

Exodus 12:1-14  
Psalm 116:1-2, 12-19

1 Corinthians 11:23-26  
John 13:1-17; 31b-35

A Facebook exchange was started when someone asked about celebrating the Lord's Supper on Easter Day. Quite a few of the responses said they celebrate it on Maundy Thursday, but not Easter Day. The Lord's Supper was instituted on Maundy Thursday, which might be the reason churches choose to celebrate the Lord's Supper on Maundy Thursday. Some said they don't celebrate it on Easter Day because they just celebrated it on Maundy Thursday. That's like saying you did not kiss your spouse this morning because you kissed your spouse last month. But that is another sermon. There is more to the Lord's Supper than it being a ritual observance. It also has an ethical component which Paul speaks to in this letter from which we read tonight.

Paul wrote his letter to the church in Corinth, for it was a church that was divided. He sets this theme of unity in the body of Christ in the very first chapter, where Paul declares that there were various groups who would say, "I belong to Paul," or "I belong to Apollos," or "I belong to Cephas," or, "I belong to Christ." Paul encourages them "that there be no divisions among [them], but that [they] be united...."

Paul continues this theme of unity in our passage this evening. Paul is concerned about how the church's celebration of the Lord's Supper was leading to factions. To understand Paul's concern we need to know that the worship in the church of Corinth was different than it is today. The church is in her very early years and as of yet there were no church buildings. The churches were house churches, that is, they met in the homes of the members. There were not many members of the church who were wealthy. But the better-off members had the largest houses and these were the natural places for the church to meet. And in that day, the church always celebrated the Lord's

Supper whenever they gathered together for worship. Also, the Lord's Supper was part of a full meal. Supper and the Lord's Supper were merged into one. There was no obvious boundary between the two. The Lord's Supper was a full meal.

Paul's concern was how they were eating the meal. The ancient Corinthian society had a strong class structure, and the members of that society limited their ties to those in the same socio-economic class. People of different socio-economic class would eat in different rooms and eat different food. Those of the upper class would eat in an inner room, eating larger portions of costly food and good wine. The lower classes would eat less food and poorer quality food, in an outer room, and the lower classes ate even a scantier fare. You gathered with and you ate with your socio-economic class. If you were of a lower class, you dared not eat with those of a higher class, and those of a higher class would not stoop so low as to eat with those of a lower class. Everyone knew their place and you stayed in your place.

Those social practices were influencing the worship practices of the early church in Corinth. The way they celebrated the Lord's Supper reflected the conventions of the larger Corinthian society. The richer members of the church would eat in the inner rooms. Those of a lower class would meet in another larger room. The richer members would eat large portions of costly food with good wine to drink. The lower classes were offered smaller quantities and poorer quality, while those of even a lower class got scantier fare altogether. Also, the rich had more leisure, so they would arrive early and begin eating. By the time the others arrived, much of the good food, or even much of all the food, had already been eaten. These practices were dividing the church. Paul describes the church's action as, "For when the time comes to eat, each of you goes

ahead with your own supper, and one goes hungry and another becomes drunk.” This socio-economic of society was dividing the church, not uniting it.

Paul finds such behavior as unworthy, it shows contempt for the church and humiliation for the poor. This is unacceptable behavior for the church. He advises them, “So then, my brothers and sisters, when you come together to eat, wait for one another.” What Paul was saying to the Corinthians was, “Corinthian Christians, you’re missing the whole point of the Lord’s supper. It isn’t to promote a “look out for yourself” attitude but to unite you to become the body of Christ. You have your own homes for your private meals, but when you come together, don’t dive in to get the best cuts for yourself. Instead, share with one another and be a community of Christ.”

Paul continues with a cautionary note, “Whoever, therefore, eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be answerable for the body and blood of the Lord. ... For all who eat or drink without discerning the body, eat and drink judgment against themselves.” This sentence has made some Christians a little anxious about receiving the sacrament. There are people who will not partake in the Lord’s Supper because of this warning. Are we good enough to receive this sacrament? This strong language is not meant to stop Christians coming to Communion. But it is meant to bring us to the table in a right attitude. When Paul speaks of “discerning the body,” Paul wants the Corinthians to be more serious about their unity in Jesus.

Paul’s argument here is much more than about ritual observance. Paul turns this ritual observance—the Lord’s Supper—into an ethical argument. The distinction between the have and have-nots is destructive to the fabric of the church. The church is not just an act of private devotion, which applies only to individuals. It concerns the

entire community, which is nothing less than the body of Christ. And by community we are not just talking about Heritage. We are talking about the entire body of Christ, the one church throughout our globe.

John Proctor, in his commentary on this letter to the Corinthians asks some questions of us. Does it relate to our church? Is it about the local church and the disparities in the local church? Does it speak to the various churches in town? Churches tend to divide over socio-economic classes. Are Christ's poorer followers unseen by the rich, even though they may live on adjacent streets? And what about the churches in the developed world? We are far wealthier than our sisters and brothers in other lands. Do we acknowledge their needs when we come to the table? If we don't, is it really the Lord's Table that we come to?

The Lord's Supper is food for spiritual nourishment. And it is more than a ritual observance. It includes an ethical imperative. As Christians all over our globe gather around the Table tonight, may it remind us of the ethical imperative of this celebration.

Let every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord.