

Series: Why Bother?

# **Why Bother with Communion?**

Sermon by Lead Pastor Larry Renoe

First Corinthians 11:17-26

Waterstone Community Church, Littleton, Colorado

Sunday morning, September 1, 2024

Mark: A reading from First Corinthians 11:17 through 26: “In the following directives, I have no praise for you, for your meetings do more harm than good. In the first place, I hear that when you come together as a church, there are divisions among you, and to some extent I believe it. No doubt there have been differences among you, to show which of you have God’s approval. So then, when you come together, it is not the Lord’s supper you eat, for when you are eating, some of you go ahead with your own private supper. As a result, one person remains hungry, and another gets drunk. Do not you have homes to eat and drink in? Or do you despise the church of God by humiliating those who have nothing? What shall I say to you? Shall I praise you? Certainly not in this matter, for I received from the Lord what I also passed on to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night He was betrayed, took bread, 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.’ In the same way, after supper, He took the cup, saying, “This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this whenever you drink it, in remembrance of me,’ for whenever you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord’s death until He comes,” the word of the Lord.

Larry: Thank you, Mark. I have to tell you, these are some of my favorite Sundays, when we can be intergenerational, have the kids in the room, have our youth ministry in the room. Give them, welcome them down here. Yeah. We are so excited for what is happening in our youth ministry. This is going to become a common occurrence. They are going to be joining us on Sunday mornings each week. The reason is because they are starting a new thing on Sunday nights. I do not know what we are going to call it, but they are going to hang out, eat food, invite friends, and have fun. That is going to be Sunday night, and then on Wednesday night, as Brendan said, they are still going to do their discipleship and dig deep into the word, so we’re just so excited for changes in programming and our investment into that generation.

I’ll say a couple of things too as we get started. I have written about three sermons this week, and I still do not know if I have the right one. I even did it last night. I am still not sure. Basically, and especially with the kids in mind, I have really had the kids on my heart this week. I want you to know, we are going to have things for you to follow along, and there will be prompts on the screen and all that, and I hope you win the prizes at the end, but this sermon has a lot to do with you. In fact, right before communion, I want to share with you my favorite Jesus story outside of the Bible, one that our boys grew up with, that I read to them a lot when they were young, and so if you hang in there with me, I promise you a good story, if nothing else today, but then the other thing: I am just not going to preach today. What I am going to do is share some thoughts about communion from my journal with you, and so we will get to that in a minute.

We are going to wrap up the series, “Why Bother?” The beauty of the Saturday night service is that I actually took some time, and we did some question-and-answer sessions, and I asked for input on what everyone thought of the “Why Bother?” series. We can’t do that in a room this size, but it was just a fascinating takeaway, what some people heard about it. I really wanted to drill down deeply into that part, as many of the stories you have shared before the scripture readings of what to do when we’re disappointed in church, when the church lets us down, when leaders let us down, when the church does things that make us feel excluded or judged or condemned. The church, in the being the church, sometimes is known for

dishing up servings of hurt, so what do we do when we have experienced that? One of the things we have tried to say in this series is one thing to do is to realize you are not alone. You are not alone. Every week we have been hearing from people. You are not alone, and one of the things to recall in that knowing you are not alone is most of all, the person who most knows what you have experienced is God, and God is sending messengers to his church all the time to call out what has gone wrong, to call out for change and renewal, and if not in this life, in the next life there will be accountability. You are not alone.

I have also been thinking this week as to why. I am spending some time thinking about the question, “Why does the church hurt people?” Here is one theory, and you tell me. Here is a theory. I think what happens in our lives is we do not always live what we believe. I thought there would be an “amen” about that. We do not always live what we believe. We say we believe certain things, but then there are moments in our lives when we do not act like what we say we believe. Let me illustrate. I could say that I believe God loves me. I think we all could say, “I believe God loves me,” and yet sometimes I am the most anxious person to be around, even though I know God loves me, and sometimes I am the most selfish person you could be around, even though I know what God has done for me. I say I believe that God loves me, but I do not always act like it, so what do we do?

