

Homily for Maundy Thursday, 3/28/2024
St. Thomas Sunnyvale CA
Lou Poulain, LLP

FOR AS OFTEN AS YOU EAT THIS BREAD AND DRINK THIS CUP...

I am particularly fond of Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians. Following Paul's description of the Eucharist we hear from tonight, there is a beautiful bit that you have certainly heard if you've attended many church weddings. To the Corinthians, Paul writes about the qualities of love. You know it:

“Love is patient, love is kind. Love is not envious, or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on having its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never ends. ...”

What perfect words to mark the celebration of loving commitment between two people!

Paul follows that with words that profoundly shape how we understand what the Church is. Paul tells the Corinthians, and us, that we all belong to each other, that each one of us is indispensable, that we all have a role to play and a place at the table. You'll remember: “The eye cannot say to the hand, ‘I do not need you.’ nor can the ear say to the foot, ‘I do not need you.’ Paul explicates this powerful analogy. We are all parts of a body. The body is only complete and entire when all the parts are together, being what they are supposed to be and doing what they are supposed to do. He then brings the idea home: We are, all together; each one of us wanted and needed, each one of us integral, and indispensable, each and every one a part of the body, and that body *is* the Body of Christ in the world! Doctrinally, this idea is called “The Mystical Body of Christ.” And further, each one of us is the recipient of unique gifts, talents and abilities, given to us not for just ourselves, but for the common good. This is the very heart of what the Church is; and this idea is so important we hear it every single year at Pentecost.

Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians is powerful, and beautiful. These profound ideas about love, and the graphic images describing how we are inexorably connected together, flow out of his discussion of the Lord's Supper, that commemorative meal we experience every Sunday.

And these words were written by Paul to a church in serious trouble.

We wouldn't know that by reading the very short selection we heard tonight. To understand why this is all important, we need to hear some of what leads us to Paul's description of Jesus' action at the Last Supper, because the mistakes that the Corinthians were making in their celebration of the Lord's Supper were serious enough to provoke a harsh warning from Paul.

Let me share with you the context.

Just before our reading tonight, Paul writes:

Now, in the following instructions I do not commend you, because when you come together it is not for the better, but for the worse. For, to begin with, when you come together as a church, I hear that there are divisions among you, and to some extent I believe it. Indeed there have been factions among you, for only so will it become clear who among you are genuine. **When you come together, it is not really to eat the Lord's supper.** For when the time comes to eat, each of you goes ahead with your own supper, and one goes hungry and another becomes drunk. What! Do you not have homes to eat and drink in? Or do you show contempt for the church of God and humiliate those who have nothing? What should I say to you? Should I commend you? **In this matter I do not commend you!**

As I said... harsh.

He follows the description we heard, of Jesus' words and actions at the Last Supper with these words:

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. Examine yourselves, and only then eat of the bread and drink of the cup. **For all who eat and drink without discerning the body, eat and drink judgement against themselves.**

Paul's complaint is clear. We see from this description that the eucharistic practice at the church in Corinth was to celebrate the memorial within a communal supper. There are other indications in the New Testament that this was widespread, and probably the common practice throughout all the communities of believers in the early years of the apostolic era. That would change, and perhaps not only because the communities increased in numbers making common meals impractical, and potentially dangerous in times of persecution. Perhaps a principle reason for the change was that common meals in that time reflected the Roman practices of class distinction.

Jesus himself taught against the practice of seating the dignitaries, the *somebodies*, at the front tables, and relegating the common folk, the *nobodies*, to the periphery. Jesus said that at the inauguration of the "Kingdom of God" the least, the last and the lost, the *nobodies*, would be first, and the powerful and influential, the *somebodies*, would be last.

Jesus' teaching ran profoundly against the prevailing culture two thousand years ago, and it continues to do now.

We understand that what Jesus did at the Last Supper was to establish what we call a *sacrament*.

