



Discerning the Body

1 Corinthians 11:17-34

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I want to look this morning at the second half of the eleventh chapter of First Corinthians, beginning at verse 17. You'll remember from last week, that starting with this chapter, we're now in a part of the epistle where St. Paul addresses some problems in the Corinthian church that were happening as they gathered together in corporate worship. The second problem starts here and it's centred on their abuse of the Lord's Supper. And while we don't usually have the same problems happening here in our church, the abuse that was happening in Corinth does have broader applications for what it means for us to be "the Church".

Look at verses 17-22. Paul starts with the problem itself:

But in the following instructions I do not commend you, because when you come together it is not for the better but for the worse.

That's some strong condemnation on whatever they're doing. You'd think that even if we mess things up when we gather as a church family, it's still better than if we didn't gather at all, but Paul tells them that their gathering together is actually for the *worse* because of what they're doing.

For, in the first place, when you come together as a church, I hear that there are divisions among you.

One of the first problems he addressed in the beginning of the book was their divisions and factions. This is different. Those divisions were over which preacher or teacher they were following. Here he's talking about disunity in a different sense that he'll get to in a moment. A report about the divisions in their church has come to him – either from mutual friends who had visited there or maybe even from the group that was being treated badly. And he says about the report, "I don't doubt it."

And I believe it in part, for there must be factions among you in order that those who are genuine among you may be recognized.

We know from Jesus' own teaching that there are both believers and unbelievers in the Church – sheep and goats, wheat and tares – and Paul appeals to that idea here. "I'm not surprised that there are divisions or factions among you. As God works out his purposes and as he tests you – as he sifts the wheat – those divisions between the true and the false believers are going to show themselves sometimes." Some of that sifting was even going on in Corinth right then, Paul says, specifically because they were abusing the Lord's Supper – some of them were weak, sick, and some were even dying. And here as Paul deals with their abuse of the Lord's Supper, we see that it's not enough to simply have right belief or right doctrine, but that the *evidence* of true faith – the proof – comes in whether or not our behaviour reflects the Gospel. Look at verses 20 to 22 and we see what was going on:

When you come together, it is not the Lord's supper that you eat. For in eating, each one goes ahead with his own meal. One goes hungry, another gets drunk. What! Do you not have houses to eat and drink in? Or do you despise the church of God and humiliate those who have nothing? What shall I say to you? Shall I commend you in this? No, I will not.

Remember when Jesus instituted his Supper in the upper room, he was with his disciples to eat the Passover meal. The tradition continued in the early Church, that the Communion was part of a larger meal. It wasn't a Passover meal – that would be going back to the "types and shadows" and would be a blasphemous denial of what Christ has done for us on the cross and in the new covenant – as if we were to go back to the temple and make sacrifices. The early Christians transformed it. They called the meal an *agapé* meal – a "love" feast – at which they gathered to fellowship. It wasn't that unlike one of our potlucks, but at some point – probably at the end of the meal – they would celebrate the Lord's Supper with the bread and wine.

It was supposed to be a beautiful picture of the new life we have in Christ. Notice, Paul talks about it as "when you come together" and when you celebrate the

"supper of the Lord" – literally, the supper that *belongs to* or is *consecrated to* the Lord. It was a living out in physical terms of the unity – the oneness – we have by the Holy Spirit and in Jesus Christ. That's what it should be. But Paul presents this glaring contrast: when the Corinthians would "come together" there was anything but "togetherness". In fact, when they came together, all it did was amplify the divisions among them – and those divisions undermined the very meaning of the Supper.

The "Lord's Supper" is the only name for the Sacrament used in Scripture, but the Church has given that supper other names. *We* most commonly call it is Holy Communion. What St. Paul was saying to the Corinthians would be like him coming to us and saying, "When you celebrate *communion*, it's actually *disunion* that you celebrate."

The problem was that Greco-Roman culture was extremely stratified and class-conscious. In contrast, Paul writes over and over about the "culture" of the Church, saying that our new birth in Christ wipes away all those distinctions: in Christ there is no Jew or Gentile, no slave or free. And yet when the Corinthians got together for this meal, they were bringing that stratification into the church. It's hard to know *exactly* what was happening, but from what we know of that society, it probably meant that the wealthy people were living it up in the dining room – like they would at any party – while the slaves and poor freemen were relegated to a lower place. The wealthy got the good food and wine and more of it, and the slaves and poor members of the church didn't. It would be like bringing a fine wine or some really good steaks to one of our potlucks and then only sharing it with those you thought socially worthy of such fine things. It would be like setting up tables in the parish hall for the well-to-do, while sending the "rabble" to eat out on the front porch.