I am convinced that one of the things and one of the ways we turn belief into action again and again in our life is through spiritual practices, through revisiting theology and doctrine, through practicing individual disciplines like scripture reading and prayer and fasting and giving and solitude, but also through church disciplines and practices like the two we have talked about these last two weeks. Baptism, last week Paul preached this amazing sermon from Acts 8 on the Ethiopian eunuch. Whenever you talk to Paul Joslyn, you leave with a good line. Here is the line I took away from last week: “The gospel is scandalous not because of who it keeps out, but because of who it lets in.” That’ll preach. That is grace, and you see, we do this idea of baptism. We celebrate it hard as a church, because church is a place of grace, and it is that grace that keeps our hearts soft and helps us practice what we believe, grace, and then today is going to be on the Lord’s Supper, a regular practice of the church to help us to act out what we believe, and in a moment we are going to dive into that and see what we should take away from this practice, so that we can live out our beliefs.

I just want to say one last thing about the “Why Bother?” series as we put a period on the end of the sentence today. It is this, I believe these kinds of things, grace and forgiveness, what we will talk about today, and the Lord’s Supper, is what the world desperately needs, and once, even when we do not know it, we live in a very secular culture. It is very flat, and it is very empty, and it says that all we have is what we have now, and we all know that at times that is not enough. The world is craving for a transcendent experience. I am a big fan of Cormac McCarthy fiction, and you read his books, and they are just so, so empty, and you are finishing reading that, and you say, “Where is hope? Is there any sense of something more than what we have now, and why won’t hopelessness go away?” I mean, evolutionary theory should be saying, “That will go away. You will settle in.” A person dies, and it is no big deal it. Why does it bother us so much? Why are we always craving for the experience of the mystery and the transcendent? It is because we believe we are made for the experience of the mystery and the transcendent, and one of the ways we do that on a regular basis, “Why bother with church?” is because we practice communion, the sacraments, a sign of eternity, and so today I wrote some things down in my journal about the Lord’s Supper. I just want to share them with you. Are you with me? All right.

One of the best afternoons of my life was a visit to the Smithsonian Institute Museum of American History in Washington, D.C., specifically the exhibit entitled, “The American Presidency.” I love this, “A

glorious burden for them and for us.” Let’s be honest. The style and substance of our forty-three presidents at that time was on display, and I remember. I can see it. There was General George Washington’s uniform. There was the top hat that Abraham Lincoln wore the night he was assassinated. There was the lap desk on which Jefferson wrote the Declaration of Independence. There was the 1903 teddy bear in honor of Teddy Roosevelt refusing to shoot a trapped black bear on a hunting expedition in Mississippi. There was the broken, bent filing cabinet that Nixon’s henchmen left behind in Watergate. Ask your grandparents about that, kids, and then there was Bill Clinton’s saxophone. It was a great afternoon.

I love the presidents. I have read a biography on every dead president, and I have read several on the living ones too, and I found their stories not to be those of supermen, but rather of very human beings who worried about wives and children while they were consumed with the loneliest decisions about the mere future of the world, and I found them with few exceptions to be men of strong constitution, who outlived wives and sometimes their own children, men acquainted with danger, loss, and suffering. Most of them had a severe crisis in office, whether in public disputes or personal matters. Did you know, for instance, how many of you have ever eaten a Baby Ruth candy bar? That’s named after Grover Cleveland’s daughter, who died of typhoid fever when she was twelve years old. I have also found them, though each one stumbled striving to guard the ideals of the republic, mindful that they were shaping and preserving the destiny of a great nation, and we have desired that for them, which is why from the earliest days of our government, we have financed the cost, millions of dollars, to have the best painters in the world fashion their portraits, to hang in the National Portrait Gallery, also in Washington, D.C.

