

St. Andrew's Presbyterian Church

The Sacraments: Part 2

A Deeper Unity

Scripture: 1 Corinthians 11:17-34

Rev. Steve Filyk

June 6, 2021

Communion

Opening Hymn: #274 – Crown him with many crowns (1,2,3,5)

Closing Hymn: #472 -- We are God's people

Communion Hymn: #526 -- Lift up your hearts unto the Lord

Choruses: "Untitled hymn (Come to Jesus)" (Chris Rice)

Our society likes to make distinctions:

Male/female,
white collar/blue collar,
working/retired.

If you do any in-branch banking

You'll note that there's often a separate line
For personal banking and business banking.

The same tellers are working

But they have carved out a separate
(and my experience an often shorter line)
For those making deposits or withdrawals for business.

But in banking there are even more distinctions.

When I was living in Vancouver

I noticed that the neighborhood CIBC
Had an elevator on their main floor
To whisk away special clients, to a special floor.

Upstairs they would provide 'white glove' service

For those who with at least \$100k investible assets.

Our society like to make distinctions.
 People are afforded different treatment
 According to what category they fit in.

For the most part we accept this.
 We might even feel that it is warranted
 whether it relates to who comes first for banking
 Or for COVID vaccinations.

But what about the church?
 Should the church simply mirror society
 With all its distinctions?
 Should we provide special treatment
 For privileged members?

Today we are continuing our series on the Sacraments.
 In the Presbyterian church we observe two sacraments:
 Baptism and the Lord's Supper.

As described in our statement of belief, "Living Faith"
 They are "visible expressions of the Gospel
 Given as means of entering
 and sustaining the Christian Life."

Or as the early church father, Saint Augustine put it,
 Sacraments are 'an outward and visible sign of an
 inward and invisible grace.'

Last week we talked about baptism.
 This week we explore the Lord's Supper
 And celebrate it near the end of our service. PAUSE

Today's lesson from Paul's first letter to the church at Corinth,
Provides the Bible's first description of the Lord's Supper.

It is believed that Paul wrote this letter to the Corinthian church
During his stay at Ephesus, on his second missionary journey.

This would place the letter's composition sometime around 53 or 54 CE
Well before the writing of the Gospel of Mark
sometime around 70 CE.

In today's reading Paul describes Jesus' institution of this meal,
A meal that is being practised by the Corinthian church.

But Paul isn't happy
how the Corinthians are celebrating the Lord's Supper.

In fact at the opening of today's lesson
He has a stern rebuke for them:
"your meetings do more harm than good."ⁱ

Can you imagine someone saying this about how we
we celebrate communion at St. Andrew's
So what was going on at Corinth?

To really understand Paul's concern,
you need a little background.

Consider what theologian N. T. Wright shares in his commentary
On this passage:

"When you go to church today for this service,
you almost won't certainly get a whole meal.

The normal practise for centuries
has been to provide a token or symbolic meal,
a small piece of bread or wafer,
and a small sip of wine...

But to begin with, as the Last Supper itself,
the meal took place in private houses,
not in a special 'church' building.

And there was a full meal served,
during which special words were said
over a particular loaf of bread
and a particular cup of wine.

The problem in Corinth was that this full meal
had become a sign of the social divisions
that ran through the church."ⁱⁱ

I mentioned that we like to make distinctions
Between people.
But if we do this in modern-day Canada
Just imagine what it would have been like
In the Roman Empire.

I can only imagine there would be
Many more distinctions...
Roman society included slave and slave-owners.

Roman citizens had significant privileges
Compared to non-Citizens,
Where we acknowledge broader human rights.

The diversity would be wide at Corinth.
And it seems that within the church
Those social divisions were being held on to.

Paul says that “I hear that when you come together as a church,
there are divisions among you,
and to some extent I believe it.”

Paul continues (and I will read this with sarcasm):
“No doubt there have to be differences among you
to show which of you have God’s approval.”ⁱⁱⁱ

Paul is upset that social distinctions
were being reinforced in the church.

So what was happening?

As Wright mentions the early church
Didn’t simply engage in token meals
To celebrate the Lord’s Supper

But held full-fledged dinners, ‘love feasts’,
As they are called in the epistle of Jude.

But when it came to these meals
It seems that not everyone waited
For all the people to arrive.

Some were maybe a little uneasy
About the contributions of the poor,
Or ‘breaking bread’ with those of lower rank,
so instead of joining together they ate by themselves.

Imagine if we had a potluck as part of today's gathering.

Imagine that while most gathered in the church hall
For sundry casseroles and salads,
That someone sets up a bbq by the office door
To provide ribs for their closest friends.

Imagine those people who had just wolfed down a plate of ribs
Still licking their fingers as they came down the stairs
To grab some tea and coffee.

People would be wondering:
What are they doing?
What are they eating?
And why wasn't I invited?

Having separate tables would cause division in the church,
A division that would be palpable especially if afterwards
Everyone reconvened for a token celebration
Of the Lord's Supper.

Paul is angry about this discrimination
That is occurring in Corinth.
Paul believes that we are one body
And that the Lord's Supper
is meant to highlight this.

But the way the Corinthians are practising it,
It is having the reverse effect.

And so he warns them about judgement:
"those who eat and drink without

Discerning the body of Christ

Eat and drink judgement on themselves.”^{iv}

Given the surrounding context in the letter

(in chapter 12 he compares the church to a human body)

We can understand this ‘discerning the body’

As an awareness of the greater Christian community.

But how do we connect this with Paul’s discussion

Of the ‘body and blood of the Lord.’

Once again Wright can help us:

“Somehow, for Paul, the two come together,
and that’s the point: doing it says it.

If, when you break the bread,
all share it in the same way,
that declares powerfully that you are all one body.

If you divide the room and the guests,
into different groups,
that powerfully makes the opposite point.

The ‘body’ which is to be recognised is both
the presence of the Lord in the eucharistic elements
and the unity of the church that shares the bread.^v

At some point in the history of the Christian church

It was decided to divorce the ‘love feast’ from the Lord’s Supper.

At some point it was decided that we’d all drink

The same bread and grape juice

Instead of asking people to bring
their own bottle of wine.

What seems clear from Paul's teaching in this passage
Is that the Sacrament proclaims not just our individual
Connection to God but our shared life in Christ.

As "Living Faith" states:

The Lord's Supper is a joyful mystery
whereby Jesus takes the bread and wine
to represent his atoning sacrifice,
deepening our union with himself
and with each other..."

VIDEO https://youtu.be/mmE_xSQbjll?t=179

Distinctions between us remain.

We are old and we are young.

We are male and we are female.

We speak all sorts of languages

And come from all sorts of places.

But here at the Lord's Table we come together as equal members
Of God's family.

Jesus has destroyed old barriers,

So let's not erect new ones.

Amen.

¹ 1 Corinthians 1:17

² NT Wright *Paul for Everyone: 1 Corinthians* 146

³ 1 Corinthians 11:18 NIV

⁴ 1 Corinthians 11:29 NIV

⁵ NT Wright *Paul for Everyone: 1 Corinthians* 151