

Communion

Text: 1 Corinthians 11:17-34

Preached by the Rev. Anne Robertson at Crawford Memorial UMC on August 1, 2021

The very first thing we did together when I arrived a year ago was to celebrate Communion together. When I sent an outline of the day to church leaders, it was titled “Communion Day.” That wasn’t just because it was the first Sunday of the month. As far as I’m concerned, Communion—the Lord’s Supper, Eucharist, or whatever you want to call it—is the center of Christian ritual as well as a foundational statement about who God is and who we are called to be in response. It’s meant to shape us, not as individuals, but as a community.

Back on the first Sunday of May, I preached about what we believe is happening inwardly during the sacrament—the deeper mystical and spiritual unity that the ritual effects in those who participate. Today I want to talk about the outward message of Communion and why I believe it’s foundational to building Christian community, and sharing God’s grace with the world. In my view, it is literally gospel. I’m going to start with a bit of Bible study and historical background and then end up with the way the practice of Communion can help heal our divisions and reconstruct our broken relationships here in the 21st century.

First to the Bible study. The passage that Kim read from 1 Corinthians 11 has kept many, many people away from the Communion table for fear of being found “unworthy.” “Unworthy” is a loaded word in our culture, where judgment and exclusion run rampant. Some people hear those words, think of all the ways they fall short of God’s ideal, and become terrified to take Communion lest they do so in an “unworthy manner.”

Others hear those words and it reawakens all the ways that the church has judged them to be unworthy and refused them access to the Table and, by extension, to Jesus. There is nothing quite so hypocritical and offensive as proclaiming that Jesus died for everyone and then turning people away from the banquet meant to claim and celebrate that. “Oh, did we say everybody? Sorry, we didn’t actually mean *you*.” People both inside and outside the church smell that hypocrisy a mile away and leave in anger, disgust and often deeply wounded. I’ve heard those stories from people again and again over the course of my ministry.

So I want to help you understand the specific context in 1 Corinthians 11 and what exactly Paul was so upset about. With that, I think you’ll find that this ancient reprimand resonates with today’s struggles. What Paul is judging here is not individual morality, but unjust behavior that is eroding trust and tearing apart a community. So, let’s travel back 2,000 years to ancient Corinth for a bit.

Sitting on a tiny bit of land, only four miles wide, that connected the northern and southern parts of Greece, the city of Corinth was founded about 6,500 years before Jesus was born. The first triremes, Greek battleships, were built there. By the classical age the city rivaled both Athens and Thebes in wealth and in architecture. The city is known for developing the Corinthian order, the most elaborate of the Greek architectural styles.

Culturally, Corinth was sort of a combination of the red-light district and the Wall Street of ancient Greece. There were over a thousand temple prostitutes in Corinth, the most famous of whom was painted well into medieval times and has her own Wikipedia entry. On the financial side, the ancient poet Horace wrote, “Not everyone is able to go to Corinth,” referring to the cost of living.

Corinth was a bustling center of trade, with a cosmopolitan population. The city added a new word to the Greek vocabulary. *Korinthia-zesthai* meant to “live like a Corinthian,” which was a life of wealthy, drunken debauchery.

In that place Paul founded a church based on the teachings of Jesus. It was a counter-cultural move and he had to have known there would be pretty constant fires that needed putting out there, even as he continued his travels to plant other churches in other places. His two letters to the church in Corinth that we have in the New Testament contain what I’m sure are just a few of those fire-fighting efforts, and the conflict about Communion here in 1 Cor. 11 is just one of them.

So, what’s going on in those verses? First, remember that celebrating Communion in the earliest churches was not just a tiny piece of bread and a sip of wine. It was a full-blown meal that people brought potluck. Churches were not in separate buildings but in private homes—usually the homes of wealthier members who had room for large groups to gather. The tiny sampling of bread and wine that we have in churches today comes from the adaptation of that full meal when the church was persecuted and had to meet in secret. Bringing your piping hot tuna casserole down into the catacombs would have aroused suspicion. So they just took tiny reminders—a bit of bread and wine—and then never went back.

But when Paul is writing, the celebrations of Communion were just like the event Jesus shared the night he was betrayed. It was supper—a full meal—and everyone in the church brought what they could. For the poor, especially, it was likely the best meal they had all week—maybe the only one where they left with their hunger fully satisfied. It’s hard to imagine a better metaphor for the gospel of Jesus. It’s reminiscent of the prophet Isaiah who begins chapter 55 with, “Ho, everyone who thirsts, come to the waters; and you that have no money, come, buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money and without price.”

The early church gathered in homes, not just to talk about the abundant love and grace of God and the sacrifice of Jesus for all but to experience that in an abundant meal; where people brought the best they had to share with each other without distinction and without price. Those two things—the message and the meal—were one and the same. It was walking the walk while talking the talk, and in doing so it built a sense of safety and trust in the community.

The poor could enter the grand villa of a wealthy person—not as a servant who got table scraps, but as an equal in the Body of Christ who was every bit as worthy of the feast, even if they themselves could only contribute a small crust of bread. Whatever life was like outside, here everyone belonged without distinction; here they were reminded that in Christ there was no Jew nor Greek; slave or free; male or female. Abundance was given to all, freely. All you had to do was come.