Kids, here is your first line. Fill in the blank. Ready? The history of the world is to remember the leaders, preserve their memory, so that we, because we do. We have marble busts of Roman emperors. We have buildings from the glory of Greece. We have a clay tablet from the Babylonian empire that records a speech by King Nebuchadnezzar. We remember the leaders. Well then, what do we have to remember Jesus Christ, leader of the greatest movement in the history of the world? Here is what we have: “For I received from the Lord what I also passed on to you. The Lord Jesus on the night He was betrayed took bread, 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.’ In the same way, after supper He took the cup, saying, ‘This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this whenever you drink it, in remembrance of me.’”

From a man founding and many suppose still carrying the most influential and enduring movement in history, you would expect something more, what shall we say, prestigious? A marble bust, a durable building, perhaps something more useful, like a systemized handbook of teachings written by his own hand. Jesus Christ, no statues, no structures, no book from his own hand. Instead, we get, “This is my body. Eat it. This is my blood. Drink it.” Honestly, it sounds like a bad poem, a very disturbing poem. One of the accusations at the early church that frenzied the Romans to persecute Christians was cannibalism. For Jesus’ own people, the Jews, these words were even more repulsive, as they were not to touch corpses and never to ingest blood. The life is in the blood, and here is the Son of God on a cross, blood running down his body and into this cup, and we are supposed to drink it? “Do this to remember me”?

Kids, in the First Testament, remembering is important. For Israel, Passover yearly was perpetual remembrance. Relive the story. Relive the story. Here’s the story: God calls the Egyptians to release the Israelites from slavery, but they refuse, and after numerous warnings, God determines to preview judgment day against Egypt for enslavement of human beings, which according to Revelation 18 is the great evil. He sends out the destroying angel with the punishment of justice, the first-born son, the hope, the strength, the future of the ancient family, will die in every household.

However, the Lord directs Israel to observe Passover. They are to slay and eat a lamb, to put the blood on the door frame of their homes and not leave their homes for any reason. Now this reveals two truths that are vital to destiny, one that the angel of death does not only go to the homes of the Egyptians. The divine wrath on sin is no respecter of persons. The angel of death goes to every home. There is no hierarchy between the good Israelites and the bad Egyptians. It is as if God is saying to Israel, “You are the oppressed. They are the oppressors. You worship the true God. They worship gods from nature, yet tonight, Israel, if I were to judge you by my righteous standards, you would not pass the test either. All fall short of the glory of God. All are sinners. You stand in need of grace and salvation as much as the Egyptians.”

Second, this night means that substitution is the way to satisfy justice and love together. Every first-born son in every Hebrew home should have looked at the table, seen the lamb on the plate, and said, “The only reason I am not dead is because the lamb is. Someone paid the price for me. My only shelter is the blood of the lamb.” Remember. Remember.

At his final Passover, the night He was betrayed, Jesus presides over the Passover meal with his disciples, and He makes startling changes to the ritual and the language. First, as Jesus breaks the bread, they were expecting Him to say this, quote: “This is the bread of our affliction. Our ancestors suffered in the wilderness so you could be free,” end quote. Instead, what does Jesus say? “This bread is my body, which is broken for you.” In other words, “This is the bread of my affliction. My suffering is going to make you free.” The second change is when He tells his disciples, kids, “This cup is the new covenant in my blood.” The word “covenant,” in the Hebrew means, “slit,” or “cut.” A covenant in the ancient world was ratified when parties walked between the cut-in-two body of an animal, through the blood. God walks the blood path. Time and again in the First Testament, God remembers his covenant. That does not mean God is forgetful. It means He is mindful of his promises. Eli Wassel said, “God is God because He remembers.” So, for thousands of years, we’ve held this bread and this cup to hear Jesus say, “I remember. Now you remember.” We need to be reminded like this because we’re not God, and we forget what’s real.

According to scripture, our world is in blindness and darkness. The world is in the power of the evil one, and we have all lost our way, and we have all lost our minds. In the beginning we had God, who is love, but we chose to eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. They ate because they doubted God was good, or at least good enough, so we ate and became gods of our own meanings in our own world, saviors of our own souls, proud and lonely and afraid and addicted and angry at shadows and lies, but God Himself comes to our rescue. He clothes Adam and Eve in animal skins. This foreshadows the animal sacrifices of the temple, which foreshadowed Jesus himself saying this in John chapter six, “Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood have eternal life, and I will raise them at the last day.” Salvation always has to do with our receiving God’s provision, his covering, his atonement, blood shed for the forgiveness of sins.

