

## When You Come Together: A Communion Meditation

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*Texts: 1 Corinthians 11: 17-34*

[Paul writes:] In delivering this message I am not offering praise, because you don't come together for the better, but for the worse. For in fact I hear, firstly, that there are schisms among you when you come together in assembly, and I partly believe it. For indeed there must be cliques among you, so that it becomes clear which ones are tried and true. When you all convene in the same place, therefore, you are not really eating the supper of the Lord; for at the meal, each proceeds with the food they brought themselves, and one person goes hungry while another drinks to excess. Do you not, in fact, have households for eating and drinking in? Or do you, in reality, despise God's assembly and humiliate those who have nothing to bring? What should I tell you? Shall I praise you? In this matter, I offer no praise. For what I received from the Lord I also handed over to you: that the Lord Jesus, on the night in which he was betrayed, took a loaf of bread, and, having given thanks, broke it and said, "This is my body, broken for your benefit; do this for my remembrance." Likewise, after the meal, the cup also, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood; do this as often as you drink, for my remembrance." For as often as you eat the loaf and drink the cup, you make the Lord's death known, until his coming. Thus, whoever eats the loaf or drinks the cup of the Lord out of line with its purpose will be answerable for the Lord's body and blood. But let each one honestly examine themselves, and so eat of the loaf and drink of the cup; for the one who eats and drinks while not having a clue about the body eats and drinks judgment upon themselves. Thus among you many are weak and infirm, and a considerable number have died, but if we examined ourselves, we should not be judged; but, in being judged by the Lord, we are corrected by the Lord, so that we might not have a verdict passed upon us along with the cosmos. So, brothers and sisters, when gathering to eat, wait for each other. Should anyone be hungry, let them eat at home, so that you not bring judgment upon yourself when you convene. And the remaining matters I shall set in order whenever I come.

Man, I'm sorry, but this is a messed-up church! Oh...First Church, Corinth, not First Church, Cambridge. At First Church, Corinth, the people are factious, greedy, arrogant, complacent about social justice, immoral, litigious, and more. You read through the pages of this letter called First Corinthians, and you see that this was just a messed-up church. To be fair, you can't really blame them. I mean, in trying to follow Jesus they faced a seriously uphill battle.

So, envision this: you live in the midst of a huge, bustling, cosmopolitan city. You are just living your life, trying to be a good Greco-Roman soul and get ahead. Like everyone else, you spend your day working and trying to get ahead. Like a good Roman, you self-servingly praise those above you, you disdain those below you, you join the crowds in honoring the troops as they come home from foreign wars, and you appreciate the solace of occasionally offering a sacrifice to the gods on the off chance that one of them might pay attention and send a little good fortune your way. Corinth was no Athens, and no Rome. It was a new city, where

everybody came from somewhere else and was jockeying for position: maybe like Las Vegas 50 years ago.

Into that setting, comes this travelling preacher named Paul, who seems to have just moved to town, found a room to rent, and got a job making tents. In addition to his tools, he carries a message, something he calls good news. And he basically invited people to upend their lives and join him in following a guy named Jesus, a Jewish rabbi from another culture 2000 miles away, who, while admittedly offering a pretty compelling vision of a meaningful and worthwhile life connected to the heart of the Divine, still, was executed by the leaders of his own people and the Roman authorities - the same Roman authorities that all of the Corinthians had respected and appreciated their whole lives.

Somehow, then, there actually were a few people in Corinth who bought into this, and Paul spent 18 months among them, laying out the basics of what it meant to have this Jesus as the guiding force of their lives. The basics of his message seem to have been this: 1) Jesus was a small town nobody, a friend of the poor and marginalized, so you gotta stop playing status games. Instead of honoring those above you and disdaining those below you, you have to learn to do the opposite. Honor those below you and be a little suspicious of the privileged ones above you. That's how you build a real community of love. 2) Jesus taught that we are responsible for each other, and there is enough for everybody, so you gotta stop trying to get ahead and share, finding your joy in being part of a community where everyone has enough. And, 3) Jesus returned no one evil for evil, so you just gotta let it go, man. In the end, his body was broken and his blood shed, but he never gave up on love, and that love, well, it conquered death. So lean into it and you just might find what's really at the heart of God.

Now, you might think I am soft-pedaling the religious stuff here, but if you really read Paul, in 1 Corinthians and elsewhere, read him with without the baggage of a bunch of abstract arguments that arose long after he wrote his letters, you'll see that Paul was first and foremost a community builder. His goal was not mainly to get people to accept Jesus Christ as their personal Lord and Savior, or believe a certain set of ideas about God. His goal was rather to get people to accept being part of a new community, a community shaped by the way of Jesus, which means the way of mutual love, sharing, and peace.

