

A New Community: “The Breaking of Bread”

May 21, 2023 A.M.
West Side Church of Christ
Searcy, Arkansas
Nathan Guy

Scripture Reading

“They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer” (Acts 2:42 NIV).

FOOD

Leg of Lamb with mint jelly glaze, rosemary roasted potatoes, honeyed carrots, followed by some sticky toffee pudding with tea. It has been years since I ate at the Punter in Cambridge, but I remember that meal. I can still taste that meal. And if you are starving, I apologize since you probably can taste that meal right now as well.

I bet we all can remember some of our favorite meals. Food has that quality to it. When God made the world, he called it good. Have you ever thought to yourself, “you know, food didn’t *have* to taste this good!” But it does.

Except, when it doesn’t. We remember one or two truly excellent meals. We probably also remember those truly horrible meals. The dish that called for a pinch of salt, not the pound of salt I accidentally poured in. The pie we left in the oven we thought we had turned off. We remember the truly great and the truly...not.

But neither is our usual story. Do you know what most households had for dinner last night? Leftovers. From Greek House? No. From Wal-Mart. The can section. That thing we made in the crock pot on Thursday that we lovingly call “soup.” You know—the thing made up of everything that was left in half-a-can in our refrigerator, before it would go to waste.

Most meals are ordinary. And because of that, we don’t think about those much. You eat 1,000 meals a year, and most of them are unremarkable. Can you even remember what you had for lunch last Tuesday? And yet...those thousands of unremarkable meals

have kept you alive, nourished your body, and made you who you are today. They were, says Tish Warren, your “daily bread.”¹ It’s funny, isn’t it? How a meal can nourish and sustain you—literally give you life—and we just take it for granted? We hardly even notice?

ASKING NEW QUESTIONS

Growing up, I heard lots of classes and sermons about the Lord’s Supper. The questions I remember asking (the questions I remember my teachers asking, the questions I remember my preaching asking and answering) were the “who” “what,” “when” and “where” questions about the Lord’s Supper.

What does the Lord’s Supper consist of? Unleavened bread, I was told; and grape juice (some used wine, but more sensible Christians used Welch’s).

When do we take the Lord’s Supper? The day of the week is Sunday. Which Sunday? Every Sunday.

We dabbled in the “who” question: who is this for? “Baptized believers,” I was told, as mom gently slapped my hand grabbing for the juice while still a 6 year old pagan.

And we even discussed the “why” in a limited sense. If someone had asked young me why we take the Lord’s Supper I would have answered quickly with a 3-word response: Because it’s commanded.

Those are not bad answer. In fact, I think those answers are good answers to MY questions. But Tom Olbricht once taught me the Bible isn’t meant to answer our questions nearly as much as it is written to question us. as it is meant to question us.

In 1 Cor 10-11, Paul talks about the Lord’s supper in more detail than any other place in the New Testament. And he is very concerned about it how they were doing it. They were doing it wrong. He wanted them to do it right. We know they took it when they met, but wouldn’t you know, “he says nothing about how frequently, when, or where they meet.”²

¹ Tish Harrison Warren, *Liturgy of the Ordinary: Sacred Practices in Everyday Life* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Books, 2016), p. 65.

² David E. Garland, *1 Corinthians*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003) [Kindle]

Instead, Paul asks the Corinthians two questions about the supper. Two questions meant to challenge us. And so this morning, I have invited Paul to ask those same two questions of us.

QUESTION 1: DO WE KNOW THAT WE ARE PARTICIPANTS?

The Apostle's first question is found in 1 Corinthians chapter 10, verse 16.

“The cup of blessing that we bless, is it not a fellowship (participation) in the blood of Christ? The bread that we break, is it not a participation in the body of Christ?” (1 Cor 10:16).

To put it in language for today: “This is the body of Christ. Do you not know that you all are participants?”

In its immediate context, the first thing that jumps out at us is the negative force of this point. Paul is faced with a church made up of former pagans, still fraternizing with pagan temple worship. A major problem in the Old Testament was the problem of syncretism. A little Yahweh, and a little Baal. Cover all your bases.

For the Corinthians it was a Saturday night pagan feast followed by a Sunday morning table with the Lord. We don't have that problem anymore, right?

