

Pass the Bread
1 Corinthians 11: 17-32

Some years ago, I occasionally had to travel out of town on business. Other than being away from my lovely wife, the thing I disliked the most about it was eating dinner alone. I would often feel uncomfortable when the hostess asked, "are you dining alone this evening?" Eating alone can become a routine thing for those folks who live by themselves but given a choice most of us would probably prefer to share our table with a close friend or relative.

Yet on the other hand I remember stopping for lunch at an Amish restaurant near Millersburg Ohio where I was promptly greeted and seated at a large table with a group of other diners whom I had never met before. At first it was an unsettling experience, as I was somewhat apprehensive about asking the farmer in bib overalls and a green John Deere hat next to me to pass the homemade bread sitting just out of arms reach. My stomach soon won out over my shyness and before long we were discussing the events of the day while eating warm homemade bread and creamy peanut butter. There is something about sharing a meal that can bring people together.

We know from the Scriptures that it can also have the opposite effect. The words that we just heard were written to the church by the apostle Paul in response to a horrible sin. Holy Communion was first instituted by Christ to be a means of grace and a source of unity and because of their selfishness and division it had become barely recognizable. Some accused others of being unworthy to be there. Others ate or drank so much that they became drunk and caused those at the end of the line to go home hungry.

John Wesley explains Paul's concerns about unworthiness this way: Paul says not one word about being unworthy to eat and drink. Rather he is speaking about those that eat and drink unworthily, taking Communion in such a rude and disorderly way that one was hungry, and one was drunken. It was having no consideration for the needs of the person behind you. In other words, it is a warning about what happens when we are thinking only of our needs and desires, rather than the needs and desires of the entire body of Christ. It is not a warning against being unworthy to receive holy communion but a warning against the sins of selfishness, conflict and division.

Unity comes when we are thinking of the needs and desires of the entire body of Christ rather than our own.

In his book *Sunday Dinner* Methodist Bishop William Willimon interprets Paul's words in a similar way- "they were eating their own selfish meal rather than the Lords Supper. Each person was eating for himself or herself, defiling the unity which the church seeks". He goes a step further to say that Paul's test for the validity of our worship is not the qualifications of the celebrant, correct formulae, and proper rubrics but the quality of the community's life together. In other words, **the standard is how well we embrace worship as a time for *us and Jesus* rather than a time for *me and Jesus*.** We may arrive not knowing one another but we certainly should not leave that way.

Bishop Willimon goes on to say that "solitary worshipers with eyes glued to individual bulletins, singing from individual hymnals, eating individual wafers and sipping from individual glasses are a poor image of what God wants to do for us on Sunday. When I think of the brokenness of modern life, the tragic, lonely detachment we suffer, I can think of no more expressive symbol of this detachment than a miserly, plastic, disposable thimble of a glass in which watered down, antiseptic juice is offered to God's people". Of course, we know there may be times when the individual cup is a necessary option, perhaps such a time as this. But those should be exceptions rather than the norm. By design, worship and communion are things the church should do together. John Wesley put it this way-Christianity is a social religion; to turn it into a solitary thing is to destroy it. The secular world would like nothing more than to see that happen and they are doing their best to help us do that very thing.

We do not need that kind of help. It seems to me that one of the best ways we can begin to tear down the walls that divide us is to learn to worship and share a meal together at Christ's table. It is no secret that the family that prays together and eats together stays together. As we share Christ's holy table with each other and with millions of others across the globe this morning, let us be even more aware of His command to us to love and serve one another. As we eat and drink let us be reminded that we share one more thing in common- the love of Christ. To quote bishop Willimon once again **we practice eating as the body of Christ so that we may become the body of Christ.** Practice makes us perfect. Let us begin now. Pass the bread!