

## **DO YOU CELEBRATE WHAT GOD HAS DONE? 1 CORINTHIANS 11:17-26**

I'm not sure who is currently considered the top male heart-throb out there. I suppose it depends on your age to some degree. But the late actor Paul Newman filled that role for many years. There's a story of a woman entering an ice cream store in Kansas City. After making her selection, she turned and found herself face to face with Paul Newman who was in town making a movie. He smiled and said hello. Paul Newman's legendary blue eyes caused the woman's knees to shake. She managed to pay for her ice cream cone, and then left the shop with her heart pounding. When she regained her composure, she realized she'd misplaced her ice cream cone. Now where was it? She started back into the store to get it and met Newman once again at the door. He asked, "Are you looking for your ice cream?" She nodded unable to speak. "You put it in your purse with your change." Probably many of us have met important or famous people at different times in our lives - people who quickened our pulse. But let me ask you: when was the last time the presence of God quickened your pulse?

Worship is a verb! It's not something done to us or for us but by us. Today the worship verb is the word "celebrate." Do you celebrate what God has done? I want us to think about worshipping and celebrating in the context of the Lord's Supper which we're going to observe at the end of the service today. It's important to take a fresh look at the meaning of this ancient Christian act of worship. I'm not so interested in the mechanics of Communion: Leavened or unleavened bread? Grape juice or real wine? One cup or individual cups? Come forward to receive it or stay in your seats? Instead, I'm interested in the mood of the service, the feeling, the kind of spiritual ambiance that we should expect when we observe the Lord's Supper. The purpose of Communion is to remember Jesus. What does it mean to remember Jesus? Remember what? Remember how? Let's focus in on one passage of the Bible to get some answers to those questions (1 Corinthians 11:17-26).

### **HOW SHOULD COMMUNION BE OBSERVED?**

How is the Lord's Supper observed by most churches most of the time? True, it can be observed in very diverse ways. Nevertheless, how communion is observed is remarkably similar in one respect. In most cases, it is devoid of any spirit of celebration. One of the most important ingredients of biblical worship is celebration. I suggest that the dominating characteristic of any observance of the Lord's Supper ought to be celebration. Here's the problem. The mood or ambiance of most of our observances of the Lord's Supper can't be supported from scripture. What do I mean by that? Most of the time the Lord's Supper – or Communion, or the Eucharist or the Mass (whatever it's called by Christians in different churches) – is permeated by a very somber, almost funeral like atmosphere. A very solemn, almost sad ambiance reigns supreme. It's often permeated with slow, dirge like music or long periods of silence. Now silence

can be a very appropriate expression of worship, but nowhere in the Bible is silence ever associated with the observance of the Lord's Supper.

In addition, during Communion in most churches we have often been called to a time of reflecting on our sins. Again, it's good and useful to examine yourself spiritually from time to time and – most important of all – to confess your sins to the Lord on a daily basis. But nowhere in the Bible does it expressly teach that dwelling on your sinfulness is a proper way to prepare yourself to receive the Lord's Supper. I'm not at all convinced that's what Paul means when he says there in v. 28 of our text, "Everyone ought to examine themselves before they eat of the bread and drink from the cup." (1 Cor 11:28 NIV) Then again, you're often encouraged when you take Communion to reflect on Jesus' agony on the cross for you. Of course there are times when it's very appropriate to dwell on the spiritual and physical suffering of what Jesus endured on the cross on your behalf. A Good Friday service is one example. But that isn't what Paul meant when he encourages the Corinthian Christians to remember Jesus' death. Instead, he wanted them to remember what Jesus' death accomplished and achieved for them past, present and future. Here's my problem with the way most churches observe the Lord's Supper. All too often, it lacks any sense of celebration. It's hard to celebrate at a funeral. It's hard to celebrate if I have to focus on my sinfulness. It's hard to celebrate when I concentrate on the spiritual and physical torture that Jesus went through.

Someone might ask, "Well, Rick, where did you ever get the idea that the Lord's Supper ought to be a celebration?" The Bible! Let's look again at how it was observed by the Corinthians in the passage we read earlier. Here's something ironic right out of the gate! The extreme and sinful ways these people observed the Lord's Supper point you toward the balanced and godly ways it should be observed. Apparently, these believers in Jesus would gather for a common meal – sort of like an early version of the all church pot-luck dinner – which was called a Love Feast. At some point during this meal the assembled group would observe the Lord's Supper with the bread and the cup being shared. But at the church in Corinth there was too much feast and too little love! Wealthy Christians were bringing in loads of food and drink and not sharing it with poorer followers of Jesus. Many of these less fortunate Christians were probably slaves with little or no money. They couldn't afford elaborate picnic baskets! In fact, many of them were probably very much in need of a good, solid meal themselves. So, here were some Christians eating too much and even getting drunk at these Love Feasts where the Lord's Supper was being observed while other believers were going away hungry or feeling left out and humiliated by the lavish displays of their wealthier brothers and sisters in the Lord.

