

FIT FOR THIS MEAL?

Good morning. It is a good morning indeed! It is the first Sunday in November and we get to take communion together. What could be a more pleasant privilege on a beautiful Fall day? We all have a little extra sleep. We have been having some interesting conversations. And some of us even claim to be learning and growing together. I certainly do. So far, *The New Church* has been more exciting, interesting, and challenging than I even expected. Nevertheless, I am eager for the nourishment and bonding of this meal. Jesus never leaves us unfed or undernourished for very long, unless we absolutely refuse His invitations. But as you probably would predict, since we are gathering at His table, I thought we might continue some of our conversations a little bit. Some of our topics are too big to end, and too wide to cover with any certainty or completeness.

So how are you this morning? The easy answer is, "Fine." But what is the question? How are you in "the way of the world" (the W-W)? Or: How are you in "the Way of the Spirit" (the W-S)? I continually hear people talking "as if" – as if we live in one reality or the other. I guess they don't like the TENSION. They want to resolve a lot of issues that I don't think get resolved for as long as we live here. I think that leads us into pretense and into false assumptions that come back to bite us.

Can you imagine the following responses?

On the W-W level:

"I am in the hospital – have cancer – it's terminal."

On the W-S level:

"I am really wonderful – surrounded by loved ones – Jesus is closer than ever – I have a deeper peace, and the future looks brighter than I ever knew it to be before."

This may sound improbable to some people, but I have seen and heard it numerous times over the years. It is one of the great privileges of being a Pastor.

I chose Paul's letter to the Ephesians as our focus for this Fall. It leads us into wondrous places. But I have had no intention of covering all the great themes and messages in Ephesians. That is a job for a Disciple Band (a Study Group). But what of this passage we read this morning? It is full of admonitions, instructions, advice – comments about things we should not do and about other things we *should* do. It is all Paul's way of trying to “build up the body” – helping the people of the early church move toward a better, stronger, more loving fellowship. He hopes it will help them, and everyone who is drawn to their fellowship.

What's wrong with Paul? Isn't this the way of the world? What happened to the Gospel, and all the ways we are not in control and cannot save ourselves? Has Paul gone back to “the Law”? And is he now assuming that we can make all these improvements by merely deciding it's a good idea and then taking care of it? All through Ephesians, and the other writings of Paul as well, it is possible to hear portions of his letters as a “bootstrap” operation: we will all pull ourselves up by our own bootstraps ... into loving each other, behaving rightly, avoiding the Seven Deadly Sins, and so forth.

Paul thinks he is talking to converts. Paul assumes he is talking to people who have been baptized – who have died to the W-W sirens and who now live by the Spirit. But we still live here, and Paul gives us advice that is good in either realm. That is, if we follow the advice, it will be good on either the W-W level or the W-S level. Except on the W-W level, most people will not manage to follow the advice very well – that is, not very consistently. And if they do, it will turn them into rather rigid, judgmental, and joyless people. On the W-W level, they will get focused on the rules and will neglect relationships more and more.

For converts, this is merely a reminder, and sometimes a clarification. The W-W no longer has the power to mesmerize the baptized. They don't need what they used to need. They may want it, when it is possible and appropriate. But the needs and desires of this world no longer govern their lives. They can handle sound advice without getting sucked in to the perfectionism or the condemnation that normally follows. Even the advice itself is never paramount. Life with the Spirit is paramount, and the dialogue and relationship with the Spirit directs and translates the advice itself into efforts useful and appropriate.

Paul says: “walk in love”; “no foolish talk”; “walk as children of light”; “make the best use of your time”; “give thanks always.” What can I do with such admonitions? It is all a lot of hogwash if I take it in a negative or W-W attitude. But the same passage warms and smiles on me if I am in the presence of the Spirit. For in the presence of the Spirit, such comments are not threatening. They cannot make me feel unloved or unaccepted or like I better quick rush about and fix myself before I get thrown away.