Kids, I can remember when I began to understand that Christianity is a blood religion. I was a child like you in the third grade, sitting in a Sunday school class with my teacher, Mrs. Watts, using her high definition flannel graph to teach Old Testament worship in the Tabernacle, and she put a figure of a bleeding lamb on the altar, and one of us asked how the lamb got so bloody, and the teacher said, “Well, the priest slit his throat.” My view of God and Christ was shaped right then, in those cinderblock walls in the basement of a building. I realized that forgiveness requires a death. I would come to realize that forgiveness offered to the world requires a death of infinite value, God’s own Son. In Christ, God absorbs our sin, so that He can forgive our sin.

Many disciples, when Jesus said, “You need to eat my flesh and drink my blood,” they could not stomach it. No pun intended. They left Jesus. The dignified secularists of the Roman culture considered Christianity to be a repulsive religion because of all the talk of blood, and there are those today who reject Christianity because a crucifixion, as the central event, is too bloody, and too angry. Writer Kathleen Norris mentions a friend who left the faith because of all the blood. She took refuge in the Unity Church, where she felt at home, because there were teddy bears provided in the pews for hugs during the service. I can sympathize. It is a scandalous notion that what is holy and divine and loving and forgiving can have so much to do with a bloody birth in a murky, mucky stable, or even more with a torturous bloodletting agony that ends with death on a Roman cross. It is asking a lot to believe that. In fact, it asks for everything you have.

Jesus once said to the Jews, “My flesh is real food, and my blood is real drink. Unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you.” The Jews and many of his disciples left Him that day, deeply offended. It was an assault on their desire to define reality, their reality. What about you? What is real? For two-thousand years we have held up this bread and this cup, and we have heard Jesus say, “I remember. Now you remember. Remember what is real.” Do you want to know what is real? Luke chapter 2, verse 7, would you read it aloud with me? “And she gave birth to her first born, a son. She wrapped Him in cloths and placed him in a manger, because there was no guest room available for them.” Do you want to know what is real? “The word became flesh,” with me, “and made his dwelling among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.” Do you want to know what is real? “Together, “While they were eating, Jesus took bread, and when He had given thanks, He broke it and gave it to his disciples, saying, ‘Take and eat. This is my body.’ Then He took a cup, and when He had given thanks, He gave it to them, saying, ‘Drink from it, all of you. This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins.’” Do you want to know what is real? “Then He said to Thomas, ‘Put your finger here. See my hands. Reach out your hand and put it into my side. Stop doubting and believe.’ Thomas said to Him, ‘My Lord and my God.’ Then Jesus told him, ‘Because you have seen me, you have believed. Blessed are those who have not seen and yet believed.’” Do you want to know what is real? “Then I saw a lamb looking as if it had been slain, standing at the center of the throne, encircled by the four living creatures and elders.”

Now the story, kids, that gathers all of this up and helps us feel what is real. It is called “The Ragman,” and it is by Walter Wangerin: “I saw a strange sight. I stumbled upon a story most strange, like nothing in my life, my street sense or my sly tongue had ever prepared me for. Hush, child, hush now, and I will tell it to you. Even before the dawn one Friday morning, I noticed a young man, handsome and strong, walking the alleys of our city. He was pulling an old cart filled with clothes, both bright and new, and he was calling in a clear tenor voice, ‘Rags.’ The air was foul and the first light filthy to be crossed with such sweet music. ‘Rags, new rags for old; I take your tired rags, rags.’”

“‘Now this is a wonder,’ I thought to myself, for the man stood six-feet-four, and his arms were like tree limbs, hard and muscular, and his eyes flashed intelligence. Could he find no better job than this one, to be a ragman in the inner city? I followed him. My curiosity drove me, and I wasn’t disappointed.”

