

An Open Invitation
June 1, 2014
I Corinthians 11:17-34a (The Message)

In many congregations, words from I Corinthians 11 are a part of the worship service every time Holy Communion is celebrated. In this morning's reading those familiar words are in the middle – sandwiched between comments about division in the church and a reminder of what the Eucharist is really all about.

Please don't try to read along in the pew Bible. I will be reading from The Message – a contemporary paraphrase – in order to help you hear a familiar passage come alive again. Listen for the voice of our Still Speaking God.

Regarding this next item, I'm not at all pleased. I am getting the picture that when you meet together it brings out your worst side instead of your best! First, I get this report on your divisiveness, competing with and criticizing each other. I'm reluctant to believe it, but there it is. The best that can be said for it is that the testing process will bring truth into the open and confirm it.

And then I find that you bring your divisions to worship - you come together, and instead of eating the Lord's Supper, you bring in a lot of food from the outside and make pigs of yourselves. Some are left out, and go home hungry. Others have to be carried out, too drunk to walk.

I can't believe it! Don't you have your own homes to eat and drink in? Why would you stoop to desecrating God's church? Why would you actually shame God's poor? I never would have believed you would stoop to this. And I'm not going to stand by and say nothing.

Let me go over with you again exactly what goes on in the Lord's Supper and why it is so centrally important. I received my instructions from the Master himself and passed them on to you.

The Master, Jesus, on the night of his betrayal, took bread. Having given thanks, he broke it and said, This is my body, broken for you. Do this to remember me. After supper, he did the same thing with the cup: This cup is my blood, my new covenant with you. Each time you drink this cup, remember me.

What you must solemnly realize is that every time you eat this bread and every time you drink this cup, you reenact in your words and actions the death of the Master. You will be drawn back to this meal again and again until the Master returns.

You must never let familiarity breed contempt. Anyone who eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Master irreverently is like part of the crowd that jeered and spit on him at his death. Is that the kind of "remembrance" you want to be part of?

Examine your motives, test your heart, come to this meal in holy awe. If you give no thought (or worse, don't care) about the broken body of the Master when you eat and drink, you're running the risk of serious consequences. That's why so many of you even now are listless and sick, and others have gone to an early grave. If we get this straight now, we won't have to be straightened out later on. Better to be confronted by the Master now than to face a fiery confrontation later.

So, my friends, when you come together to the Lord's Table, be reverent and courteous with one another. If you're so hungry that you can't wait to be served, go home and get a sandwich. But by no means risk turning this Meal into an eating and drinking binge or a family squabble. It is a spiritual meal - a love feast.

May God bless the reading and the hearing of these words.

Let us pray. Holy Three in One, remind us that our faith is both far simpler and far more complex than we often assume. Help us to find unity in the loaf and cup that awaits us at your table. Take and use my words to empower our imaginations, awaken us to new possibilities, and embolden us in our actions. Amen.

Why is it that kitchens are so often places where memorable conversations occur?

Before I share what is perhaps my most memorable kitchen encounter, let me give you a little context. I had traveled with a rather large church group to another state to do mission work. We were quite a diverse bunch. The teenagers and college students

represented many different Christian traditions, and also included a good number who had no real religious background.

A few days into our work, it was my turn to lead the evening worship experience. As I was busy at work in the kitchen preparing the elements for communion, an adult chaperone walked in. Rather than offering to help, he demanded to know what I thought I was doing.

Moments later we were joined by the other adult chaperones. These leaders were all committed Christians, but an outside observer looking in that evening may have seen our behavior as anything but Christian.

We had sweated together for days while helping oversee manual labors of love. We were all physically exhausted, and spiritually hungry.

This was a passionate conversation. Raised voices suggested that our topic was both important and emotional.

I remember several remarks . . . Each leader had an opinion:

- We couldn't possibly serve Communion because there were many unbelievers in our midst and it would make them uncomfortable.
- We had to make Communion the central component of worship because it would help center us in the midst of our chaos.
- The cup needed to be filled with grape juice since minors were involved, and I would need to communicate this clearly as a part of the invitation.
- Communion belongs on Sunday morning, not a weekday evening.
- While there was no question Communion could be a part of the worship experience, it was most critical that we do it right – especially that the right people were involved in the breaking of the bread and the pouring of the cup, and that these people said the right words.

While it may be tempting to dismiss this as an isolated incident, my own experiences suggest that when it comes to Communion we often find reasons to disagree. In my experience in parish ministry, I have served congregations with an incredible variety of practices.