How on earth did observing the Lord's Supper in Corinth evolve into this kind of fiasco? After all, Paul himself had given them instruction about five years earlier on exactly how to observe the Lord's Supper correctly. That's just my point. The Lord's Supper had never ever been observed with cool reserve and funeral like

somberness. There's no way that the Corinthians in a matter of just five years would have gone from a funeral like atmosphere to a drunken party like atmosphere. But if the original observance of the Lord's Supper that Paul had started was a joyful, exuberant, festive and celebrative event that, yes, did involve enjoying good food together and featured great spiritual fellowship, then it becomes much easier to explain how it had degenerated into what it had become in his absence. The Corinthian Christians had taken something holy and made it sinful. They'd taken something fun for all members of the church and made it miserable for the poorest believers. They'd taken something festive and made it selfish. They'd taken a grand celebration and turned into a drunken party.

Again, here's the point I want to make today. Their mistake reveals how the Lord's Supper is supposed to be observed. It was always supposed to be this positive, rejoicing, "pull out all the stops", powerful celebration of what had been accomplished by Jesus at the cross. Communion should be a mighty celebration! When we observe the Lord's Supper, it should be like Easter Sunday in mood, atmosphere and ambiance. When you observe the Lord's Supper in a few minutes, will you celebrate? You should! It's a celebration of Jesus' triumph and victory and how it has changed your life for all eternity. Now, that's some thoughts on how communion should be celebrated. But let's ask a related question. Our scripture passage says that every time you celebrate the Lord's Supper you should remember Jesus and proclaim His death until He comes again. What does that mean?

## **HOW SHOULD JESUS BE REMEMBERED?**

Paul says here, "For whenever you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes." (1 Cor 11:26 NIV). What does that mean? When you proclaim the Lord's death, it means you focus on the accomplishments of the cross more than just the fact of the cross. It means you focus on the spiritual triumph of the cross more than simply remembering the historical events of the cross and resurrection. It means you announce to one and all the victory Jesus achieved through His death and resurrection. To proclaim the Lord's death is to share the good news of all that Jesus has accomplished.

Even Jesus said that you should use Communion as an opportunity to remember Him. The Bible says, "He took some bread and gave thanks to God for it. Then he broke it in pieces and gave it to the disciples, saying, 'This is my body, which is given for you. Do this to remember me.'" (Luke 22:19 NLT) What does that look like? Was Jesus saying, in effect, "I want you to remember what a miserable little worm you are and how it's all your fault I had to die that horrible death and go through all that unspeakable suffering and I don't want you to forget it ever"? I don't think so. Instead, Jesus wants you to enjoy a victorious celebration on a regular basis that focuses on what He accomplished on the cross and at the empty tomb.

I agree with Lee Eclov when he writes, "This table is different. This table of the Lord isn't where sinners find Christ but where sinners celebrate being found.... Maybe some morning, instead of solemnly passing these trays, we should dance for joy. Maybe we should sing every born-again song we know. Maybe we should tell our 'homecoming' stories and laugh like people who no longer fear death. Maybe we should ask if anyone wants seconds and hold our little cups high to toast lost sisters found and dead brothers alive."

When you come forward to receive Communion today, you'll notice that our music is going to be much more upbeat and joyful. That's by intent. Joy is the appropriate ambiance for the Lord's Supper. Celebration is the appropriate atmosphere for Communion. The announcement of victory is the appropriate mood for partaking of the bread and the cup. Observing the Lord's Supper should be a regular opportunity to celebrate what God has done for you. So, will you celebrate today? Is that how you'll come to the Table today? It ought to be! Christian, if there is anytime to shout to the Lord, to bless the Lord and to exult in God your Savior, it ought to be when you come to this Table. It represents everything Jesus won for you through His death and resurrection.

How should you remember Jesus today? What should you celebrate today? Celebrate the fact that you are fully forgiven of every sin. The Bible says, "For everyone has sinned; we all fall short of God's glorious standard. Yet God, with undeserved kindness, declares that we are righteous. He did this through Christ Jesus when he freed us from the penalty for our sins.... So now there is no condemnation for those who belong to Christ Jesus" (Rom 3:23-24; 8:1 NLT) There is no sin in your life that God can't forgive. There is no pit so deep that God is not deeper still. There is nothing that God can't remove and lose forever in the ocean of His divine forgetfulness. He says He will separate you from the guilt of your sins as far as the east is from the west. Not only are you forgiven, but because of what Jesus did, you stand before God as if you had never sinned at all. You are fully forgiven of every sin! How many of you believe that's something worth celebrating?