“Soon the ragman saw a woman sitting on her back porch. She was sobbing into a handkerchief, sighing and shedding a thousand tears. Her knees and her elbows made a sad x. Her shoulders shook. Her heart was breaking. The ragman stopped his cart. Quietly he walked to the woman, stepping around the tin cans, the dead toys and pampers. ‘Give me your rags,’ he said gently, ‘and I’ll give you another,’

and he slipped the handkerchief from her eyes, and she looked up, and he laid across her palm a linen cloth so clean and new that it shone. She blinked from the gift to the giver. Then, as he began to pull his cart again, the ragman did a strange thing. He put her stained handkerchief to his own face, and then he began to weep, to sob as grievously as she had done, his shoulders shaking, and she was left without a tear.”

“‘This is a wonder,’ I breathed to myself, and I followed the sobbing ragman like a child who cannot turn away from a mystery; ‘Rags, rags, new rags for old.’ In a little while, when the sky showed gray behind the rooftops, and I could see the shredded curtains hanging out black windows, the ragman came upon a girl whose head was wrapped in a bandage, whose eyes were empty. Blood soaked her bandage. A single line of blood ran down her cheek. Now the tall ragman looked upon this child with pity, and he drew a lovely yellow bonnet from his cart. ‘Give me your rag,’ he said, tracing his own line on her cheek, ‘and I’ll give you mine,’ and the child could only gaze at him while he loosened the bandage, removed it, and tied it to his own head. The bonnet he set on hers, and I gasped at what I saw, for with the bandage went the wound. Against his brow, it ran a darker, more substantial blood, his own.”

“‘Rags, rags, I take old rags,’ cried the sobbing, bleeding, strong, intelligent ragman. The sun hurt both the sky now and my eyes, and the ragman seemed more and more to hurry. ‘Are you going to work?’ he asked a man who leaned against a telephone pole. The man shook his head. The ragman pressed him, ‘Do you have a job?’ ‘Are you crazy?’ sneered the other. He pulled away from the pole, revealing the right sleeve of his jacket, flat, the cuff stuffed into his pocket. He had no arm. ‘So,’ said the ragman, ‘give me your jacket, and I’ll give you mine,’ so much quiet authority in his voice. The one-armed man took off his jacket, and so did the ragman, and I trembled at what I saw, for the ragman’s arm stayed in its sleeve, and when the other put it on, he had two good arms thick as tree limbs, but the ragman had only one. ‘Go to work,’ he said.”

“After that, he found a drunk lying unconscious beneath an army blanket, an old man hunched, wizened and sick. He took the blanket and wrapped it around himself, but the drunk he left new clothes. Now I had to run to keep up with the ragman, though he was weeping uncontrollably and bleeding freely at the forehead, pulling his cart with one arm, stumbling from drunkenness, falling again and again, exhausted, old, old and sick. Yet he went with terrible speed on spider’s legs. He skittered through the alleys of the city, this mile and the next, until he came to its limits, and then he rushed beyond. I wept to see the change in this man. I hurt to see his sorrow, and yet I needed to see where he was going in such a haste, perhaps to know what drove him so. The little old ragman, he came to a landfill, he came to the garbage pits, and I wanted to help him in what he did, but I hung back, hiding. He climbed a hill, and with tormented labor, he cleared a little space on the hill, and then he sighed, and he lay down, and he pillowed his head on a handkerchief and a jacket, and he covered his bones with an army blanket, and he died.”

“Oh, how I cried to witness that death. I slumped in a junked car and wailed and mourned as one who has no hope, because I had come to love the ragman, and every other face had faded in the wonder of this man, and I cherished him, but he died. I sobbed myself to sleep. I did not know, how could I know, that I slept through Friday and Saturday and its nights too, and then on Sunday morning, I was awakened by a violence. Light, pure, hard, demanding light slammed against my sour face, and I blinked, and I looked, and I saw the first wonder of all. There was the ragman, folding the blanket most carefully, a scar on his forehead. He was alive, and besides that, healthy. There was no sign of sorrow or age, and all the rags that he had gathered shone from cleanliness. Well then, I lowered my head, and trembling

for all that I had seen, I myself walked up to the ragman. I told him my name with shame, for I was a sorry figure next to him. Then I took off all my clothes in that place, and I said to him with dear yearning in my voice, ‘dress me,’ and he dressed me. My Lord put new rags on me, and I am a wonder beside Him, the ragman, the ragman, the Christ.”

