sight of the real meaning and purpose of the Lord’s Supper. They were spoiling it, contaminating it with their callousness, their insensitivity and selfishness, their disregard for the needs of other members of the fellowship. The Lord’s Supper had become for many of them just an empty ritual in which they went through all the motions but their hearts were not engaged.

Paul warns them in verse 27 of the danger of participating in the sacrament in an unworthy manner. He says:

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.

Then in verse 29:

Anyone who eats and drinks without recognizing the body of the Lord eats and drinks judgment on himself.

In *The Message*, verse 29 says:

If you give no thought (or worse, don’t care) about the broken body of the Master when you eat and drink, you’re running the risk of serious consequences.

Paul’s warning is not just for the Corinthians. It is for us, too. So he says in verse 28 that each of us should examine ourselves, we should test our hearts, before we eat of the bread or drink of the cup. Over in 2 Corinthians 13:5, Paul says: “Examine yourselves to see whether you are in the faith; test yourselves.”

The Message paraphrase says: “Test yourselves to make sure you are solid in the faith. Don’t drift along taking everything for granted. Give yourselves regular check-ups.”

Why do we need regular check-ups? Why do we need to examine ourselves? First, to make sure we are spiritually healthy. To make sure we are alive in Christ. To make sure our faith is real and our hope in Christ secure.

The second reason we need to examine ourselves is so that we do not dishonor the Lord by participating in Communion unworthily. In one sense, we are all unworthy. We are

all unworthy of the saving grace of Christ. And there is nothing we can do to make ourselves worthy.

But the kind of unworthiness Paul has in mind is something that disqualifies a person from participating in the sacrament. What is that unworthiness? It is when a person partakes without a personal, trusting faith in Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord – a personal, trusting faith in His saving work on the cross for the forgiveness of your sins.

Or it may be the unworthiness of coming to the Lord's Supper without examining your heart, without confessing to the Lord and repenting of any known sin in your life. If you harbor sin in your heart, if you stubbornly refuse to let go of some sin or some sinful attitude, you cannot participate in a worthy manner. Our EPC Book of Worship says that God's people "are to prepare themselves by the examination of their inner spiritual life, of their present relationship to Christ, to confess and repent of known sins, to forgive those who have offended (us), to pray earnestly for the renewing grace of the Holy Spirit, and to draw near with a true heart in the full assurance of faith."

Have you examined yourself lately in the searchlight of God's Word and His claim on your life? Are you "worthy" to partake of Communion today? Let me reiterate: None of us is truly worthy. But our worthiness in God's sight is not based on how good or bad we have been. It is based on whether we have received God's saving grace, and whether we are living in a right relationship with Him and with others.

The body of Christ was given for you. The blood of Christ was shed for you. Never take that lightly or for granted. But with a sincere, humble, repentant, trusting heart draw near to Him in faith. And give thanks to God for this holy feast which cost the Lord Jesus all He had, even His life.

Lord, let it be so in us. Amen.