

A Preparatory Exhortation
LaGrave Christian Reformed Church
July 10, 2022 – PM Sermon
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Matthew 26:26-30

Not only will we will celebrate the Lord's Supper tonight, my sermon is based on the story of the original Lord's Supper story. And to start doing that I thought I would bring up two words. Two words that have a place in my past and probably in the past of most of you here. Two words that used to hover around all our Lord's Supper celebrations. Those words are: *Preparatory Exhortation!*

Some of you smiled when I said those words. Some of you have no idea what I'm talking about. If you are under 40, or if you haven't grown up in the Christian Reformed Church, you probably don't know what a preparatory exhortation is. So let me tell you. Years ago our church was very concerned about preserving the sanctity of the Lord's table. We believed strongly that not just anyone should eat this meal. We believed strongly that the table should be *fenced* (that's the technical term), and those who did come should carefully examine themselves before they ate. If they ate the bread and the wine casually, without being sorry for their sin, they would be in danger of God's judgment.

The table got fenced in a couple of ways. It used to be that elders would require all visitors who wanted communion to come and talk to them before hand, and if the person didn't meet their standards, communion was denied. One of my best friends growing up had a mom who was Christian Reformed, but a dad who was Catholic. His Catholic dad was a wonderful Christian guy: he was in church every Sunday, he participated in the life of the church, but he never took communion. I'm sure that's because the elders thought a Catholic shouldn't do that until he renounced his Catholicism. The other way we fenced the table was in the worship service. On the Sunday before communion was celebrated, a form was read aloud in church. That form called everyone to a week of self-examination before they took the bread and the wine. The form that called us to the week of self-examination was called, The Preparatory Exhortation.

I looked through the old blue hymnbook – the one published in 1956 – and I read through some of the old Preparatory Exhortations, and it was very interesting to hear the language. Listen to this bit: *“Let everyone consider by himself his sins and accursedness, that he may abhor himself and humble himself before God, considering that the wrath of God against sin is so great that He, rather than to leave it unpunished, has punished it in his beloved Son, Jesus Christ, with the bitter and shameful death of the cross.”* Not exactly light hearted, is it? It goes on from there to plow through a list of 22 serious sins that would exclude you from the Lord's table. Excluded are (among others): all quarrelsome persons, adulterers, fornicators, drunkards, covetous persons, children who are rebellious against their parents and – as a final catch all – all those who lead offensive lives. It's a fence. A high fence.

Reading these old forms made me realize how much we have changed. 50 years ago this sort of language was fairly common in our churches, but now it sounds foreign. We've become much more open in our Lord's Supper celebrations and much more joyful. We don't approach the table with fear and trembling, we come with joy to meet our Lord (in the words of the song that we will sing a little later). Mostly I'm glad for the recent changes to the way that we approach the Lord's Supper. I like the joy and the openness of our current arrangement. I wince at the severity of the old forms. I'm glad that people like my friend's dad are now welcome at the table. But if

I'm completely honest, sometimes I also worry. Sometimes I wonder: When we gave up the preparatory exhortation and all its warning against those 22 sins, when we started lowering the fences to the table and letting all sorts of people in, did we lose our moral seriousness? Did we lose some of our zeal and commitment to the Christian life? As our table became more open, did we become less dedicated? Should we be more careful about who gets this holy food, and should we be more careful about the moral state of the people who eat here? Many churches still maintain fences around their table, many churches are more strict about who can come. Is this just another sign of the CRC's slide? These are serious questions.

A look at the first Lord's Supper may help us address these questions. As I read the story over and over this week, I was struck by whom Jesus allowed at his table that night, and by the state of mind of those who were there. Who was allowed at the table?

All twelve disciples, including Judas. When Jesus held up the cup and said, 'Drink from it all of you,' the "all of you" that "all" included the one who was to betray him. In fact, not only does Jesus allow his betrayer at the table, he shares the bread and the wine with him right after he has made it clear to Judas that he knows what Judas is about to do. It's one of the most remarkable moments in Scripture: a minute after Jesus has looked Judas in the eye and shows that he knows the depths of his rebellion, he looks him in the eye again and says, "This is my body, given for you."

And Judas isn't the only crooked guest at the table that night. Peter is no boy scout. He won't betray Jesus, but he will fall into his own serious sin when he makes his public rejection of faith. Jesus knows all about that too. He predicts Peter's denial right after the meal is over. Furthermore, Jesus knows that the obedience of the rest of the disciples is also suspect. '*You will all become deserters!*' Jesus tells them point blank in verse 31.

Luke complicates the picture even more by showing us that the disciple's disobedience isn't just something in the future, their state of mind during the meal itself is far from perfect. He tells us that in the middle of dinner, right after Jesus has given them his body and blood, a dispute arose among them about who would be the greatest in the kingdom of heaven, who would be Jesus' vice president. If they come to the table of sacrifice and argue about whose number one, I think it's safe to say that they don't get it. They aren't exactly eating in the right Spirit.

