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October 1, 2017 (World Communion Sunday – Fall Hospitality Series)
I Corinthians 11:17-34
Vertical and Horizontal

Hearing again the Apostle Paul's words to the church in Corinth makes me thankful that it was to them, and not to us here at Waterford. Paul lacks affirmation and encouragement within this text, and instead clearly articulates the places where the believers are missing the mark of what it means to be a faithful follower of Jesus in a united faith community. Perhaps we should be thankful that the church in Corinth was struggling, because since they were then we too receive this helpful teaching on the Lord's Supper and relationships within the body of Christ.

Today is the third Sunday in our fall series on hospitality as well as the Sunday we will join with others around the world in recognizing World Communion Sunday. It is quite fitting that these two realities are combined today. Later in our worship we will gather around the table and receive the bread and the cup and then share it with our brothers and sisters. As we are hosted by God we will then extend hospitality to each other and in doing so highlight both the vertical and horizontal dimensions within communion.

Let us back up though and unpack what is happening in 1st Corinthians, and then think about how Anabaptists over the ages have lived into this text, and then finally consider what are the implications for us today on World Communion Sunday and within this series of hospitality.

Verses 23-25 of our passage are very familiar to us as we hear these words every time we celebrate communion. In addition it is also always part of the lectionary readings for Maundy Thursday during Holy Week. However, we rarely look at the broader context of these verses that indicate implications of these verses within the chapter. As we expand out we begin to hear of conflict, trouble, and division happening within the faith community of Corinth. Paul's sarcastic

exaggeration clearly comes through in his line of rhetorical questioning in verse 22. The questioning leads him to mockingly ask, “Shall I praise you?” To which he answers, “Certainly not in this matter!”

As we hear this text from our North American lenses we might struggle to understand what exactly the problem is, and where the conflict resides. Within our lenses we might superimpose our understanding of the Lord’s Supper in which we celebrate it just a couple times a year, and during that celebration receive a tiny piece of bread and a swallow of grape juice... not a context in which someone is going to walk away physically full or drunk from wine consumption. However, the church in Corinth as part of the Early Church had very different practices and understandings related to the Lord’s Supper.

We could neatly summarize the conflict and division within the church of Corinth by simply stating that the members of the church are behaving according to acceptable social norms. They are in fact acting just like they have been taught to act. They are living into the social stratification of their society that has been taught as normative and essential. The crux of the problem occurs when Paul points out that they are not gathered within their social context but instead as a gathered body of Christ. It is here at this table that Christ invites all to come, all to receive, all to be joined together into one body in which Christ is the head. In Christ there is no social stratification. In Christ there is neither Jew nor Greek, male nor female, documented nor undocumented, slave nor free, Republican nor Democrat, old nor young, rich nor poor, and the list could go on. The crux of the problem is that the church in Corinth has not allowed the ways of Jesus to be permeated to every corner of their lives. Instead, as exhibited in their observing the Lord’s Supper, there are parts of their lives that remain fully under the guiding presence and structure of the broader society.

During this time your status was essential to understanding your place and position in relationship to others. Remembering that the Early Church would not have had a nice building like we do, they gathered together in homes. It would have been the wealthier members of the faith community that would have been in a position to host others. The society norms would have dictated that you broke bread with others of your social class standing. So a wealthier household would invite others from their social level to come to eat. If others from lower social levels were invited, they would experience different treatment and different food.

Those of the same higher level would be invited deep into the house to recline around the table alongside of the host and to eat and drink the very best food and the very best drink available – to eat and drink to their hearts' content. However, those of lower levels would have been placed further from the host, outside the dining area, perhaps in the hallway, and then even lower levels would have been placed outside perhaps in the courtyard. In those locations they would have been served lower quantities of food and of lesser quality. While the higher class would have experienced an abundance, those of the lower classes would have experienced a sense of scarcity. This point was even more poignant as the upper classes could have arrived earlier to begin eating while those in the lower classes would have had jobs in the workforce that would have delayed their arrival. So when they were able to arrive to the party, the party would have already been in full swing.

Then there would be the servants who were present to serve everyone in the various classes while they themselves would not be privy to any of the food or drink; even that which was served to those gathered clear out in the courtyard.

In 1st Corinthians chapter eleven Paul is critiquing how the body of Christ functions as they gather together to break bread. Here Paul paints the picture of how the church is simply

going about the normative practices and expectations of the society around them. The rich eat their fill, and drink to the point of intoxication, while the poor remain hungry, cast aside to the outer circles.

After Paul outlines the problem he draws them back to the essence of why they are gathered as a group of believers. Beginning in verse twenty-three he rehearses Jesus' words at the Last Supper. There he took the bread and the cup and gave thanks and served it to others. It is here that we hear the explicit theological statement, "Whenever you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes again." By joining in the Lord's Supper we live into our covenantal relationship with Jesus that is lived out in community with others. Both the vertical and the horizontal. Paul's critique of the church in Corinth is his belief that "Any celebration of the Lord's Supper that fails to exemplify the scandalous message of the cross is not the Lord's Table at all."ⁱ "While this way of behaving might have been "normal" in the culture of Corinth, for Paul it is unacceptable, especially since the Lord's Supper was intended to demonstrate the unity of the church in the mutual dependence on grace of God shown in the death and resurrection of Jesus."ⁱⁱ The church was going through the words that recalled the Last Supper, however, their actions were preaching a completely difference message.