Celebrate your full deliverance from all the powers of hell. The Bible talks about the presence of evil spiritual strongholds in people's lives. Yes, I believe it's possible for even followers of Jesus to still be virtual spiritual prisoners of ungodly attitudes and activities. It might be racial prejudice, addiction to pornography, a pattern of abusive anger, a gossiping tongue, substance abuse, the worship of money or the things that money can buy. The Bible says, "We are human, but we don't wage war as humans do. We use God's mighty weapons, not worldly weapons, to knock down the strongholds of human reasoning and to destroy false arguments. We destroy every proud obstacle that keeps people from knowing God. We capture their rebellious thoughts and teach them to obey Christ." (2 Cor 10:3-5 NLT) Listen again to the wonderful words of scripture, "I pray that your hearts will be flooded with light so that you can understand the

confident hope he has given to those he called—his holy people who are his rich and glorious inheritance.” (Eph 1:18 NLT) Full deliverance from all the powers of hell! How many of you believe that’s something worth celebrating?

Celebrate the availability of healing for every dimension of your life. In this church we believe in God’s ability to heal you physically. We don’t believe He always heals people or that you can somehow manipulate Him into healing you by working up enough faith. But we believe you should ask. Jesus said, “Until now you have not asked for anything in my name. Ask and you will receive, and your joy will be complete.” (John 16:24 NIV) There are other kinds of healing that need to occur beyond the physical dimension. Some of us need healing today for a broken relationship – with a spouse, a parent, a child or a friend. Some of us need healing today from out of control anxiety – an issue, a decision or a new direction in life that we’re faced with.

In recent years, we’ve offered laying on of hands for prayer and anointing with oil when we observe the Lord’s Supper. We will do that again today. If you need physical healing or some other kind of healing, please go to either front corner of the sanctuary after you receive the bread and cup. A prayer team is waiting at either location to pray with you and for you. The Bible says, “Are any of you suffering hardships? You should pray. Are any of you happy? You should sing praises. Are any of you sick? You should call for the elders of the church to come and pray over you, anointing you with oil in the name of the Lord. Such a prayer offered in faith will heal the sick, and the Lord will make you well. And if you have committed any sins, you will be forgiven.” (James 5:13-16 NLT) Healing is available for every dimension of your life! How many of you believe that’s something worth celebrating?

Finally, celebrate the full release of God’s love and grace into every area of your life. The Bible says, “...For we know how dearly God loves us, because he has given us the Holy Spirit to fill our hearts with his love.” (Rom 5:5 NLT) I think of what else the Bible says, “Always be full of joy in the Lord. I say it again—rejoice!... Don’t worry about anything; instead, pray about everything. Tell God what you need, and thank him for all he has done. Then you will experience God’s peace, which exceeds anything we can understand. His peace will guard your hearts and minds as you live in Christ Jesus.” (Phil 4:4,6-7 NLT) God’s love and grace has been released into every area of your life! How many of you believe that’s something worth celebrating? Every time you come to the Table, you celebrate how much God loves you. Every time you come to the Table, you remember that God is for you and never against you. Every time you come to the Table, you remember that because Jesus gave you peace with God, you can also experience the peace of God in every difficult life situation. All of that and so much more is worth celebrating. So, go ahead today, celebrate! That’s the very best way to remember Jesus and to proclaim His death until He comes again.

There's a wonderful story by Isak Dinesen called "Babette's Feast." It's about a very strict, religious community in Denmark. Babette works as a cook for two elderly sisters who have no idea that she once was a chef to nobility back in her native France. Babette's dream is to return to her beloved home city of Paris, so every year she buys a lottery ticket in hopes of winning enough money to return. And every night her austere employers demand that she cook the same dreary meal: boiled fish and potatoes, because, they say, Jesus commanded, "Take no thought of food and drink."

One day the unbelievable happens: Babette wins the lottery! The prize is 10,000 francs, a small fortune. And because the anniversary of the founding of the community is approaching, Babette asks if she might prepare a French feast with all the trimmings for the entire village. At first the townspeople refuse: "No, it would be sin to indulge in such rich food." But Babette begs them, and finally they relent, "As a favor to you, we will allow you to serve us this French dinner." But the people secretly vow not to enjoy the feast and instead to occupy their minds with spiritual things, believing God will not blame them for eating this sinful meal as long as they don't enjoy it.

Babette begins her preparations. Caravans of exotic food arrive in the village along with barrels of fine wine. Finally the big day comes, and the village gathers. The first course is an exquisite turtle soup. The diners force it down without enjoyment. But although they usually eat in silence, conversation begins to break out. Then comes the wine: the finest vintage in France. The atmosphere changes. Someone smiles. Someone else giggles. An arm comes up and drapes over a shoulder. Someone is heard to say, "After all, did not the Lord Jesus say, love one another?" By the time the main entrée of quail arrives, those austere, pleasure-fearing people are giggling and laughing and slurping and guffawing and praising God for their many years together. This group of joyless believers is transformed into a loving community through the gift of a meal. One of the two sisters goes into the kitchen to thank Babette, saying, "Oh, how we will miss you when you return to Paris!" And Babette replies, "I will not be returning to Paris, because I have no money. I spent it all on the feast."

Can you think of anyone else who gave His all to make us a loving, joy-filled community through the gift of a meal? The Lord's Supper is an event that deserves to be entered into with a spirit of holy celebration. Today, will you celebrate what God has done?