So, here's what the first Supper looked like from Jesus' perspective: Jesus looks at a table full of traitors, deniers and deserters; all of them are bickering about who's going to be number one. Most people in Jesus' position would leave the table in disgust, or at least they would give them all a piece of his mind. But Jesus gives them his body and blood instead and says, "Take eat, take drink, this wine is for the forgiveness of your sins." Then he goes out and dies for them. Grace flows wide and deep at the first supper. Jesus gives tremendous room for his disciple's failings.

Applying this to our communion, when you realize the state of mind of the disciples at the first Supper, maybe you think, "Well that's it, if the disciples are all allowed, anyone is eligible. No barriers at the table!" But things aren't quite that simple. Grace flows wide at the first supper, but that grace is not cheap. Jesus gives the bread and wine to the disobedient, but that doesn't mean obedience doesn't matter to him. The fact is that although he feeds all these broken people at the table, he also challenges them. He welcomes them all to the table, he washes all of their feet, but he doesn't simply overlook their disobedience, he confronts it. The traitor, the denier and the deserters are all confronted personally, face to face. And maybe even more importantly, their disobedience is not overlooked, Jesus himself will pay a terrible, painful price for it.

Surely our attitude to this table cannot be: ‘You’re a sinner? Don’t worry about it! There’s grace here! God loves you just as you are, anyone can eat this food, no strings attached, no commitment necessary!’ Dietrich Bonhoeffer railed against this sort of cheap grace. He complained that, in his day, cheap grace that had created a church full of Christians who came to church on Sunday, got their forgiveness, got their weekly dose of grace, and went out in the world and lived however they wanted. Their attitude was: “God gives you forgiving grace at his table no matter what you do!!!??? Well I think then that I’ll only obey God when it’s convenient for me. If God’s laws are inconvenient, if they go against what I feel is okay, I’ll just do my thing and rely on his grace. Perfect. Grace makes my life easy!”

Obviously this attitude won’t do. Jesus didn’t die on the cross to make our life *convenient*. Jesus didn’t give his body and blood to *enable* sin, he gave it to save us from sin, and to change us. It’s because abuses like this that Paul warned the Corinthian church not to eat the Lord’s Supper in an unworthy manner. Eat it in the wrong Spirit and you’re in danger of judgment he says.

So you’ve got those two things pulling in different directions: On the one hand Jesus’ amazing openness and his offering of his body to undiscerning sinners. On the other hand, the fear of cheapening Christ’s sacrifice. So how do we balance these things? How do we offer sinners grace at this table, without making the grace cheap? What’s the difference between cheap grace and saving grace?

Let me try to explain the difference, and I think the difference between them will help us understand the Spirit in which you are invited to this table. One of the most famous things the great Swiss Theologian Karl Barth ever said was also one of the simplest. One time at the end of his life, after he had written thousands of pages of deep theology wrestling with the nature of Christianity, someone asked him, “Dr. Barth, what is the essence of Christianity? After all you’ve studied, what does it come down to??” Barth said simply that this is what it means: “Jesus loves me, this I know, for the Bible tells me so.” Wow. What a profound statement! And a gracious statement. After all that study, it finally comes down to that statement we all learn as a child: Jesus loves me. That’s grace: In the end, we are little ones in Jesus’ arms.

But, while those words are a statement of grace in the mouth of Karl Barth in that particular situation, now imagine those same gracious words in a different situation. Imagine a college freshman starting her first religion class. The professor is trying to get her to study the Bible, to sharpen her mind, to wrestle with the mysteries of the faith. The girl refuses. “Ultimately we human beings can’t figure this stuff out professor!” she says, and on her exam her answer to every question is “Jesus loves me this I know for the Bible tells me so.” It’s the same gracious statement. It’s the same truth, but now the grace is cheap. When someone like Karl Barth, who has worked and wrestled and struggled their whole life partakes of the statement, “Jesus loves me this I know,” it is a legitimate celebration of God’s grace. When a lazy freshman partakes of it, it’s a cheap excuse from a person who would like to do as little for Jesus as possible. And I think it’s fair to say that by her use of that statement on her exam, this freshman is partaking of it in an unworthy manner and will certainly eat and drink judgment unto herself - in this case the judgment of the professor’s failing grade.

How does that translate to us here, and this Supper we are about to share? Grace flows deep here. No matter what your past is Jesus offers you his grace. His arms are open. His food is free. As the plate goes around, anyone here can reach into that plate and take from his grace. We can’t stop you. The elders are not instructed to set off an alarm if someone they’re not sure about grabs

the communion elements. They will not come bounding over the seats to tear the bread out of your hand. The food is there for the taking.

But understand this: this bread is costly. And while this bread might have only a dollar's worth of ingredients, the grace offered in this bread came at a great cost. Understand also: This is the body of Christ! And if you aren't really sure that you want to be part of that body, if you're not sure that you want to follow this man with the holes in his hands and love in his eyes, then maybe you shouldn't take and eat.

But if you are a person who wants to follow Jesus, even if you're not sure you understand him, even if you're not sure your faith is all that strong, even if you know you've let him down badly in the past, even if you are afraid that you might let him down in the future, if new life sounds good to you, if new beginnings sound good to you, if you want Jesus of Nazareth as the center of your life, then I invite you – HE invites you – to *“Take, eat, remember and believe that the blood of Jesus was given for the complete remission of all your sins.”*

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