Maybe it's not even a Saturday night problem for his church anymore. Is it possible that even Sunday morning has become about something more than Jesus and Him crucified?

This is a holy event, and living intentionally unholy lives 24/6, then coming to the table to cash in on our holy elixir, is never what Jesus had in mind. We know that coming to Jesus does that—erases your sins, changes your life, regardless of what you've done. But even in the first century some Christians took that amazing grace and said “lets continue in sin so God can give us more grace!” And Paul says “what's wrong with you?!”

Paul's question about participation leads him to offer this bold announcement: “You cannot drink the cup of the Lord and the cup of demons. You cannot partake of the table of the Lord and the table of demons” (1 Cor 10:21).

Years ago, Rick Atchley said “when something goes wrong in our country, we usually point to Hollywood or Washington. Why are we always complaining about how bad Hollywood is as if we are surprised that sinners sin? Why are we surprised that sinners

sin? The problem is not that sinners sin. The problem is that the church can't wait til Saturday night to spend \$20 to watch them do it!"

Do you know that you are participants in the body and blood of Christ? And since all of life is worship, and since all of life is in the presence of God, I invite him into everything I do. Is what I do here today consistent with how I feast with him every other day?

Ah, but do you see the positive force here, friends?

When Luke writes his gospel, he makes sure you know that Jesus ate meals with his followers (5:33). When 5000 hungry followers were fed by the master, they all ate and were satisfied (Lk 9:17). He ate with Pharisees—even the ruler of the Pharisees, reclining next to them at the table (7:36; 14:1). He ate and drank with tax collectors and sinners (5:30). Some of his most important teaching takes place around a table.

And so when he knew he was about to be betrayed, Jesus had one final meal with his disciples (Lk 22:14-20). That's what it's called. The "last" supper.

But it wasn't the last. Was it? Hardly anything about that night was the last. It wasn't the last time he would be betrayed. It wasn't the last time followers of his would tuck tail and run. It wouldn't be the last time Jesus would be rejected. But there was something that was "last." Do you know what it was? Satan was called the "accuser" all through Scripture. He always had something he could accuse us for. Something that legitimately barred us from feasting at the table with the Lord in the New Jerusalem on the final day. But no longer. In the cross, the accuser of the brethren has been cast down. And because of Jesus' sacrifice, the veil of the Temple was ripped from top to bottom. There is now *no condemnation* for those who are in Christ Jesus. And all are welcome at his table.

And so it was, that before Luke even finishes his gospel, followers of Jesus eat and drink with the Messiah himself. Two are walking on the road to Emmaus. They don't quite know what to make of all they have heard. But Jesus shows up among them. He talks with them. They love it so much, they ask him to stay for dinner. And all of the sudden, in Luke's story, he's not the guest anymore; he's the host. He takes bread, blesses it, and breaks it. Then he disappears. And there, at the table, the followers realize they had been with Jesus. In the next story, Jesus appears to his disciples, but Luke can't finish the story without including what at first seems like a throw-away line. Jesus asks if they have any food? And then, he eats before them.

In Acts 10:41, Peter tells the crowd about how special it is to be an Apostle. And to have seen the resurrected Lord. He appeared “not to all the people” says Peter, “but to us who had been chosen by God as witnesses, *who ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead.*”

Eating and drinking with Jesus was a staple part of life in the community of Christ. And it still is. He promised “I will drink this cup anew with you in my Father’s kingdom.” That great banquet table, described by the prophets—they spoke of the best meal you are ever going to have, and they said “that’s what will happen when God sets up his kingdom. It’s going to be glorious.” One day someone said to Jesus, “blessed is anyone who eats bread in the kingdom of God!” And we are! And so we feast now, with Christ in spirit, because we are already in the kingdom of God. And we also anticipate now, because we know there is still a future day when the kingdom shall be seen in all its glory when Christ returns in flesh. But we know that future day will include us! And so...we feast. We—the body of Christ. We are participants! That body was broken FOR you! It was given FOR you! One of the first charges after the resurrection was this: “the disciples stole the body.” No they didn’t! It was a gift! Jesus gave his body to his disciples. The same spirit that raised Jesus from the dead now dwells in you. We share his spirit, we share his heart, and we share his body. We are participants in the body and blood of the Lord, amen?!

