

The Blessing of Gathering

1 Corinthians 11:17-34

I want to talk about how much of a blessing the weekly worship service can be... One of the great blessings of becoming a Christian is that we become part of a community of believers that gathers for worship, encouragement and support. The church family is meant to be a great blessing for each of us and one of the big ways God pours out his grace on every believer, and the weekly worship service is a big part of that.

Coming to church should be a blessing – a time to connect with Christ and connect with other believers. You should be encouraged and built up in your faith and want to come to church and look forward to it. And it shouldn't be just because the music or sermon was good, it should be because of the fellowship and friendship you enjoy with other believers. We come together to encourage and build one another up.

This morning I want us to think about how well that's going here at East Lincoln. Are we a church family where people are cared for and encouraged? When we come together on Sundays, is it a blessing for you? Is it a blessing for everyone?

In the passage we are going to study this morning we are going to see a church that was really messing this up. Back then they didn't have multiple churches in a local community to choose from – there was only one. Corinth had one group of Christians that gathered regularly for worship and fellowship and when they did, it was a disaster.

What if you came to church and you felt worse when you left than when you came in? Imagine feeling completely left out and ignored – like no one cared about you. That's what was happening in Corinth. When the people gathered as the church family it was supposed to be a time of worship and encouragement, but it wasn't. It was a disaster – a time where people separated into different groups and only paid attention to their own wants and needs.

Paul found out that it was happening and wrote to them about it in 1 Corinthians chapter 11. I want us to use this passage to think about how we're doing as a church family and how we can keep improving in this area.

Read 1 Corinthians 11:17-22.

¹⁷ But in the following instructions I do not commend you, because when you come together it is not for the better but for the worse. ¹⁸ For, in the first place, when you come together as a church, I hear that there are divisions among you. And I believe it in part, ¹⁹ for there must be factions among you in order that those who are genuine among you may be recognized. ²⁰ When you come together, it is not the Lord's supper that you eat. ²¹ For in eating, each one goes ahead with his own meal. One goes hungry, another gets drunk. ²² What! Do you not have houses to eat and drink in? Or do you despise the church of God and humiliate those who have nothing? What shall I say to you? Shall I commend you in this? No, I will not.

So Paul was really upset about what was going on when they were meeting together. At that time, when a church family would gather there was often a meal that was shared – they called them “love feasts.” The people would enjoy fellowship and their common faith in Christ. They would also observe the Lord’s Supper at the end of the meal. People would contribute food for the meal, and the rich would bring most of it, while some of the poor couldn’t bring any. But it didn’t matter. The Lord had blessed some of the people with an abundance so that everyone could partake and no one would go hungry or be left out.

But in Corinth it was all messed up. When the people gathered they would end up separating by socio-economic groups. The rich would get there first with all the food and begin eating together. The poor would be late because they were working and they didn’t have any food. By the time they got there, the food was all gone and they were excluded. The rich had been feasting and didn’t pay any attention to the poor. They even went so far as to consume all the bread and wine that was to be used in Communion to the point where they were getting drunk. There was nothing left. The poor were going hungry, the rich were getting drunk

So Paul wasn’t a happy camper. He says in verse 18 that when they came together it was for the worse, not the better. It wasn’t about worshipping, encouraging one another, and enjoying fellowship together, it was about self-centeredness, favoritism and neglect – very reflective of the social divisions that existed in the culture where the poor were treated as nothing. Paul recognized in verse 19 that divisions were necessary even in the church because they revealed those who

were truly faithful to the Lord, and in Corinth it wasn't looking good. It was a mess.

Things were so out of hand that he says it wasn't even the Lord's Supper that they ate anymore even though they partook of the elements. It was so messed up by what they were doing it had completely lost its meaning. Paul's summary was that they were despising the church of God and humiliating the poor and he was disgusted. That sounds terrible. I wouldn't want to go to a church like that, but they didn't have a choice. It was their only option.

So what does he do? He reminds them of the Upper Room with Jesus and of the sacredness of the elements they were so carelessly consuming.

Read 1 Corinthians 11:23-26.

²³ For I received from the Lord what I also delivered to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took bread, ²⁴ and when he had given thanks, he broke it, and said, "This is my body, which is for you. Do this in remembrance of me." ²⁵ In the same way also he took the cup, after supper, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me." ²⁶ For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes.