Which is exactly the gospel Jesus both preached and lived. Blessed are the poor; blessed are the hungry; blessed are the persecuted—come, be happy, in the church of Jesus Christ we all share with and protect each other. Your station in life doesn’t matter here; all are welcome; all may join the feast. The vast mansion of God opens its doors to anyone willing to enter; the table is set; eat until you are fully satisfied. Bring two loaves and a fish and come away with twelve baskets left over.

That whole message was being hit with a wrecking ball in Corinth. The rich members didn’t just come for supper, they came early for Happy Hour. The poor, who were still laboring at the docks or wherever, had to finish a hard day, run home to scrape together not just enough for themselves, but

something to share, and get themselves to church. But by the time they got there, the wealthy members not only had eaten what they had brought, but were drunk to boot. The poor then had, not an abundant feast where all were equal, but the same measly rations they had the rest of the week, served up with the reminder that they were unequal not just out there, but also in here. In God's house. In the church of Jesus Christ. Whatever they then discussed about the love and grace available to all in Jesus was not just vapid hypocrisy, but a fundamental violation of both the personhood of the poor and the Christ who called them blessed.

What was happening in Corinth was anti-gospel; it was anti-Christ, and if it was allowed to continue, it would so pervert the gospel that it would be worse than not having a church in Corinth at all. It's a wonder Paul settled for just blasting them in a letter and didn't show up in person to literally flip the tables. He actually may have done something of the sort since Second Corinthians 2:1 says he's sending a letter because, "I made up my mind not to make you another painful visit."

So, the "unworthy" manner of celebrating the Lord's Supper in the church in Corinth had nothing to do with the behavior of individual church members at home or out and about in Corinth. It wasn't telling the rich to give up their wealth, and it certainly wasn't telling the poor that they needed to work harder or be content with whatever they themselves had brought. It was condemning them for desecrating the ritual meant to embody God's abundance shared equally with everyone by re-shaping it around the surrounding culture's exclusion, division, and inequality. They were bringing injustice directly into the heart of God's ultimate sacrifice. Paul says that in doing that they were eating and drinking judgment against themselves. I agree.

Now hold that thought.

The foundational human need that is broken by injustice of all kinds is trust. It's one of the essential building blocks of mental, emotional, and spiritual health. When you peel away the layers of every crisis we are facing today, we find that what has been eroded away at the core is trust. People don't trust the church, the government, schools, the press, corporations, and now even hospitals and doctors.

With trust gone, we are ripe for manipulation by those who wish us harm. Every division is exploited and magnified by bad actors, because too many people no longer know who to trust. Focusing on holding those bad actors to account might get us a bit of a reprieve. But if we are ever to actually protect ourselves, we have to recognize that those bad actors could never have found a foothold if we hadn't turned a blind eye to decades and even centuries of corruption and injustice. We often hear the phrase, "No justice, no peace." That's true because without justice there is no trust; and when trust is gone, we are easily made into pawns on the board of war, manipulated by those who profit from our fear and chaos.

The church, as a whole, has been a part of that problem. In the United States you can barely begin to count the scandals—the abuse of children, the misogyny, the financial corruption, the condemnation of LGBTQ people, the centuries of participation in support of white supremacy, either directly or through turning a blind eye. The list goes on. People are not leaving the church because they have no spiritual hunger. They are not leaving the church because soccer practice is on Sunday morning. They are leaving the church because we have out Corinthian-ed the Corinthians, proving ourselves untrustworthy by allowing injustice of all kinds to run unchecked year after year, decade after

decade, century after century—and, as a cursory glance into the church at Corinth tell us—millennium after millennium.

And yet, the central narrative of the Bible is that of restoration and resurrection. I believe that's why Jesus modeled the ultimate act of inclusion and equality just hours before his arrest. He had a meal with his disciples—including Judas, who was about to leave that meal early to betray him to death; including Peter who would deny even knowing him in a few hours; including all but John who would not be able to summon the courage to even stand with him as he died. For that lot he still was willing to break his body and shed his blood. For that lot he was willing to die. For that lot he tied a servant's towel around his waist and washed their feet. And then he told them that at all of their meals going forward, they should remember and do likewise.

It is going to take a very long time for trust to be rebuilt across every sector of our nation and our world. But if we are to take the message of resurrection to heart, we can call on the Spirit to fill our dry bones and begin by taking Paul's admonition to heart and understanding that the ritual of Holy Communion isn't just about filling ourselves. Communion is where we embody and proclaim the gospel of Jesus Christ for others by sharing what we have with all who come.

The United Methodist Church practices a totally open table. We don't have a ritual of first communion here because there is no point in a person's life where the table is closed. In seminary I was taught how to commune an infant. You don't have to understand what's going on—as if any of us can really understand the mysteries of God in the first place. You don't have to be baptized. You just have to be hungry enough for the love of God to come.

And if we do it right—if everyone is truly and absolutely equal and welcome; if no one is shamed for what they do or don't bring; if everyone gives according to their ability so that the portions are equal; if no one who hungers—spiritually or physically—is turned away, the seeds of trust will be newly planted. Where equality and justice are not just spoken, but lived, those seeds can grow and eventually produce fruit with seeds that can be planted elsewhere.

In that world, we have each other's backs. We who have more will share with those who have less. We with privilege will make a way for those who struggle. We who have much won't eat first, just because we can. We won't get drunk in our excess. We have gone to prepare a place for those who have none that the feast might ever expand until it encompasses the world. That's the gospel. That's communion. Amen.