There is a mistranslation a chapter later, where some older versions warn against taking the Supper “unworthily.” Are you kidding? No one is worthy! The most unworthy is the one who thinks he IS worthy! God welcomes the publican who stands in the doorway, beating his chest saying, “do not look upon me, a sinner.” He welcomes the prostitute who just yesterday learned “you don’t have to be defined by what you’ve done. He will take you as you are.” He welcomes broken people at the table. It’s a broken body after all. And to them...to you...Christ says “did you know that you are participants? This body and this blood...this is for you. Betrayers and sinners. This is for you!

QUESTION 2: DO YOU KNOW THERE ARE OTHERS HERE, TOO?

But that “mistranslation” I spoke of earlier still means something. While older versions have “unworthily” (which makes you think if you’ve been bad you aren’t welcome to the table), better translation read “in an unworthy manner” or “in a way that doesn’t fit the meaning.” You see, there is a way to do the Lord’s supper wrong. And the Corinthians figured out how--which prompted Paul’s second question.

“Do you not have houses to eat and drink in?,” asked Paul; “Or do you despise the church of God and humiliate those who have nothing? (1 Cor 11:22)

To put it in language for today: “You have come to the table *as* the body of Christ. Do you not know that others are invited here, too?”

I learned this week about “the long-handled spoon exercise” that goes like this:

you each tie a spoon to a broom handle, and then see how long it takes a table full of young people to work out how to eat the bowl of soup that’s in front of them. The answer, of course, is that they can’t, and everyone goes hungry. But what they can do is each feed the person opposite them across the table. And when they work that out, everyone gets a good meal.

It reminded me of the famous C. S. Lewis line—that hell is a banquet table filled to the brim with the finest of foods. But all the people around the table are skeletons. Because the forks are 4-feet long, and these self-centered heartless one refuse to feed each other.³

It’s easy to get caught up in consumerism and just be that: “a consumer.” But the supper is meant to challenge that assumption about myself and life. I’m not the only one invited. And this Supper is something meant to be shared.

Greco-Roman meals offered first class and second class seating. First class was the Triclinium or dining room. Space was limited, and all the guests reclined. Second class was back in the atrium, where people were forced to sit.⁴

To make matters worse, Corinth had just been through a severe famine. Can you imagine how the gap between the have’s and the have-not’s might have widened even more in a time of lean, when the “have’s” feast out in their plenty, while the “have not’s” wither on the vine? Paul could correct the problem by encouraging more donations to non-profits—you know, set up a soup kitchen, for example. No—Paul wants to change how they see the world when they see it through the broken body and poured out blood of the Lamb. If it’s the *Lord’s* Supper, and he’s the host, and his body and his blood are what we are eating—if we are sharing, participating, fellowshiping in the broken body of Christ—then we must welcome all to the table whom the Lord our God is calling.

We tend to read this section of scripture and ask questions like “what constitutes the right observance of the Lord’s Supper?” “Who should be included, and who should be

³ Sam Wells, “Heaven and Hell,” Sermon (Jan 19, 2011). <http://chapel-archives.oit.duke.edu/documents/January18HeavenandHellYorkChapel.pdf>

⁴ Jerome Murphy-O’Connor, *St. Paul’s Corinth: Texts and Archaeology* (Michael Glazier, 1983), p. 159.

excluded.” “Is it a sacrifice offering, or a memorial meal, or a celebration of resurrection?” But as one New Testament writer puts it, “the only question that Paul raises is this: Does what is done proclaim the Lord’s death or does it advertise our selfishness?”⁵

This was supposed to be the *Lord’s* Supper. But it wasn’t. it was *their* supper. You see, the Lord’s dinner is “intended to convey to every participant that he or she is somebody precious to God.” But instead, the Corinthian brunch shouted to half the group that “they were worthless nobodies.” In the words of David Garland, “It was tainted by the deadly combination of indulgence and indifference.”⁶

And they learned it from their culture. Listen to a first-century Roman describe his frustration at a situation just like this at a meal he was invited to:

Since I am asked to dinner, no longer, as before, a purchased guest, why is not the same dinner served to me as to you? You take oysters fattened in the Lucrina lake, I suck a mussel through a hole in the shell; you get mushrooms, I take hog funguses... Golden with fat, a turtledove gorges you with its bloated rump; there is set before me a magpie that has died in its cage. Why do I dine without you although, Ponticus, I am dining with you?...⁷

I don’t for one minute think in our church today, giving the same cup of juice and the same piece of bread to every person who asks on Sunday morning despises or humiliates anyone. I’m glad we all get the same. But the question persists. Is this the Lord’s supper, or is this *my* supper?

