

St. Andrew's Presbyterian Church

"Discerning the Body"

Scripture: 1 Corinthians 11:17-34, Psalm 34:1-8

Hymns: God is here! As we your people meet 799 (tune: hymn to joy), We are one in the Spirit 471, We are Gods' people 472 or God bless your church with strength 491 Choruses: Bind us Together

September 10

Rev. Steve Filyk

\*Need plate with bits of bread and tiny cup of grape juice or wine on the communion table

Think about your last few social gatherings you've attended.

Maybe you invited people over.

Maybe you received an invitation.

Think about those gatherings.

Who was sitting around the table? (point to table)

Were they people much like you?

People the same age, shape, and color?

People with the same hobbies and interests?

People with the same education, in the same tax bracket?

Consider these gatherings.

How would you describe them?

Diverse or homogenous?

Inclusive or exclusive?

(walk over to table)

Today's epistle lesson contains a rather familiar section:

That "institution of the Lord's Supper"

That is often read when we celebrate Holy Communion.

*"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."*

*For whenever you eat this bread and drink this cup,  
you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes.<sup>i</sup>*

These words from Paul

give us our earliest written reference to Holy Communion.

While the gospels also retell the story,

and speak about the meal in greater detail,

They are written a full twenty to thirty years later.<sup>ii</sup>

This 'institution' is familiar,

but the context in which we find it is pretty foreign to most of us.

Paul has set the 'institution' in the middle of a reprimand,

A rebuke to the church at Corinth.

To understand what is going on

you should realise that the way we celebrate Holy Communion

is not how the church always celebrated it.

What we heard today reveals that in the early church,

"the sacramental acts of the Holy Communion

took place in connection with a common meal or 'love feast',

in imitation of the Last Supper."<sup>iii</sup>

So for the Corinthians Holy Communion wasn't a token meal

(pick up piece of bread)

But a full-on meal.

It wasn't shared in a church, but a private home.

And from what we hear of how the Corinthians

Were practising it,

it wasn't a particularly holy event.

Instead of sharing the meal at the same time,  
 Some were starting before others.  
 Instead of eating together, as one body,  
 Some were eating privately.

In the end some got drunk  
 while others went hungry.  
 Some were honored while others were humiliated.

Differences in wealth and social standing  
 Were creating divisions in Christ's family.

Maybe this is not so surprising  
 given the surrounding Roman culture.

British New Testament scholar N.T. Wright  
 Notes that "Many rich people in the ancient world  
 prided themselves on showing hospitality to those less well off,

but they often did so in a way  
 which let the others know they were inferior...

Sometimes they had a small main dining room for themselves  
 and their closest friends,  
 where excellent food and wine would be served,

and another room, or a sequence of rooms,  
 with food and drink of poorer quality."

Wright continues, "It seems that in Corinth  
 the rich hosts whose houses  
 were large enough for a Christian meeting  
 were continuing this social practise  
 at the 'Lord's Supper' itself."<sup>iv</sup>

PAUSE

Now it would be hard for us to fathom  
 Hosting a meal where guests are treated differently  
 On the basis of their income or social status.

Where some are served filet mignon on china  
 and others are handed baloney sandwiches  
 wrapped in paper.

But we all make similar distinctions, don't we?

Where we discriminate is with our invitations.  
 Some people get invited to the party and others don't.

As for Paul, he's not on with this sort of discrimination  
 Especially as it relates to the Lord's supper.

He tells the Corinthians  
 that their meetings are doing more harm than good.  
 He tells the Corinthians  
 that their actions are despising the church.

PAUSE

Imagine our Session getting a letter from Presbytery  
 Saying that St. Andrew's is doing more harm than good.

That would sting!

Of course Paul isn't interested in putting the Corinthians down.  
 He's interested in reforming their practises  
 Even if he needs to shock them to do it!

And so he takes them back to the beginning  
 to consider the institution of the Lord's Supper.

Paul lays it out for them  
 To remind them that it was sacred.

