

Sermon on 1 Corinthians 11:17-34 prepared for Grace Church by Jonathan Shradar

I love Ethiopian food. A couple of weeks ago Stacy and I stole away to our favorite Ethiopian restaurant and the owner ribbed us that it had been too long since our last visit... But with each bite we savored some of our favorite stuff. Not only is it good food, to is a meal that brings with it memories and reminders of our life together.

Our first real date was at an Ethiopian restaurant. Some of our best times with friends have been around that shared plate of food. 99% of the takeout we ate in DC was Ethiopian. So in some ways, with every bite I am transported back to all of these wonderful times, reminded of the experience and the emotions...

Most of us have meals like that - meals that take us back - to Mom's cooking, to exciting times, to comfort...

Even if it is not the food, meals can be a sacred human experience; people gathered around a shared table, listening to one another, laughing, crying, revealing who we really are in all our awkwardness!

From reminder to experiencing life, the tables of our lives are important.

In Christianity, there is another shared meal that is meant to both bring us back, remind us of a life given for us, and be in the moment, experiencing life with one another. This is communion. And our text today is a correction to a church going through its motions and abusing the table. As we hear of their folly maybe we can think of our own and recalibrate ourselves by this meal.

The Lord's Supper is meant to show us our need for Christ and our bond to others.

1 Corinthians 11:17-34

As we have been studying the letter to the Corinthian church from the Apostle Paul (since last July), I have been struck by the "others-orientation" in the issues and information that has been conveyed. Of course it is a letter to a church, so the corporate reality of Christianity is at play, but given my own inclination to read everything and hear everything through a lens of my individuality, it has been at times challenging and at others refreshing that Paul has not written platitudes for the solitary believer, but words of refinement and encouragement for the body of believers, in relation to one another.

This section of Scripture is doing just that - calling the whole church to something and even maligning individualism when it comes to the expression of the church. This flows direction from a call against "me-centered" worship and is building toward the orderly function of the church, and central to that is this, the right approach and participation in the Lord's Supper.

As we progress this morning we want to see the Sin that Paul is calling out in the church, then recognize the Significance of communion and what it means for believers, then we will contemplate and participate in the Seriousness of the meal.

1) Sin

Just 16 verses before Paul was commending the church for keeping the traditions he taught them, and now he refuses to commend them for how they are administering the meal of remembrance, the Lord's Supper as a church. I have labeled it sin here because this is not a mistake in missing the point but an abuse of the experience and each other. What was suppose to be a proclamation of Christ is amounting to a denial of him in their midst.

When they gather as a church it is not for the better but for the worse. So what is really happening here?

Paul speaks of divisions among them, as he did to open the letter, but there the divisions were theological and stylistic here the divisions are not for arguments sake, they are the social situation of each believer.

Remember the church in Corinth was meeting in "house churches" throughout the city. One of the patrons of the church (wealthy people with large homes) would open their house for the gathering of the church. In would come people from across the economic spectrum to worship together. And common in first century worship was the "love feast," a shared meal that would lead to communion, taking the Lord's Supper as part of worship. In Corinth though, there is not much shared about this meal.

Whether it was simply the layout of the houses or it was the intentional segregation of people, those arriving early, and those honored by the host would sit in the small dining room and once that was full the overflow would locate in the atrium, the large entry area of the house. And given the economic realities at play, the rich were able to come before the unwashed masses and others could not arrive until their long day of work was done.

By the time these believers showed up, the meal had devolved into a potluck where you ate only what you brought highlighting the disparity among them. Some were full and others hungry. Some get drunk because they have the good wine, others are left without - nothing to partake of at what is supposed to be the Lord's table.

Each person was far more concerned with satisfying his own hunger and thirst. Those meant to be in covenant, committed community with one another are disregarding each other, neglecting the needs of each other and putting themselves above all others.

Imagine the worst pictures of American segregation, lunch counters and divided restaurants... This is what the church in Corinth would have resembled.

The “better” that the church is supposed to display is the common divisions of society (social status, race, class, wealth, gender, etc.) being overcome. But instead there was an obnoxious snobbishness between the rich and the not-so-rich.

“There seems to have been a peculiarly callous insensitivity to the physical needs of those with very little, almost to the point of humiliating them. When they came together, there was no sense of being one family in the Lord. Each group kept to itself. The food brought was not shared in a common pool, but each enjoyed his/her own provision. Some managed even to get drunk. The arrangements, in brief, emphasized the divisions in the church at Corinth, not their fellowship.” Prior

When such schism actually penetrates the public worship of the congregation, the situation is scandalous.

I appreciate the inclusion of Paul’s response in verse 22 - “What!” Church you are so self-centered that you rather humiliate each other by promoting division than humbling yourselves by promoting Christ in this meal.

