

1 October 2023

Room at the Table
1 Corinthians 11:17-26

We continue thinking about the troubled church in Corinth. This week we have problems with the Lord's Supper. We read 1 Corinthians chapter 11, verses 17-26:

¹⁷Now in the following instructions I do not commend you, because when you come together it is not for the better but for the worse. ¹⁸For, to begin with, when you come together as a church, I hear that there are divisions among you; and to some extent I believe it. ¹⁹Indeed, there have to be factions among you, for only so will it become clear who among you are genuine. ²⁰When you come together, it is not really to eat the Lord's supper. ²¹For when the time comes to eat, each of you goes ahead with your own supper, and one goes hungry and another becomes drunk. ²²What! Do you not have homes to eat and drink in? Or do you show contempt for the church of God and humiliate those who have nothing? What should I say to you? Should I commend you? In this matter I do not commend you!

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

There is surely no more sacred regular observance of the Christian church than Communion – or the Mass, or the Eucharist, or the Lord's Supper, or even in some churches “the Breaking of Bread.” Along with Baptism, it is also the most ancient of our observances, having been instituted by Christ himself. In fact, given that this letter to the Corinthians was written some twenty years before any of the gospels were composed, this passage we just read is the oldest written account of the sacrament. But ever since Christ and Paul, it has been practiced without interruption, by nearly every Christian church, in every nation and nearly every language, using basically the same words that Paul uses here. Today we celebrate “World Communion Sunday,” a day set aside to celebrate this unifying ritual of our faith. Communion is so essential, so universally acknowledged, that even the church at Corinth couldn't screw it up, right?

“Oh yeah?” said the Corinthians. “Hold my beer.”

To understand exactly how they *did* screw it up, we need a little bit of background. Jesus' last supper with his disciples was, of course, an actual supper: a full meal. And so was the Early Church's observance: a meal, not a token wafer and sip of something red. Moreover, in the early church, that “something red” wasn't Welch's Grape Juice, and it wasn't a necessarily a sip. It was wine. And they apparently didn't yet have a system down for lining up to get their portions. With all that in mind, let's read it again: *When you come together, it is not really to eat the Lord's supper. For when the time comes to eat, each of you goes ahead with your own supper, and one goes hungry and another becomes drunk.*

So try to picture what lies behind that description. Apparently some people were bringing their own picnic baskets of food – but not setting it up for a potluck, not to share – just opening it

up at their own table and pigging out. I picture some tables piled with food, but every seat at those tables already taken while other tables are bare. As for the wine, that was apparently not being shared either, inasmuch as some didn't get any, and others got plastered in remembrance of Christ. When the Corinthian church held the sacred meal, some came for the meal part, not the sacred bit, and they made sure that they got their needs met first, either not noticing the needs of others or just not caring.

That sounds bad, obviously, but what does it have to do with us? We don't do that stuff. We line up neatly. No one's hogging all the cubes of gluten free bread (Funny, that.) or chugging all the tiny glasses of grape juice like Jell-O shots. On the surface, this passage has no more to do with us than the one we read a couple of weeks ago about eating meat that had previously been sacrificed to Zeus. But, just as that passage revealed a deeper principle, so too does this one. Why do we gather at church? Is it to meet our own needs or to be a part of meeting the needs of others?

When we put it that way, it feels like more of a problem, doesn't it? At the most appalling level, we have the American prosperity gospel, telling people to come to church and make their donations as the first step toward achieving wealth for themselves. Those churches are as unconcerned with the needs of others as any other Ponzi scheme. But that's not us. None of us are here to become millionaires – I hope. But it's still possible to think of church only in terms of what we get out of it. When someone decides to leave a church, what do they usually say? "I'm just not being fed." One answer to that, which I've never used, is, "Oh? And are you feeding anyone? Maybe focus on that for a while and see if you still feel malnourished." And even we faithful regulars do it sometimes. We all have Sundays in which we spend our time chatting with our friends without noticing the visitor standing alone or the quiet person who looks as if they haven't slept. We aren't being malicious, just careless, but the fact remains that on any given Sunday some of us are here to share the Spirit of God with others, and some of us are here for what *we* can get out of it.

Paul's response to this self-centered approach to worship is to remind people who we are gathered to remember and what our deliverance once cost him. When you eat the bread of this Supper, he says, remember Christ and his broken body. When you take the cup, remember Christ and his blood. Because when you do that – when you partake of this meal in a spirit of remembrance – you proclaim the Lord. We are here to remember Christ's giving; not our own getting.

We *do* gain greatly by being a part of the family of faith. Study after study shows that. We who have this community and this shared purpose are likely to be healthier – emotionally, psychologically, and every other way – than those who do not. But here's the catch: we don't come here to obtain those benefits. We come here to offer them to others. We were not called to the family of God for our own sake, but so that we can call others. We have not been blessed by God because we are so darn deserving; we have been blessed so that we can bless others. And when we gather at the Lord's table, we are not to treat it as a privilege reserved for us, but as a gift for us to share. Our job is to make room at the table for whoever is seeking God, whoever is looking for hope.

I invite the Chancel Choir to join me up front now to finish this sermon with "At This Table."

Anthem: "At This Table"

At this table, everyone is welcome
At this table, everyone is seen
At this table, everybody matters
No one falls between.

At this table, you can say whatever
At this table, you can speak your mind
At this table, everything's forgiven
There's enough for everyone.

So come as you are
Remember that the door is always open
Yes, come as you are
The perfect gift that you could bring is your heart
So come, come as you are.

At this table, there will be no judgement
At this table, mercy has a seat
At this table, we're all sons and daughters
There's no place I'd rather be.

So come as you are
Remember that the door is always open
Come as you are
The perfect gift that you could bring is your heart
Come, come as you are.

Come as you are, oh
At this table, everyone is welcome
At this table, everybody cares
At this table, everybody matters
So come, pull up a chair.