Maybe Paul *does* revert to Jewish roots at times. Most of us revert to the patterns we grew up in, from time to time. I am admitting that it is possible for Paul too. But I suspect we should be slow to jump to such conclusions. What about verse six: *“Let no one deceive you with empty words, for because of these things the wrath of God comes upon the sons of disobedience.”*

Maybe I am the one deceiving you with empty words. I have certainly been accused of it from time to time over the years. Only, from my perspective, Paul does not forget that we still live in the world, even though we are no longer *of* the world. God is still the Creator, and things still run according to the principles that Creation is built on. For Paul, “the wrath of God” is often what we would call the consequences of natural law working according to plan. If we disobey the precepts of natural law, we do suffer the consequences. Humans have a tendency to try to get what they think they want, while at the same time pretending they can escape the consequences of how they are behaving on the way to getting what they want. Of course, none of *us* ever do that, but we can see it happening in the lives of those around us. And Paul is suggesting that we can even get sucked into the consequences if we stay too close to people who are operating against Creation’s principles. If a ship is going down, you don’t want to stay too close to it; it will drag you under with it. (verses 7, 11, 15)

Why am I even talking about such obvious things? Well, maybe for the same reasons Paul does. Sometimes people seem to confuse things almost on purpose. Maybe if we get confused enough, it will turn into an excuse big enough to get us forgiven. Of course, we can get forgiveness a lot easier and more powerfully by just going to Jesus. Only, that always requires repentance. If we can act confused enough, we don’t have to repent – we don’t have to change anything, not even our opinions or attitudes. We can pretend the confusion is somebody else’s fault.

Still, there is a lot of confusion about New LIFE in the Way of the Spirit. Does freedom from the Law mean we are immune from the consequences of disobeying the Law? No! Not hardly! Freedom from the Law means the Law is no longer the driving force of our lives. We no longer look to the Law as the source of the rewards we are hoping to acquire. But the Law still operates. We don't expect that to cease just because we pray a lot. Our relationship to the Holy Spirit, and to each other, is far more important to us than the Law. But we still keep a "weather eye" open to the Law – and to the W-W levels of life. Is that a surprise?

All good, loving, caring parents teach their children "the Law." How else will they survive in the W-W? There are no guarantees, but knowing the precepts of survival will increase their chances of survival. Few parents spend as much time and energy teaching their children the precepts of the W-S – but that's a different subject. Developing good work habits; getting good grades; having good morals; knowing how to choose a mate, or a job, or your friends – all are huge and important items for survival here.

Even less well known today, though I used to hear it frequently when I was younger: We come to the Way of the Gospel through knowing the way of the Law. Knowing the Law is prerequisite for knowing the Gospel. Jesus, Paul, Augustine, Luther, Calvin, and John Cotton all knew the Law – got shipwrecked on the Law – before they could hear the Gospel. Yet all of them knew that the Law was good and right, as far as it went. And where does it stop? It stops this side of our being able to obey it. Oh, at moments we can obey part of it, for short periods of time. But the promises of the Law all depend on our keeping all of it all the time. They even require that everybody around us keep the precepts of the Law also. How does Jesus make this really clear to us? Have you ever read the Sermon on the Mount? And did you then take the next step: keep a log of your efforts to live by its precepts, even for one whole day?

In any case, the W-W is not something we can abandon or ignore while we live here. "Free" from it means we are no longer terrified, enslaved, or controlled by it. That does not mean it has evaporated before us. We still pay our bills, for instance. We still go to work in the morning. We will do that with a different attitude, and probably with some improved approaches. But we still pay our bills and go to our work.

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What are morals? They are behavior patterns that work in the W-W. Some of them have twin concepts in the W-S, though in the W-S we have different reasons for following them. A dorky illustration, no doubt, but: In the W-W, it is immoral to make love to Betty because she is married to somebody else. If you are smart, you will not make love to Betty because the consequences will be lots and lots of trouble. No matter what some of the movies say, it won't work out well.

In the W-S, the trouble that comes from breaking the rules is of minor concern. Betty is one of God's very special and very precious daughters. Concern for her – and awareness of her true destiny and purpose – is a huge item. Notions about personal and temporary pleasure, for her or for you, do not weigh very much in the light of the Way of the Spirit. But if you walk in the Way of the Spirit, both levels will be clear to you. That is, the way of the world will not have disappeared; it will simply seem small and inconsequential in comparison to the awareness, motives, and purposes of the Spiritual Way.

In any case, being citizens in both realms simultaneously, the choices we make are always impacting both of the realms we live in. It is therefore “necessary for us to pray every day.” That is: Unaided, we do not have wisdom enough to keep clear and focused about all the choices, opportunities, challenges, and temptations that keep coming toward us continually, and sometimes in bunches. Do choices ever come at you in bunches?