Paul supposes that these factions are necessary, to show who is genuine in the faith, so their true colors come shining through.

No Supper at all! Don’t be deceived church, what you are doing is no communion. It is instead missing the vibrant center of gospel-formed life, unity around the truth the meal points to. Diversity of people and a new family formed in Christ.

And this is the breakdown of the church. When this is off, nothing else will work. There is nothing to commend here.

This breakdown of unity and life makes think in modern terms, the church is like the family that has discarded the dining table and a shared meal. There are the schedules and the workload, and the frustration of trying to get little kids to sit and eat... but what is meant instill unity, be a vital place of relating and teaching children to interact with other humans, to remind the family that they have what is important (each other); it’s replaced with entertainment and solitude. And the poor dining table become just another storage location for all our junk.

Study after study reveals how bad this is for families, for kids and for the fabric of our culture...

This is essentially what is happening in Corinth. It is sin and Paul is calling them to turn from it. To recenter on what matters and the thing meant to form the community. He is calling them back to the significance of the meal.

2) Significance

This is a meal instituted by Jesus and given to the church, this is among the traditions that Paul instructed them in, but clearly one they have neglected. The shared bread imaging the body of Christ, that which was beaten and broken and Jesus says it is that “which is for you.” Taken in remembrance of him.

The cup, a new covenant secured by his blood. The blood shed, the blood meeting the wrath against sin and ushering in a new age of relationship between God and man.

The true Supper is not merely a meal to add to a regular routine, to match our physical hunger or even quench our physical thirst - but it is meant to be a picture of the sacrifice of Christ, pointing to the thing that meets our spiritual hunger and thirst.

This is the gospel in the Lord’s Supper. That sinful people can believe in Christ and be saved. Saved from the destruction and punishment we deserved. And saved to a new community of people and relationship with God.

This sacrifice of Christ delivers forgiveness. His body in our place a substitute for us. He offers himself that we would be forgiven. Free from sin and its wages. Past, present and future all handled in Christ. This is what we remember when we eat.

The blood of the new covenant. The covenant of the law shared on the mountain rendered obsolete by the covenant of love forged on calvary. No longer earning salvation, but receiving it as a gift. Living a new response to forgiveness, and living it among other forgiven saints.

“The main word Paul uses to describe what has happened is covenant. Through the shedding of the blood of Jesus, the paschal lamb, it is now possible for Jews and Greeks, rich and poor, libertine and legalist, men and women to know the glorious freedom of forgiveness and to have personal knowledge of God. Those who enter into this personal relationship, this covenant-relationship, with the Lord naturally enter at the same time into a covenant-relationship with one another. Thus, the covenant community is established - and that is precisely what the Corinthians were undermining by their behavior. For them the death of Christ was not central; the return of Christ was not dominant; the love of Christ was not in control. It was, in a word, not ‘the Lord’s Supper.’” Prior

The meal of significance is accomplished when Christ’s sacrifice is central, his return hoped for and his love our defining tone among one another. And Jesus gives the world-shaking command; ‘Do this in remembrance of me...’

The Lord’s Supper, communion, then is the line that connects the ship to its anchor. Christ and his sacrifice, his death, is the anchor that steadies our souls and the ship of our lives together. And the church stands ready, holding the line for all to see that they will believe in the anchor.

Have you ever been to the USS Midway - or any large Navy ship - you can tour the Forecastle (Foc'sle - pronounce it correctly or we know you are a communist!) And there on the floor of this room is the ginormous chain linked together, connecting to the anchor holding the ship in place. Fun to see people attempt to lift the massive weight of each link, which gives confidence that we the ship won't be moved! The church is the Forecastle and our tour is wide open come and see what ties us to the anchor.

As often as you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he returns. This meal is the public proclamation of Jesus! Take away all the preaching, take away the songs, the children's programs, and leave nothing but the Lord's Supper and you have effectively preached the gospel. Say what the meal means, eat it together in the glorious diversity of the body of Christ and you have made Jesus known to all that see.

When you take it, be careful that it does not simply become routine and lose it's meaning. And don't see it merely as a personal experience but one to be shared as a reminder of the vast reach of Christ's grace, and the glorious image of the kingdom made up of tremendously different people.

Because it is a meal of significance, Paul commands that it be taken with a sacred seriousness.

3) Seriousness

Therefore whoever eats this bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty of sin against the body and blood of the Lord. This is serious and as the church in Corinth was disregarding each other in taking the Lord's Supper they have sinned.

And it leads to discipline - Paul says it is why many of them are weak and ill and have died. Not being condemned (since they are in Christ) but disciplined by God so that they won't fall into condemnation. We may not like talking about the active discipline of the Lord, but here is a clear example of it happening for the good of the church and the believer. So this is serious stuff. How you eat the bread and drink the wine matters.

