

More Food Problems

TEXT: 1 Corinthians 11:17-34

Preached by Rev. Anne Robertson at Crawford Memorial UMC on February 5, 2023

We've already seen that Paul's first letter to the church in Corinth is him trying to put out fires. It wasn't that the church in Corinth had less-faithful members than his other churches, but the city around it had so many issues that conflict in a church there was inevitable, even before you start mixing Jews and Gentiles under one roof.

Churches, for good and for ill, reflect the communities around them, and in Corinth, the problems in the city that I highlighted last week were naturally present when the people of the city gathered to learn about a new way to live out an ancient faith in the house church Paul founded there.

Last week we talked about the broadest conflict around food for the early churches: the sourcing of meat. The central event of every church at the time, whether founded by Paul, Peter, or others, was a full meal. That's what communion was. You remembered the last meal of Jesus with his disciples, as well as his first breakfast with them after the resurrection and the great banquet to come at the end of the ages by sharing a meal. With a mix of Jews and Gentiles in those first churches and different dietary laws for each, having dinner at every church gathering was more complicated than it sounds to us.

But beyond the sourcing of the meat, the meal was causing other problems, too. And those other problems were not caused by differences between Jews and Gentiles but by the differences between rich and poor. The cost of living in ancient Corinth was through the roof, and the wealth inequality was stark. But because we've lost all that early context, we are prone to misunderstand Paul's response to this particular piece of the problem.

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 so 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, what's going on in those verses? The key to understanding it is not only that they met in private homes and came for a full meal, but that the pieces of that meal were brought by those who came—all of them. There is nothing closer to an early church service than a potluck dinner at a church. That's what it was, with some faith sharing and teaching thrown in. And everyone brought something every time they gathered, each according to their means.

For the poor, especially, communion at church 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. You can make a case that the meal was, in itself, the gospel.

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. And we see the problems in Paul's description. 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 that letter because, "I made up my mind not to make you another painful visit."

Remember the opening of First Corinthians, where Paul tells them that their focus on status, by comparing who baptized each of them, was emptying the power of the Cross, the power that comes from voluntarily associating ourselves with those of the lowest status. The behavior at the meal was all that and more. Together it was bad enough that, apparently, sometime between Paul's first letter to them and the second, he left Ephesus and went back there for what he describes as a "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.

The church, as a whole, has never rid itself 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—all rooted in that same anti-Christ message that some people are more inherently worthy than others. We've made the "power of the Cross" be the power of Constantine's cross—the one that marched

before armies to overthrow the enemies in the Crusades, not the Cross of Jesus that symbolized the oppressed, the executed, and those on society's margins.

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 unworthy 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. It would only be John and the women who would be able to summon the courage even to stand with him as he died. All the others went into hiding.

For that lot Jesus 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.

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 founder of Methodism, John Wesley, taught that the meal was a means of grace. If we were trying to prove ourselves worthy before we came to the table, we had it backwards. It was by coming to the table, even in our unworthy state, that we came to truly understand that God's grace knew no distinctions. Like in the early church, the meal was the message. It was the lived experience of being equal before God.

Losing that is largely the fault of the church, not just because of our hypocrisy, but also because we have watered it down. The weekly feast became a tiny morsel when Christians were persecuted in the Roman empire and it was hard to smuggle your tuna casserole into the catacombs without being detected. But once Christianity was the religion of the empire, the church literally gave up sharing a full meal with all who gathered every week. We gave up feeding the poor and sharing equally at every gathering, as extremely wealthy churches still offered just a crumb of bread and, until very recently, withheld the wine entirely.

We also spiritualized the food—we come to church to “be fed.” But even on a communion Sunday, we're hardly fed. Once the church came out of the catacombs, we took the lived gospel of a shared meal and turned it into the words of a liturgy while not satisfying anyone's actual hunger.

All of that is still important—don't get me wrong—but, like I said last week, what is closer to the communion of the early church is coffee hour. When I stand here in a few minutes and offer the liturgy and bless the bread and cup, you can think of what you receive as a taste of what is to come—not just in the age to come, but in the hour to come in Gifford Hall.

One thing that I believe The United Methodist Church does right in all this, is that we practice 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.

But all of that would be a sham if we then made distinctions at coffee hour. In my years at the Bible Society, I frequently preached at the Congregational church in downtown Hyannis, which has a considerable population of unhoused folks—or people who are close to that point. One week when I went there to preach, the weather was rainy and cold and a group of those who struggled with shelter were gathered on a landing by the church door. But they weren't planning to go in.

So, I went over to talk with them and to ask a question. I told them I was about to preach to the congregation and asked if there was something they'd like me to tell them. Was there a message they'd like to convey? I stressed that it could be good or bad—I was willing to tell them whatever they told me.

What did they say? They were grateful for coffee hour. One of them did regularly attend worship. The rest did not. But when the service was over, in they all came in to share in the feast of coffee hour. And they were welcomed. People knew their names and sat and talked with them around the tables as they shared the real, flesh and blood presence of Jesus in communion with each other.

Congregationalist and Methodist theologians will argue stridently about the communion liturgy that happens during the service and what it represents. One of my jobs as an ordained elder in the United Methodist Church is to guard the sacraments; and the UMC has a document over 40 pages long about what we think we're doing in this ritual. But I'm here to tell you that you don't need a single word to explain it to the poor who came to coffee hour in Hyannis. Most of them skipped the service and still had communion every week.

Amen.