Gerald Mast, one of my professors from Bluffton University, wrote a book entitled "Go to Church: Change the World." In this book he has a whole chapter devoted to our Anabaptist understanding of communion. Gerald writes:

In Jesus' life and ministry we find the most miraculous social and economic transformation taking place around the most ordinary practices: sharing bread and drink together around a table. Whether by including sinners and social outcasts at his table...Jesus showed that inclusive and just table fellowship is a central feature of the reign of God.ⁱⁱⁱ

As Anabaptists we also closely link communion with our decision to respond to Jesus' invitation to all and choose to join the church through the waters of baptism. We also closely link it with the practice of footwashing as we live into Jesus' example and teaching in John chapter 13. While gathered with the disciples in the upper room during the Passover, Jesus gets up during the meal and assumes the role of the servant. The very role of the one who in the societal norms would not have received anything to eat or drink at the gathering. Jesus picks up the basin and the towel and kneels before the disciples and picks up their dirty, sweaty, mud caked feet and begins to wash them and dry them with a towel around his waist. Ancient culture was familiar with footwashing and understood that it was the host's responsibility *as an act of hospitality* to have footwashing available. However, never would the host have lowered themselves to that level to actually do the footwashing.

In our Anabaptist tradition Gerald Mast again offers that:

the relationship between sharing bread and offering service is made explicit with the ritual of footwashing (after) the communion meal. Believers who have just offered one another bread and juice now kneel before each other with basin and towel to pour water over each other's feet and to wipe the feet dry with a towel. A dimension of this cleansing, of course, is the experience of mutual vulnerability and dependence that is strengthened in the act of giving and receiving the washing of feet. Barriers of status, ideology, age, gender, and occupation can fall away as we become first of all servants to each other.^{iv}

I can think of no better images than communion and footwashing to project to the society around us that we will *not* allow the society norms and social stratification to permeate within the context of our faith community. Instead, joining together around the table, waiting until all are served, and taking up the towel and basin communicates that we believe in the scandal of the cross. The scandal that has "reconfigured social barriers between slave and free, advantaged and

disadvantaged... (we choose to) profess faith in a Lord, who though having status equal to God, chose to serve all – even those who have nothing.”^v

This week I kept recalling Lyle Miller’s words to our high school graduates back in May. During second service Lyle preached on the text from John 13 where he encouraged the graduates to keep coming to church with their dirty feet. It is here in the body of Christ that we can let go of pretense and choose to be authentic to who we are and where we are at in life. Bringing our dirty feet is an act of faith that those in my body of faith will receive me, and even take the time to kneel down and help cleanse my feet of the filth and dirt of this world.

Perhaps you have already made the connections in this sermon to World Communion Sunday and our series on hospitality. Jesus’ table is huge, so huge that it is able to invite all to come and fellowship with him. There are no inner and outer circles. There are no distinctions between those who have responded to Jesus’ invitation. There is no hierarchy of culture, or language, or wealth, or gender, or skin color, or theology, or ideology. At the table we gather as believers to remember and profess and live into Jesus’ death and resurrection until he comes again. We gather to look across the table and declare you are part of me, and I am part of you. Together we become the body of Christ. I need you, you need me, and we are joined as we are hosted by Jesus. A vertical saving relationship that gives way to transformed horizontal relationships.

This whole sermon has been filled with a calling to engage in hospitality, especially with others within our faith community. I wish to conclude by offering a summary statement by author Danny Carroll. Carroll summarizes it this way:

The most profound opportunity to embody hospitality was and continues to be the celebration of the Lord’s Supper. The meal is grounded in the sacrifice of Jesus on the cross and is rooted in his final meal with his disciples. If hospitality is about opening oneself up

and giving oneself to others, if it is time of sharing with all who claim the faith with the full expectation of God's provision, then the conjunction of the Lord's Supper and the cross is a powerful demonstration of divine hospitality. All are welcome. We who were once enemies of God have been reconciled to him and have been baptized into one body; all stand as equals before the Lord. At the table, forgiven sinners embrace other sinners and forgive those who have committed transgressions against them... The Lord's Supper, so central a symbol of the person and work of Jesus, (is) inseparable from the practice of hospitality.^{vi}

Amen!

ⁱ Carla Works, *Commentary on 1 Corinthians 11:23-26*

https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=1596

ⁱⁱ Dwight Peterson, *Commentary on 1 Corinthians 11:23-26*

https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=279

ⁱⁱⁱ Gerald Mast, *Go to Church: Change the World* (Herald Press: Harrisonburg, Virginia), 95.

^{iv} Mast, *Go to Church*, 100.

^v Works, *Commentary*, https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=1596

^{vi} M. Daniel Carroll R., *Christians at the Border: Immigration, the Church, and the Bible* (Brazos Press: Grand Rapids, Michigan), 120-121.