This table calls us to remember what is real. Because God’s love is a consuming fire, and because He has come to us through the blood of His Son, we should come to this table surrendering our lives to Jesus. All things must pass through this table, our hopes, our longings, our thoughts, our marriages, our kids, our work, our joys, our sorrows, our wounds, our opinions, our politics, and our sins. Jesus invites us to his table to surrender the hardest things to surrender, our sins. He invites us to come if we want to come, not if we understand everything, not if we have figured it all out, not if we have read all the books or think we have lived a decent life. We come to the table because we believe it is what is real, God saves sinners. So, let’s now appropriate that forgiveness and that grace to our own hearts as we publicly confess and receive God’s forgiveness together. The words of confession will be on the screen. I will read the leader part, and you read the people part.

How many of us have loved the Lord our God with all our heart and with all our soul, and with all our strength? How many of us have loved our neighbors as ourselves? Together, today, Lord, we are sorry for our inadequate responses to your love. Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. In the name of Jesus the Lamb, we are forgiven.

How many of us have ever said something that was slander? How many of us have ever gossiped? How many of us have lied or shaded the truth to cover ourselves? Raise your hand. My hand is up. Let us confess. Lord, we confess that we have murdered people in our hearts, and God, you see our hearts. Jesus, some of us have even told ourselves, “I am going to hold my tongue next time,” and we still blew it. We made a law, and we broke it. In the name of Jesus the lamb, we are forgiven. Amen.

How many of us have ever committed adultery, where we lusted to hold another body or have another relationship? Let’s talk to Jesus. Lord, we confess that we have committed adultery in our hearts, and God, you saw us. We have tried to stop a million times. How can we treat you like this when you have loved us at such cost? Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. In the name of Jesus Christ, we are forgiven. Amen.

How many of us have ever felt like we spent more on ourselves than we should have? How many of us know we could give more away in radical generosity, but we hold back? Let us confess. Our God, we confess that we struggle with all that we have while millions starve. We really struggle with this one. We confess. Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. In the name of Jesus, we are forgiven. Amen.

How many of us ever feel like we are a complete failure? How many of us measure ourselves by other people and think inside, “I am nothing”? Lord Jesus, we confess that we have condemned what you have loved and saved, ourselves. We have not believed your gospel, and we have tried to barter and prove our worth. Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. In the name of Jesus the Lamb, we are forgiven. Amen.

Now we come to the table. Remember what is real. Jesus is the meaning of all things, so the question is not, “What does this table mean?” The real question is, “What does everything else mean in light of this table?” and so we come. We remember that in the early church, the meal was a family meal, and the entire family would eat it together. It has become more of a ritual, but today we want to feel in an

intergenerational service of a family, and so we invite all your families to come. If your family lives for Jesus and loves Jesus, your family and you are invited to this table. Come, and let's remember our leader.

"On the night He was betrayed, Jesus took bread. He broke it, and He said, 'This is my body given for you. As often as you eat it, remember me.' In the same way, after the Passover meal, He took the cup. He said, 'This cup represents the new covenant, my blood poured out for the forgiveness of sins. As often as you drink it, remember me.'"

In your time and when you are ready, come to the table. There will be music playing. We invite you to leave your seats. Come to any of the stations, gluten-free in the back. You can take the elements anywhere in the room. Take them anywhere or back to your seats. There is one other encouragement I would give you. This is a family meal, the Waterstone family, so talk to each other. Embrace each other. Handshakes, whatever you are comfortable doing. Introverts, nod. Use this time to connect. If you do not know what to say, then say what has been said for two-thousand years, "The peace of the Lord." Let's come to the table and remember our leader.

42:15 minutes

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Edited by Tom Kenaston

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