

GOOD NEWS AROUND THE TABLE
I Corinthians 11:17-26

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I spent three days last week in Louisville at an organization called the Louisville Institute. I was with a group of 30 ministers from around the United States and Canada; we represented a number of different Christian denominations. Each of us had been awarded a grant from Louisville to pursue a particular project. The three days were intense; we each presented our project idea, and then the others in our group asked questions and made suggestions.

My project is about communion and the words we say at the communion table, and what they mean to each of us.

It's always interesting when you meet a new group of people for the first time, like I did last week. Some people are shy, some are more outgoing; some flit around the room like social butterflies, some sidle right up next to the group leaders. It's sort of like the junior high lunchroom all over again, or that first school dance. Who's popular? Who's not? Who fits in? Who doesn't?

I'm told that some people have similar feelings when they move into a retirement community. Who gets to sit at which table?

There is something very basic about this jockeying for position, something almost primal. We each want, don't we, to be noticed? We each want to belong. Whether we're at a PTA meeting or a whether we're running for president, in some way, we want our lives to matter, and we want to belong. We want to feel a part of something.

Paul writes a letter to the church at Corinth, to these brand-new Christians who were just beginning to figure out what it means to be a part of something bigger than themselves. This letter is full of emotion; we can easily see that Paul loves this church deeply and wants the best for it. It's the kind of letter you might write to a younger sibling, to someone who looks up to you as a mentor; the kind of letter you might write to a daughter or son. Some passages may sound harsh, but it's not the harshness of anger; it's the passion of someone who is committed to providing guidance.

When Paul tells the church how it is they are to observe the Lord's Supper, he gives very detailed advice. These gatherings of the early church were in homes. The believers would gather for weekly worship in the home of one of their leaders. The gathering would start with a meal, a real meal -- not a ceremonial meal -- then there would be singing, and prayer, and there would be the observance of communion, the symbolic meal.

But here's what started happening as the years went by. The gatherings of the church started to look like the other social gatherings of Corinth in the first century. If you went to the meeting of your trade guild in first century Corinth, you'd see that the owners of the businesses gathered in one room, usually the nicest room in the house; the middle managers gathered in another, and the hourly workers were usually found outside or in the courtyard. Everyone knew their place. That was the social structure to which everyone was accustomed. Pretty soon the church was no different. If you were a wealthy member of the church, you would eat with your friends in the inner room of the house. You'd be served the best food and wine. People of less status would eat in

the outer rooms or the courtyard, on less costly food. Servants would not eat at all, but would serve the others.

When it was time for worship, the people would come together, but even though they were together physically, the differences persisted. Some people had eaten well, while some hadn't eaten at all. Some were drunk on too much wine. Worship was a formality, perhaps with some meaning to individuals, but it did not bring the body of Christ together.

Word spreads to Paul that this is happening, and he wants to put an end to it. He addresses it head-on; there is nothing wishy-washy about his words.

“This may be the way you choose to live in Corinth,” he says, “but it will not be tolerated on the Sabbath, not on the day of worship.” “You see, communion is a new covenant.” The first covenant, the one God gave to the people of Israel through Moses, knit those people together as one nation. This new covenant creates a new people, the body of Christ, the church. It creates unity, a bond that is stronger than any social or economic division. You are no longer defined by your class or by your bank account. You are Christians, you are disciples, you are followers of Jesus; that is your identity and it makes you one people.

Jesus gives us this meal and says, “Do this in remembrance of me.” When you eat this bread and drink this cup, remember me. That word, “re-member” has more than one meaning. It has to do with memory, with calling to mind the life and words of Jesus. It also has to do with unifying the body. To “re-member” is to put back together something that once was apart. We are all members of the body of Christ. At this table, our differences fade away. What is important is what we have in common.

We can't come to this table the way Jesus intended if some of us are well-fed and some of us are hungry. We can't experience the spirit of this meal if some of us feel welcome and some of us feel excluded. We can only gather around this table if we are committed to feeding the hungry, welcoming the lonely, reaching out to the forgotten.

Think about what that first communion meal was like. Jesus had spent the week in Jerusalem. He'd entered the city for the Passover festival, one of thousands of other pilgrims. Yet for him it felt different. He knew he was being watched. He knew that the religious authorities were suspicious of him, and the political authorities tolerated no threats to their power. As the week went on, the drumbeat in his own mind grew louder. Thursday night was Passover, and he shared the meal with his best friends. Yet aren't those the people we find hardest to get along with sometimes? The people you spend the most time with? Friends, family, coworkers...you think you trust them, but what if you can't?

Is there anything more uncomfortable than sitting down to eat Thanksgiving dinner with the relative you like the least? You try to ignore your feelings, you try to be generous, but their every habit annoys you. Even worse, do you know what it's like to lose faith in someone you once relied on? It was not a perfect Passover meal for Jesus. He knew that Judas was drifting away. Yet he doesn't express his anger. He doesn't kick Judas out. Perhaps Jesus thought that the table would cause Judas to change his mind. Perhaps he was setting an example for us. We sometimes have to share tables, and meals, and lives with those we like the least, even with people we no longer

trust...holding out hope that reconciliation and forgiveness are possible. That the body will be re-membered, put back together.

What if we approach the communion table that way this morning? Believing that it is the will of God that we recognize one another as brother and sister, believing that it is God's will that the human family become one.

In this meal we enter into the brokenness of the life of Jesus. "This is my body," he says, "broken for you." And we know what brokenness is like. We know the brokenness of relationships and promises and how it feels when our own spirits are broken. The world itself seems broken and so are all our human systems and the hearts of so many people. We need to be re-membered back into wholeness.

"This is the new covenant", Jesus says. A new promise that you will be made into one people.

And this is the table where all are welcome. Those who feel whole and joyful and those who feel broken and sad. The prom queens, the quarterbacks, the cheerleaders - - and those who were cut from the team first and never asked to the dance. Those who eat at the finest restaurants and those who eat from the dumpster. Your most annoying relative and you on your very worst day when all your flaws are showing. We're welcome and we're loved and we're remembered.

Then we're fed and nourished and sent back out into the world to witness to the good news, that wholeness is possible, that forgiveness is real, that hospitality is not just good manners but God's middle name.