Do I harbor any lingering doubts about my brother because of what he is wearing? Because of how he smells? Did I choose where I sit because of how I feel about someone on the other side of the auditorium? Did I clench my purse a bit tighter when he passed by me? Do I hope that she won’t ask me to lunch? Do I really not want to be associated with them?

By the second century, Christianity was taking a foothold in large cities like Rome and Carthage. Rumors began to circulate about this band called Christians. Some said they were a cannibal cult, meeting under cover of darkness to eat flesh and drink blood. But people kept coming to Christianity. Do you know why? A Christian named Tertullian

⁵ Beverly Gaventa, “You Proclaim The Lord’s Death: 1 Corinthians 11:26 and Paul’s Understanding of Worship,” *Review & Expositor* 80 (3): 385.

⁶ Garland, *1 Corinthians*.

⁷ Martial, *Epigrams* 3.60. Quoted in Garland, *1 Corinthians*.

wrote a little book and said “do you know why people keep joining this group even with all the swirling rumors?”

“It is mainly the deeds of a love so noble that lead many to put a brand upon us. See how they love one another, they say...how they are ready even to die for one another, they say.”⁸

APPLYING THE TESTS

So what are the tasks Paul gives to ensure that we are asking the right questions?

There are two.

First, examine yourselves. It was *before* the supper in Mark’s gospel that Jesus said “one of you is going to betray me.” And each one, in turn, replied “it is not I, is it?” as if to say, “that’s terrible, but it’s not my fault!” They seem more concerned with their innocence than Jesus’ fate or the terrible fate about to befall one of their own. It seems, then, that “self-examination requires focusing on more than just oneself.”⁹

Second, says Paul, “discern the body.” I love the shape of the cross that is formed by noting the first two commandments. Love God (vertical line) and love your neighbor (horizontal line). And the second is like the first. They touch. Thus forms a cross.

And so it is with this line: “discern the body.” Did you notice how Paul doesn’t mention the wine again, when he says to discern the body. He just mentions the bread. And like the bread being one loaf, says Paul, we are “one body.” One way we discern the body is by looking around. It’s easy to spend the supper sitting alone. Thinking alone. Discerning alone. That is not wrong—as long as it’s an opportunity to ask if my life is being lived alone. As Keck puts it, discerning the body is not just about the piece of bread *on* the table but the assembled bodies *at* the table. That’s the horizontal line.

But there is also a vertical line. When we discern the body, we discern Jesus. We remember that this is the *Lord’s* Supper. In every sense. He is the host. And he is the main course.

But these two are related. As we discern this Jesus, it changes how we treat everyone around us. “Let this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus” wrote Paul to the Philippians. Think on Jesus. Think like Jesus. And when you are done reflecting—that’s

⁸ Tertullian, *Apology* 39.

⁹ Garland, *1 Corinthians*.

chapter 2—go and tell the sweet older ladies on the back row to get along—that’s chapter 4. Discern the body...then, discern the body.

Do I want that? Do I want all of God’s people at one table? Do I want to share my bread with those who need it most? Do I want to bring the life of Jesus into every area of my life? Do I want the holy meal to tell the holy story in every step I take?

If so...come to the table. For He has invited you. When a host shared a meal with guests, they formed a bond of relationship that was not to be taken lightly. Among the Greeks, eating together made you equals, and it was a way to bring unity: you didn’t speak against each other or act disunited when you were at table. And the supper Jesus envisioned was one of men and women dining together. Masters and slaves dining together. Jews and gentiles dining together. Tomorrow’s religious leaders and yesterday’s prostitutes. At the same table. There is room for you. I know that...because there is room for me.

We are one body. We show that we are one body when we gather to take the body AS one body. But unlike every civic club brunch or luncheon, we gather as the body of Christ. And we participate in the Lord’s Supper. Can’t you tell? Just look at how we love one another.