

“THE BODY OF CHRIST”

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Fourth in a Lenten series on great preachers

Psalm 23; Epistle 1 Corinthians 11:17-34

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preached by the Rev. Elizabeth Oettinger

There can truly be no Lord's supper, no communion, no Holy Eucharist in a community whose members do not love each other. We may as well call it a poorly planned dinner party.

There were divisions among the Corinthian saints. Some were authentic and some were not. The comportment of authentic believers exposed those who used Christianity for personal, economic, or political purposes (v. 18-19).

Several things were wrong with the supper, due in large part to the stratification of the Corinthians.

There were private separate networking parties going on. Class and social status separated people. Those who could get off early or did not have to work rushed to eat the best food and drink the best wine before the others arrived.

Many were left humiliated, possibly because they were excluded from the meal entirely, or because they did not have the means to contribute to the lavish preparations, and felt guilty partaking of the meal.

It was a mockery of the common meal, initiated by Jesus, designed to be accessible to all, in remembrance of him. The meal was to commemorate an act of love by sharing in love with one another (1 Cor. 10: 16-17). Authentic remembering was to imitate Christ, not just to have a dinner in his honor. The meal was to bring the high down and the low up until they were one in Christ.

Paul gave a warning, “Be careful how you take this supper.”

Paul had in mind the lack of loving concern that the Corinthians had for one another. He told them, if they partook in the supper unworthily they classed themselves with those who murdered Jesus. He then recommended the importance of self-examination, leading to reconciliation with God and each other, prior to participation in the supper. He was encouraging the Corinthians to evaluate the authenticity of their relationship to others in the body of Christ. *You must properly discern the Savior's body.* They were coming together supposedly to honor Jesus' body and all the while they were abusing it. They did not know who is really included in the body of Christ.

Beloved, we are the body of Christ. You cannot celebrate the Savior's body if you do not love and take care of the whole body. Why is the church sick and feeble? Why is the church of little effect in critical times? Because the hand is saying to the foot, “I don't need you... touch is what is important.” The eyes say to the stomach, “I don't need you ... seeing is all that is essential to the body.”

The church at Corinth did not discern the Savior's body. The church of today still does not discern it. Class, denominations, political affiliation, race, nationality, gender identification, and affectional orientation separate us, and we use the church and the name of Jesus to reinforce these divisions and barriers. And because of this, our influence is weak, sick, and in some cases dead.

Paul suggests a remedy to bring the church back to a real remembrance of what authentic communion embodies. Verse 33 says when you come together for the supper, wait for one another. I recall when I was about eleven or twelve my family determined that I was the best candidate to travel with my maternal grandmother on a trip to see my aunt in Seaside, California. We had a number of major mishaps ... we bought tickets to the wrong city, my grandfather ran over my grandmother's alligator shoe as he pulled off, the lady in front of my grandmother leaned back too far and my grandmother pushed her up into her ice cream cone, the bags went on to the wrong city, while my truly "sanctified" grandmother and I waited for my aunt in a very smoky, dimly lit Spanish-speaking roadside bar. It was the trip from hell.

We finally got to my aunt's house, and I huffed and puffed the bags inside and sat down to rest, at which time my grandmother requested that I run yet another errand. Well, I had had it, and I protested, letting my grandmother know how unjust it was for her to ask me to do another thing. My protestations were out of character for me, as we just didn't say certain things to my grandmother, and while I was protesting I looked for the closest escape route. Her response was also out of character. She said, "Yvette honey, it is a privilege for you to 'wait on' me." I didn't see it that way then, but now as she sleeps in Jesus, I agree. It was a profound privilege for me to "wait on" my grandmother.

Paul tells the Corinthian saints to wait for each other. This implies that everyone has a right to be a part of the supper, although we are not all in the same place at the same time. We don't all see things the same. We don't all believe things exactly the same. We can wait for each other. Some of us go fast and some take a little time. We can wait for each other. We don't all have the same balances in our bank accounts, but the table of Jesus is for all of us. Some of us are mourning the loss of yesterday and afraid of tomorrow. We can wait for each other. We can hope and believe that those who say cruel things today will say kind things tomorrow. We can wait for each other. I must bear with you and you must bear with me. We can't give up on one another, for we are all the body of Christ and we can wait for each other.