I think it is too easy to read this and categorize it as something fixed and forgotten. The church now provides the elements of the Lord's Supper and we all take it together... For us though I think it is what comes before and after communion that indicates our trouble more than the meal itself. How do we associate with one another? Is there unity in the body centered and fueled by Christ? Are we comfortable in our self-seeking, our preferences above all others, so much so that we don't see each other, or recognize others' needs... Is the "covenant community" just an add-on to your busy life that can be adjusted or sacrificed for the more important things..?

Even nonchalance; are we cool and indifferent when we gather over the meal of the gospel. I am not a terribly serious guy, that comes across is my sad attempts at humor and my love for all things with sugar in them. But this body of believers means something vitally important and the bread and the cup point to the most important thing in our lives, to approach it with a casualness as if it is something we have to do once a month that doesn't matter all that much, or to see it as an individual experience, is to take it in an unworthy manner. And Paul is warning us here, along with the church in Corinth, to correct the mistakes, to avoid the discipline.

Solution is the same. We first see the significance of the meal - of what we are proclaiming. Then each one of us that approach the table, is to examine ourselves. The context implies that his self-examination will be specifically directed to ascertaining whether or not he is living and acting "in love and charity" with his neighbors.

Self examination is not about reaching some moral or spiritual standard of perfection - to be sinless in that moment - but to recognize your need for Christ even to take the elements of communion rightly. I need Jesus' help to confess and confront sin in my life, I need Jesus' help to see him as the center of my experience, I need Jesus' help to love other believers in the church, to think about them, to see and bear the weight of their needs. And it is in the recognition of that need, in repentance for trying on my own, that we worthily approach the meal.

Paul is calling the Christians to examine themselves, not to find reasons they are unworthy, but to find evidence of a repentant heart - evidence that grace is at work. If a believer has a repentant heart, he or she should be coming to the table... we examine ourselves not for perfection, but for recognition of our need of Christ's perfection on our behalf. People freed by Christ clinging to him for all of life.

And that recognition also then helps us to discern or recognize the body as verse 29 calls us to. While we are certainly meant to realize Christ's body broken for us, the focus in this verse is on the body of the church, the other believers. We examine ourselves and we recognize, we notice, we embrace the body of believers the Lord has called us to be part of.

When you come together to eat the Lord's Supper you wait for one another - you welcome one another. Each of us as honored guests. That in our diversity Christ is glorified.

Don Carson "The church is made up of natural enemies. What binds us together is not common education, common race, common income level, common politics, common nationality, common accents, common jobs, or anything else of that sort. Christians come together because they have all been saved by Jesus Christ and owe him a common allegiance... they are a band of natural enemies who love one another for Jesus' sake."

It's important to remember that what we have in common is far greater than any of the differences we discover among us.

Our task - and joy - is to receive anew the benefits of his grace in the context of truly welcoming others, who are recipients of that same grace. It is not simply by coincidence that Paul begins his corrective on spiritual gifts in the next section by placing that once again in the context of the unity of the body, all members being equally concerned for each other.

The Lord's Supper reveals the vertical aspects of what it means to be in union with God through the Lord Jesus Christ, but there are also horizontal and social implications for what it means to put others needs first.

And this is what the world sees. This is what outsiders view when they see the church. People who should not be together all in unity pointing to the blazing center of the gospel - to Jesus.

The Lord's Supper is meant to show us our need for Christ and our bond to others.

How can we respond today?

Get in on the new covenant - This is a meal that is for believers, for those who have placed their lives and trust in Jesus - and you can get in on it. Leave your sin and call on Jesus for help and salvation - and enter into the body of covenant people.

See your need - all of us, check yourself before you wreck yourself - know that you can't survive on your own and you need Jesus for righteousness, for grace, for caring for others. Take the bread and the cup as proof of your reliance on Christ for all things.

Seek others - wait on one another, beyond the confines of routine, live the unity we are promised in Christ. Take opportunities to meet the needs of others for the glory of Christ.

This meal is a solemn one but it is also a celebration. That Jesus would enter into our mess to claim us as his own. From that grace we live, free to follow him, from the salvation he gives us, for his glory until he returns and we dwell with him for eternity. This is what we toast to when we raise the cup together. And it is in stark contrast to the expectations of those without Christ.

We live in a fast world... food is to be scarfed... because it is just fuel. I want to savor things. Ethiopian food - you could describe my delight as savoring. This is what the Lord's Supper is for too... to savor the meal of unity with other believers and together to savor our Savior, whose love and sacrifice change everything. Who gives us life and hope and who we proclaim until he returns.

Let us savor it together.