But back to Corinth. Having spent 18 months laying this foundation, Paul took off to the next town to do the same thing elsewhere. 18 months, that's all they got with him. *18 months* of Christian formation, to undo a *life-time* of Greco-Roman formation. Paul left behind maybe 100 Jesus-people, in the midst of perhaps 100,000 Empire-people. He left them living in the same houses, probably doing the same jobs, surrounded by the same influences all around them, and off he went. Is it any wonder poor little bitty First Church of Cambridge was messed up? Of course they still lived with the same old lives they had before, factious, greedy, arrogant, complacent about social justice, immoral, and litigious, as Paul calls them. You might, in a moment, declare your commitment to the way of Jesus, but habits of the heart take time to change, much longer than a moment, especially when you are surrounded by all the same influences as before.

And, again, think about this. The foundation Paul laid for them was kind of unnatural and counter-cultural. Or maybe it's best to think about this emotionally, the foundation Paul laid for them was sort of, embarrassing. When people became followers of Jesus, it was inevitable that people were going to look at them and wonder "why do you can't keep up in the status game anymore." People were going to look at them and wonder "why do you share with and rely on others, rather than stand on your own two feet." People were going to look at them and wonder "why do you respond to being wronged with kindness rather than aggressiveness?" It's

like these Jesus-followers were trying to make a virtue of not being strong, not being self-sufficient, and not being able to keep up. It's kind of embarrassing.

I know that feeling. I got a twinge of it four weeks ago on ReGathering Sunday. It was about 10 minutes before the service began and we were gathering out on the front lawn. I was talking with someone, but noticed a young man walk by on the sidewalk. Maybe a graduate student, maybe a tech worker? As he walked by, I imagine on his way to brunch, he sort of looked around at the group of us standing there, and I saw on his face a look of, not animosity, but I could swear, bemusement. Like, "look at those people. Still hanging on to that old Christian thing. They have nothing better to do on a Sunday morning than listen to a bunch of old platitudes about being nice and illogical beliefs about a God who clearly isn't making a darn bit of difference in the world today." His face seemed to ask, "Why do those people need that?" And I could feel the weight of that look, maybe even a twinge of embarrassment.

There is a lot of success and status and public respect in a one-mile radius of this place, but it sure isn't focused on the church. Why do I need this? Why do we need this? Why do you need this? Seeing that look of bemusement, this church thing can be sort of embarrassing.

And, at least, I think that's the dynamic you have to feel, to see what's really happening in the passage I read earlier from Paul's letter to First Church, Corinth. In the face of incredible odds working against him, in the face of a whole empire based on a different view of what make for a good life, in order to transform people into followers of Jesus, Paul taught them, simply but profoundly, how to eat together.

- 1) You don't play status games. You gather with whoever comes, rich or poor, slave or free, male or female, successful or struggling, and in the name of Jesus, who himself did away with status games, eating with all who would have him, you break bread together, as a reminder of his body broken on the cross.
- 2) Also, you wait until everyone gets there, you share what you can, and you wait until all the potluck dishes are placed on the table, so everyone can get enough, even if they brought little, because wealth comes not from what you have, but from what you share.
- 3) You eat with people you would never otherwise eat with, just like Jesus ate with morally compromised rich people and those others dismissed as sinners. In eating, together, equally, you create a community of love, of sharing, of peace.
- 4) At the end of the meal, you pour the celebratory wine, the wine that reminds you of the blood of Jesus, the life-carrying blood, that was shed, but which went through the gate of death to carry life again.

Jesus created this community we are a part of, and though at least in the eyes of the world, in the eyes of a young man walking by on the side walk, bemused, in those eyes, death is always near, but life will always prevail.

And Paul says, with a broken heart, you've messed it up. I guess you were embarrassed by the way of Jesus. You've allowed your gathering, your meal, to show who you were, not who you are. You've allowed it to embody status games and self-satisfaction and turmoil. Don't you see? You are the body of Christ. It is you who have been "broken," broken in a way that allows you to break free of the Empire and follow the true way of life. But you have forgotten who you are, you have forgotten whose you are.

Friends, this is a cautionary tale. What we will do together in a few minutes as we take bread and wine that remind us of the body and blood of Christ, that remind us that we are the body of Christ, "broken" in a way that leads to life. Sadly in some ways, this won't feel much

like a community meal. And while I whole-heartedly believe in the mystical and spiritual presence of Christ in the tangible gifts we eat together today, and whole-heartedly believe that we are taking tangible grace into our bodies and lives, all of that is 14 steps down the historical and theological road from what the Lord's supper originally was.

The meal that we share is a meal meant to shape us into a community of love, and sharing, and peace. While First Church, Corinth, clearly had some trouble with that, I have to say, I already see countless signs here among First Church, Cambridge, that this meal is doing just that. In fact, I do wonder if that young man walking by on ReGathering Sunday, with a bemused look on his face, might have been saying to himself, from his perspective, "Man, this is a messed-up church." I hope so. I we seem messed-up in his eyes, which just might mean we are the right path in following the way of Jesus. Yes, I hope so. So, take and eat this day, aware that we are the body of Christ, "broken" in a way that leads to life, and we are now, and will by the grace of God will continue to be, a community of love, and sharing, and peace, no matter how messed-up that is in the eyes of this world.

In the name of the Living God, Father Son and Holy Spirit, Mother of us all. Amen.