Rather than living out real *communion* with each other, the Corinthians were using the Lord's Supper as an opportunity for reminding the poor of their place – forgetting that in Christ there's only one "place". And so Paul asks, "You have your own homes. If you want to a fancy dinner party, have it there, but when you gather as the Church and when you come to celebrate the Lord's Supper, make sure you're being the Church and make sure

you're celebrating the Lord's Supper and not your own place in secular society. Paul shames the ones guilty of this abuse just as they had shamed some of the members of their church.

He reminds them that the purpose of our gatherings isn't to make something of your social status and the purpose of the Lord's Supper isn't to come and eat your fill. No, *the purpose is to remember and proclaim the Lord's death until he comes again*. Again, the purpose of the Table is our unity in Christ. To remind us of that, Paul takes us back to Jesus' own description of the Supper in the upper room. Look at verses 23-26:

For I received from the Lord what I also delivered to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night when 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 also he took the cup, after supper, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me." For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes.

Now, there are all sorts of different viewpoints and theological understandings about the Lord's Supper and what it is and is not and what it does and does not do for those who partake of it, but these words of Paul that come directly from Jesus undercut *all* those other teachings, ideas, and doctrines. This is the *core* of the Lord's Supper. This is what it means at its most basic. If we don't get this right, none of those other things matter – and that's why it's so important to Paul that the Corinthians "get" this.

Paul takes us back to the Last Supper in the upper room where Jesus and his disciples celebrated the traditional Jewish Passover meal. That meal always started with the host blessing the bread, breaking it, and giving it to the others at the table. It was the first part of the meal and it immediately followed the Passover liturgy itself, in which the events of the redemption of Israel from Egypt were described. So Jesus did a remarkable thing. The Passover meal was full of symbolism – and Jesus took that symbolism and redefined it.

He took the bread and as he broke it he declared it a symbol of his own body, given as a sacrifice – like the animals, whose blood-drained carcasses were placed on the altar of the tabernacle and the temple. The bread – his body – given as a sacrifice "for you" – for us. He goes back to the imagery of Isaiah 53: "he bore the sins of many" – and that "many" includes you and me. And he tells us: "Do it in remembrance of me." Think again of the Passover. For the Jews, "remembrance" was more than just something we do mentally. In the Old Testament remembrance was always something that involved both "memory" and "activity". God "remembers" and "visits", he "forgives" and "blots out". He called on Israel to "remember" by building a physical "memorial" or in the case of the Passover, by acting out a rite of perpetual, yearly remembrance. In the same way, Jesus now takes that ancient "memorial" that was merely a type and shadow of his own perfect sacrifice, and reconstitutes it as a new "memorial" for the true Israel that will gather around the Table in his name to "remember" its own deliverance through him. That's why he refers to it as *my* remembrance. It's not just something we do "in memory of *him*", but is something we eat as a "memorial" of the salvation he bought us by his death and resurrection.

This is why Paul was so concerned with what the Corinthians were doing in abusing the Lord's Supper. There's a vertical element when we come to the Lord's Table because it's Jesus did for us that we remember and celebrate, but there's a horizontal element too. The Lord's Supper puts us as believers in communion with each other and reminds us that as we proclaim Christ's death, we proclaim the very thing that makes us one. When you take a piece of the bread, it not only represents what Christ did for you, it also serves as a reminder that you are part of his body and *one* with everyone else who partakes of the bread too. The Corinthians had forgotten what the bread meant.

At that meal in the upper room, Jesus also took the cup of wine and gave it new meaning too – just as he had with the bread. He picks up the prophecy of Jeremiah 31 that speaks of God establishing a new covenant. As the bread

represents his body, broken and laid on the altar, the cup of wine represents his blood, sacrificially poured out for our redemption. And again he reminds us: "do this in remembrance of *me*." Paul reminds us: this is the *Lord's* supper, and in emphasising that, he crushes the Corinthians that had distorted, abused, and used those symbols to celebrate themselves and their wealth and prestige at the expense of their poorer brothers and sisters.

Throughout the passage, Paul's emphasis is on the death of Jesus and how his death ratified the new covenant between God and his people. This is where the Corinthian's version of the meal broke down. It's not that they weren't necessarily thinking on Christ as they celebrated the Lord's Supper. It's not that they were failing somehow to be in right communion with him. The problem is that they were abusing each other and in doing so they were undermining and negating the very point of Christ's death. Jesus' purpose was to create a new people for his name in which all the old distinctions of class and culture – distinctions rooted in the Fall – are gone. And if we ignore all this – if we abuse the Lord's Supper – Paul says, we put ourselves in grave danger. Look at verses 27-32:

Whoever, therefore, eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty concerning the body and blood of the Lord. Let a person examine himself, then, and so eat of the bread and drink of the cup. For anyone who eats and drinks without discerning the body eats and drinks judgment on himself. That is why many of you are weak and ill, and some have died. But if we judged ourselves truly, we would not be judged. But when we are judged by the Lord, we are disciplined so that we may not be condemned along with the world.