- When should we celebrate the Sacrament of Communion? Some churches included communion in every service of worship while other communities of faith observed it at specific intervals – most commonly on a monthly basis.
- Who gets to preside at the table? I have experienced both extremes: only clergy or only lay leaders from the congregation.
- What really happens in Communion? Finally, I found common ground – none believed as our Catholic sisters and brothers do that the bread and wine are changed into the actual body and blood of Jesus. Even so, we still couldn't agree on this matter. The most common options have been
 - the meal is symbolic;
 - although Jesus isn't physically present he is spiritually present;
 - Jesus is present in, with and under the elements.
- How do you partake? The big divide is among those congregations that allow parishioners to remain seated and bring the elements to them and those where worshipers come forward to receive the elements. Even among those who stay seated there was disagreement about whether to partake when the elements are passed or to hold them so that the congregation could do so together once all had been served.

Some of you who have listened closely may be ready to inform me I missed out on a few of the more important issues. While your lists may vary I am sure someone here would suggest that my limited vocabulary thus far leaves much to be desired.

- For simplicity's sake I have spoken of Communion, but have failed to share that it can and often is also called Holy Communion, the Lord's Supper, or Eucharist.
- I have also called it a Sacrament, but many Christians prefer the term ordinance.

I would love to lecture on each of these topics at some length, but imagine many of you have brunch or lunch plans. So, let me move away from that historical inquiry to something a bit more straightforward: this morning's Scripture reading.

Most of you have heard parts of the passage read or spoken from memory hundreds or even thousands of times. You know them well. Even so, you likely associate them with your own experiences of Communion rather than placing them in their original context.

Paul is not happy with the way the church at Corinth has taken Communion and turned it into something less than it was meant to be. In their practice the Communion Meal was just that – an actual full meal or was included as a part of a full meal. (Thankfully whether or not to have a full meal is one conversation I have managed to avoid.)

The Church at Corinth was abusing something that was designed to be a holy meal. Appropriately enough, after all we have heard this morning, the scholars disagree on exactly what was taking place in Corinth that Paul was writing to correct. They do, however, agree that this community of faith had become divided over communion.

Everyone within the church was not being treated equally when it came to Communion. While our modern divisions at the table tend to be theological this division seems to be economic.

I think the vagueness of the problem helps make the solution even more meaningful for our contemporary situation. We are to remember what this meal is all about.

A few chapters earlier, Paul offered a perspective that we need to hear again now:

When we drink the cup of blessing, aren't we taking into ourselves the blood, the very life, of Christ?

And isn't it the same with the loaf of bread we break and eat? Don't we take into ourselves the body, the very life, of Christ? Because there is one loaf, our many-ness becomes one-ness - Christ doesn't become fragmented in us. Rather, we become unified in him. We don't reduce Christ to what we are; he raises us to what he is.¹

¹ | Corinthians 10:16-17, The Message

And now, in our passage, he seeks to connect the Corinthian church and to connect us with the very teaching he received from the Master – the one that contains words many of us know by heart. They remind of us lessons we need to hear often:

- The table isn't ours; it belongs to Jesus.
- The meal isn't an occasion for the well to do to showcase fine dining etiquette; it is a love feast to which all are welcome.

It is our custom here at United Church to celebrate Communion monthly. Whether you have come to the table a few times before or a few thousand, as you prepare to come this morning I invite you to start getting ready.

I never did finish my story about my plan to include Communion in an evening worship service – a plan that was interrupted by a kitchen conversation. As it turns out, we did celebrate Communion that night.

That evening I started with verse 28: "Examine your motives, test your heart, come to this meal in holy awe." I wanted to be sure that everyone knew the importance of the meal.

I also spoke of the one loaf. It was significant that I held up before the group a single loaf – a loaf I broke and we shared. It was significant that I held up before the group a single cup – a cup we all shared. None of us changed our opinions about Communion that night, but we were all reminded that we are united in Jesus.

Sisters and brothers of the United Church the same is true for us. We will soon sing a song I imagine will be new to many of you. We will sing verses one through three as our communion hymn, and then we will sing verses three through five as our closing hymn. We will sing the third verse twice so that you get it, and so that it becomes real for me:

As Christ breaks bread, and bids us share, each proud division ends. The love that made us, makes us one, and strangers now are friends, and strangers now are friends.²

Amen.

² Brian Wren. *I Come With Joy*.