When Jesus instituted the Lord's Supper, it was a solemn and sacred meal to remember his body that was broken and blood that was shed at the cross. It was to proclaim his death. I don't know about you, but when I hold the bread and cup in my hands and I think about Jesus' body and blood that was given for me, it is a solemn and sacred experience. There is both gratitude and grief as I remember what Jesus did to pay the penalty for my sins. And that's the way it should be. That's what the Lord's Supper is about and that's what Paul wanted it to be about in all the churches he ministered to.

The Corinthians weren't doing that at all – they weren't making that discernment. They weren't treating the bread and wine as anything other than food and drink to fill themselves with, and they were doing it while neglecting the poor. So Paul reminded them of the seriousness of the meal and followed with a warning...

Read 1 Corinthians 11:27-32.

²⁷ Whoever, therefore, eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty concerning the body and blood of the Lord. ²⁸ Let a person examine himself, then, and so eat of the bread and drink of the cup. ²⁹ For anyone who eats and drinks without discerning the body eats and drinks judgment on himself. ³⁰ That is why many of you are weak and ill, and some have died. ³¹ But if we judged ourselves truly, we would not be judged. ³² But when we are judged by the Lord, we are disciplined so that we may not be condemned along with the world.

Paul warned them that before they took the bread and cup in Communion they needed to examine themselves. They needed to discern the body and I think he's talking about recognizing the sacredness of the bread and cup. The word translated "discern" means to distinguish one thing from another, and they weren't doing that. They were treating the bread and cup as just more food at a meal and they should never do that. It should be set apart as sacred because of what it represented.

By doing what they were doing Paul says they were bringing judgement upon themselves. They were eating and drinking in an unworthy manner and were guilty of profaning the body and blood of the Lord. Many of them were becoming weak and ill and dying and Paul says that was God's judgment for what they were doing. He tells them they ought rather to judge themselves so that they would not come under the judgment of God and when they are judged by him it is God's discipline so they would repent and not be condemned.

The Lord's Supper is a sacred observance and Paul warned them it was very important that they treat it that way. He finishes his rebuke with some simple instruction of how to treat one another in that situation.

Read 1 Corinthians 11:33-34.

³³ So then, my brothers, when you come together to eat, wait for one another— ³⁴ if anyone is hungry, let him eat at home—so that when you come together it will not be for judgment. About the other things I will give directions when I come.

He wanted them to pay attention to what's going on. Don't start eating until everybody shows up. If you're really hungry, eat at home before you come. Care

for the poor. Honor them as Christ has honored them. Jesus died to demonstrate his love for us and put us first, now we put others first by at least waiting for them.

You hopefully can see that we treat Communion very seriously here at East Lincoln. We set it apart from any other meal. We give instruction so that we remember what's going on; we treat the bread and cup with the honor of what they stand for; we give time for examination so that we don't partake in an unworthy manner. And I encourage you, that when we take Communion, you treat it with just as much solemnity as we do. It's not a time to be on your phone or talking to the people next to you. It's a time of solemn reflection, repentance, and gratitude.

But this passage is primarily about blessing one another when we gather for worship on Sunday mornings and we need to examine ourselves in that regard. The people in Corinth were only focusing on themselves and were so self-absorbed they were excluding people outside their group. This is something we need to watch out for.

The worship service is to be a blessing – for everyone. I would hate to find out that someone came and left discouraged because they were excluded or ignored. I don't think any of us would do that intentionally, but I think we can end up doing it inadvertently. We can come to church looking for what we can get out of it and forget that God also wants us to be a blessing to others.

So I encourage all of us to take some time to look around on Sunday mornings for those who may be standing or sitting alone. We naturally gravitate toward our friend groups and we enjoy time on Sundays to connect, and that's great. But we also need to be aware of others who may not be connected. We are known to be a friendly church by many, but there are some who haven't felt that way. They've come for a while and then left without making a connection. Some of that might be on them for not making an effort to reach out, but some of that might be on us for not reaching out to them. I think it would be good for all of us to make it a practice to look around on Sunday mornings and see if there's anyone that's being left out and then reach out to them and include them in conversation.