Paul lays it out for them  
 So they can see the stark contrast  
 Between this act of Jesus  
 And their actions.

In the Lord's Supper Jesus offers himself to his disciples.  
 "This is my body, which is broken for you..."  
 "This cup is the new covenant in my blood..."

Jesus's meal is about self-giving and self-sacrifice.

By contrast the meal at Corinth is about socialising  
 With one's equals or betters.  
 The meal isn't about Jesus' gift or even Christian community  
 But comfort, satisfaction, and private ambition.

Paul warns them that against participating  
 In the Lord's Supper in an "unworthy manner".

That it would be a sin against the body and blood of Jesus.

And Paul warns them against eating  
 without discerning the body of Christ.  
 That is, eating without regard for Christ's presence  
 AND eating without regard for the surrounding community

He says that it would bring judgement.<sup>v</sup>

Now you will recall that when we serve communion  
 that everyone is given the same token meal,  
 That the leadership is served last,  
 and that everyone eats together, at the same time.

We honor the body of Christ  
 And we respect the whole community  
 When we celebrate Holy Communion.

But what about those gatherings that we have in our own private homes.  
 Do we discern Christ's body there?  
 Or is this something we only do at church?

Think again about the last few social gatherings you attended.  
 Maybe you were hosting.  
 Maybe you were being hosted.

Think about those gatherings.  
 Was the diversity of Christ's family present?

Maybe someone quite wealthy... and someone quite poor.  
 Someone well educated... and someone never graduated.  
 Someone whose family immigrated generations ago...  
 and someone who just arrived.

Was the gathering inclusive or exclusive?

Now you may be thinking to yourself: "Pastor, it is only natural.  
 It is only natural we would associate  
 with those who are most like us."

Yes it is natural.

But in Christ we are a new creation, one body.

And discerning the whole body,  
 including those whom the world overlooks,  
 is the way of Christ.

(return to pulpit)

Close your eyes and imagine, if you will.  
 All the people of the earth in one line.  
 All the people of the earth lined up  
 according to status, wealth, and power.

Imagine where you stand in this line.  
 Imagine the people standing in front of you  
 And the people standing behind you.

Maybe you spot a Telus executive.  
 Maybe you see a Syrian refugee.

Everyone is lined up one after another.

Can you picture it?

So where are you in the line?

Probably somewhere in the middle...

And which direction are you facing?

Are you are looking towards those

with greater wealth, status, and power?

You can open your eyes.

Which direction were you facing?

It's our natural inclination, isn't it?

To look towards wealth, status, power.

To look in the direction where we want to be,

towards the people with the things that we want.

---

<sup>i</sup> 1 Corinthians 11:23-26

<sup>ii</sup> Oliver Larry Yarbrough "1 Corinthians 11:23-26, Exegetical Perspective" *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary - Feasting on the Word – Year C, Volume 2: Lent through Eastertide.*

<sup>iii</sup> "1 Corinthians 11:17-34 The Lord's Supper" *The Eerdmans Bible Commentary* Eds D. Guthrie & J. A. Moyter 1066

<sup>iv</sup> N.T. Wright *Paul for Everyone: 1 Corinthians* 146

But what about Christ. (point to table)

Was he looking to get something

or was he looking to give something?

"This is my body, which is broken for you..."

"This cup is the new covenant in my blood..."

PAUSE

Could it be that our truest act of worship this week will be

to notice when we are looking forward

And then to turn our attention to those behind us.<sup>vi</sup>

May God help us live as Jesus lived.

May we discern this body of Christ.

Amen.

<sup>v</sup> N.T. Wright notes the various places where Paul refers to the church as a body, in this letter. And he notes that Paul is using a double-sense: both the Lord's presence in the communion elements and the church's unity here. N.T. Wright *Paul for Everyone: 1 Corinthians* 146

<sup>vi</sup> illustration take from Mike Graves "1 Corinthians 11:23-26, Homiletical Perspective" *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary - Feasting on the Word – Year C, Volume 2: Lent through Eastertide.*