The sermon title asks: Am I fit for this meal? I have been trying to lead up to the fact, or at least the reminder, that we live in two realms or realities at the same time. Therefore there are three answers to this question. And the answers are:

- I do get myself fit for this meal.
- I am never fit for this meal.
- This meal fits me just right.

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I.) I DO GET MYSELF FIT FOR THIS MEAL

Answer number one: I do get myself fit for this meal. I turn my attention toward it. I think about what I know of its meaning. I turn my attention away from many other things, and remember Jesus. I cannot do that for very long without gratitude and love rising in me. I know what He did, what He went through, what it cost Him. More and more I get glimmers of why He was doing it – why it mattered; why there was no other way to break through all the barriers of denial, subterfuge, suspicion, and fear that keep us separated from the presence and love of God.

This meal summarizes and symbolizes and speaks it all again: the invitation; the grace and mercy; the hope and promise of God for all of us.

And this meal carries also the dark side: the cost; the depth of love and caring to which Jesus was willing to go; the reality of my refusing His Kingship – my rejection of His rights over my life; my refusal to give Him my loyalty and my allegiance.

I do not want it to be that way any longer. It still is that way in some moments, in some instances. But they are careless and momentary, in comparison to how it used to be. Except, of course, for the dimensions within me which I have not yet fully come to terms with. But that is part of the third answer.

The first answer is yes: I remember, and I prepare myself, and I come to this meal with unspeakable gratitude, anticipation, and open-hearted love. And I know that His love and mercy await me. In such ways, I am fit and ready to come to this banquet.

II.) I AM NEVER FIT FOR THIS MEAL

Answer number two is equally true and genuine: I am never fit for this meal – never worthy; never even close. Even on small, mundane, little levels, none of us can ever demand or deserve love. I cannot deserve or demand love from any of you, and certainly not from Mariana or my children. If it comes, it is pure gift. I didn't always know that, but I know it now. But this meal is not on any small or little or mundane levels. The majesty and personal attention of the numinous God are involved here. The stature and worth of the Son of God are involved here. I have nothing to bring, no claims to make – no worth, promises, gifts, or good intentions to offer – that would make it right or proper or even believable that I would be invited to this meal, or allowed a place at this table.

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What am I, who am I, what have I ever done ... to imagine that the omniscient God – even the God and Father of the Lord, Jesus Christ – would have any interest in me whatsoever? Can I appeal to areas of merit – achievements, accomplishments, character references? Thinking about such things only makes it worse. I have lived for some years now and have my memories; I know how hard I have tried, and what I have tried to live for and be like. Yet my memories plague me as much as they bless me. There is no way I can imagine ever being worthy of this meal or fit for the company that gathers around this table. Yet there is one wrinkle: He keeps inviting me. I cannot imagine why; it makes no sense to me. It will always and ever be a major mystery to me – a dimension to life I neither comprehend nor understand. But He keeps inviting me.

Should I refuse to come, simply because I know I am unworthy and have no rightful place at this banquet? Maybe the mistake will come to light. Maybe He will stop inviting me.

Of course, I no longer believe that. Mystery that it is – unjust and improbable though it may be – He will keep inviting me. So I will keep accepting the invitation, and I will keep coming to this meal.

III.) THIS MEAL FITS ME JUST RIGHT

And the third answer is: Though I am not fit for this meal, this meal fits me to a T. That is, it does indeed match my condition. It feeds me things that are incredibly appropriate to what I need, to what I am missing, to what I lack. I have the very hungers, the very needs, the very lack of nutrients that this meal fills and feeds.

I have an unworthiness problem. I have an imperfection problem. I have a guilt-and-shame problem. I have a never-fully-belonging problem. I have abandonment issues. I have a problem with never feeling like I am truly accepted. Can you imagine why this meal tastes so incredibly good to me?

So I read things like Ephesians 2:8. For some people, it is just words on a page. For me, it is a message of everything that makes life possible, and beautiful:

“For it is by grace you are saved through faith; it is not your own doing. It is God’s gift, not a reward for work done. There is nothing for anyone to boast of, we are God’s handiwork, created in Christ Jesus for the life of good deeds which God designed for us.”