I remember the relief I experienced when I was about twenty years old and read this passage, paying attention to the context for the first time. Those of us who grew up in pietistic traditions were terrorised by these verses that are so often quoted out of context before the Lord's Supper, with the intent of warning the congregation that if you don't examine yourself and if you don't take care of the sin in your life, then you'll be an unworthy partaker and will

bring God's judgement on you. I remember as a kid, sitting in the pew and the thinking about all the awful things that happened to people in the Old Testament because of their sins and dreading that God might zap me if I were to eat the bread and drink the cup with any sin still on my conscience.

Now, while I certainly encourage repentance and confession before we come to the Table, let me be clear: that is not Paul's point here. Remember, he's explained that they dishonour the Table in two ways: First, the rich have been abusing the poor by treating the meal like any other social get-together. And second, in doing that, they have abused the Lord himself by not properly "remembering" him, especially in terms of the salvation he's wrought by his death – the very death by which he intends to make them one, not "divided" as their abuse of the Supper does. Undermining the unity Christ gives us is the abuse and is what makes them (or us) unworthy partakers.

Remember that when it comes to personal sin, none of us is worthy to come to the Lord's Table. This is why we repeat every week: "We do not presume to come to your table, merciful Lord, trusting in our own righteousness, but in your manifold and great mercies. We are not worthy so much as to gather up the crumbs under your table. But you are the same Lord whose nature is always to have mercy. Grant us, therefore, gracious Lord, so to eat the flesh of your dear Son Jesus Christ, and to drink his blood, that our sinful bodies may be made clean by his body, and our souls washed through his most precious blood, that we may evermore dwell in him and he in us."

Brother and sisters, our *sin* is exactly *why* we come to his Table. We come here to remember that he has saved us and not we ourselves. We come to here to remember the new life that he has given us – and as we remember the new life he has given us, we are called to remember that his new life knits us together into one -- into *his* – body. The worst thing we can do is not coming to the Table with some sin still on our conscience, but to come to the Table in such a way that we undermine the very body of Christ. That's what St. Paul's talking about when he says they aren't discerning the body. They came to the Table – and maybe they even came

piously and with their thoughts focused on Jesus – but they came to the Table without a thought for his body – without a thought for their brothers and sisters in Christ. This is why when the Prayer Book instructs the priest regarding excommunication, the emphasis is on those brothers and sisters who are at *enmity* with each other – who are not living in unity and harmony as members of the body of Christ. When we come to the Table, we need to be conscious of Jesus and his sacrifice for our sins, but we also need to come understanding that the his Supper is also an outward sign and seal of our unity – all of us – in him by virtue of his sacrifice. We get hung up on thinking on and discerning Christ at his Table – and we need to think about that – but how often are we thinking on and discerning his body – the fellowship of believers?

That's Paul's point here. If the Corinthians (and by extension us) are unable to live out the reality of the body of Christ in something so basic as the Lord's Supper, it begs the question: have we even truly experienced the redemption Jesus offers? If we can't forgive or can't love a brother or sister, it's the most condemning of all possible evidence that we ourselves have failed to grasp the very nature of the forgiveness that Jesus has offered to us – and if we don't understand it and if we're still leaning on our own supposed righteousness, we are going to fall under judgement – in fact, the very same judgement from which Jesus came to redeem us. And so Paul wraps it up in verses 33 to 34, saying:

So then, my brothers, when you come together to eat, wait for one another—if anyone is hungry, let him eat at home—so that when you come together it will not be for judgment. About the other things I will give directions when I come.

Paul's final advice may very well be why the *agapé* meal gradually disappeared. His point is to call them back to the meaning of the Supper: *wait* for one another – literally, *receive* one another. In the hospitality context it means "*welcome* one another". That's what it means to discern the *body* – to see that each of us here is a fellow sinner redeemed by the body and blood of Christ. Self-examination is an important thing, but if

that's all we get out of this text, we miss Paul's point and that's that when we come to the *Lord's* Table, we need to pay attention to our relationships with each other in the body of Christ. The most significant thing he says here is in that final command: *receive*, or *welcome*, one another. It's the Lord's Supper after all, not ours. He sends the invitations, not us. We need to actualise his Supper – to live it out and to truly *be* his body. Our task – and our joy – is to receive anew the benefits of his grace *as* we welcome each other as fellow recipients of his grace.

Please pray with me: Heavenly Father, it's appropriate that at this time of national thanksgiving coming up tomorrow, that we pause here to give you thanks for the greatest gift of all: for giving up your only-begotten Son that he might die as a sacrifice for our sins. But Father, as we come to your Table, let us remember that through Jesus and his death, we have been knit together into one body. Let his Table be a weekly reminder to us of what it means to receive and welcome our fellow redeemed as we partake of this foretaste of the great banquet that awaits us in eternity. We ask this in his holy name. Amen.