Let's take a time out. What is a sacrament? The word, in Latin, *sacramentum* originally referred to the exchange of a token between two people, to symbolize the solemnity of a promise or vow. A contemporary example would be the wedding rings exchanged at the ceremony, and worn as a mark of the couple's marriage status. The church appropriated the word to refer to "[an] outward and visible sign of inward and spiritual grace, given by Christ as sure and certain means by which we receive that grace." (this definition is taken from the catechism in the back of your prayerbook)

Using that churchy word, can we not say that Paul's concern was that the practices of the Corinthian community were actually an **anti-sacrament**; a **counter-sign**, signifying not grace, but *disgraceful* divisions within their community.

So, now, listen again to Paul's words: Examine yourselves, and only then eat of the bread and drink of the cup. **For all who eat and drink without discerning the body, eat and drink judgement against themselves.**

Historically, the church interpreted these words "...without discerning the body" in reference to the consecrated bread and wine now "the Body of Christ" and "the Blood of Christ." This might be how you have personally understood this text. The nature of the changed status of the bread and wine after the words of institution were pronounced became an obsession of the medieval church. They adopted a Latin word to describe their understanding that the nature of the bread and wine were truly changed. That word was "transubstantiation."

But I have come to believe that, when we read the central sections of I Corinthians altogether, there is an entirely different focus in Paul's judgment.

Think for a moment about Paul's analogy of the body and its many members. Everybody belongs, and every one of us is needed — indeed indispensable. Everybody - all of us together - from everywhere and throughout time - belong to the body, The Mystical Body of Christ active in the world working toward the complete actualization of God's Kingdom. This is, I believe, what Paul means when he says, **"For all who eat and drink without discerning the body, eat and drink judgement against themselves."**

If we do not ... if we cannot ... discern the Body of Christ containing ALL its members, we eat and drink judgment against ourselves. It is less about recognizing Christ's body and blood in bread and wine, and more about recognizing Christ's presence among us in the least, the last and the lost.

This is not a unique problem within the church. Less than 50 years after Paul wrote his letter, after all the apostles had died, when church leadership was entirely in the hands

of successors, that one of the earliest of the Church Fathers, Clement of Rome, wrote a letter to a church that was in trouble, torn asunder by rivalry and division. We still have that letter, addressed by Clement to the Church at Corinth.

Lest we think that these were problems only for the early church, let me share a story about a business trip I took to Philadelphia in the fall of 2001. I was traveling with a coworker who was an Episcopalian. We'd flown out on Saturday night on the redeye and after arriving and getting our car, we drove to the historic district and we were walking around. He suggested we go to church, and he looked up St. Stephen's Episcopal Church on 10th street, just a few blocks away. We walked down to attend the 10:00 service. The church was stunningly beautiful; granite with marble altar and pulpit. I was especially taken with the massive balcony stretching all the way around three quarters of the church. At coffee hour, I chatted with the rector, Father Stephen. I commented on the massive "choir loft." He laughed, and said that when the church was built in 1808 to serve a somewhat wealthy area of Philadelphia, they needed a large slave gallery, since blacks were not permitted to sit in the same pews as the white congregants. ... and they were not permitted to come to the altar rail until every last white person had already received communion.

Anti-sacraments and counter-signs.

Our contemporary circumstances include these very same kinds of issues, including race and class. None of us are immune from our cultural biases. The question is how intentionally, and persistently, we shine the light of Jesus' gospel on the inequities and injustices that exist all around us.

Tonight we commemorate Jesus' final meal with his disciples. The synoptic gospels tell us of the passover supper, and bread Jesus broke which he identified with his body, and the cup he blessed, which he identified as the blood of a new covenant.

We also hear from John's Gospel, the story of Jesus washing his disciples feet, instituting a new model of servant leadership and a new commandment to love one another.

Tonight is a night to celebrate with gratitude these gifts, and to recommit to be attentive to these sacraments, these signs and symbols of our mission as followers of Jesus.

For as often as we eat this bread and drink the cup, we proclaim the Lord's death until he comes.

Amen.

