

Sunday November 21, 2021
 Lesson 12: Communion Connections
 Scripture: 1 Corinthians 11: 17-34

Context:

The 2021 fall series is titled “Belong.” Each unit will focus on a way the people of God are called to seek community and discover how God has connected us to one another. Today we continue the unit “The Fellowship of the Table,” an exploration of the table our Lord provides to us and how we can share life with each other in meals and hospitality. The lesson “Communion Connections” illustrates how receiving Holy Communion can provide a powerful experience of unity within a diverse congregation.

The lesson comes from the book of First Corinthians, a book found in the New Testament. First and Second Corinthians are both excerpts of letters written to the church in Corinth. Much of the letters written to the Corinthians deal with behavioral issues and how members of the church relate to one another. The first letter constantly addresses the divisions in the community which has been a consistent concern of the letter.¹ The focal passage deals with Paul taking the Lord’s Supper tradition to address issues of inequality and conflict in the church.² There are a few notes to keep in mind as he addresses the church.

The first concerns what he means when he discusses the Lord’s Supper. This particular event is not about the Holy Communion we think of when reflecting on what we receive in corporate worship. For one thing, there were no separate buildings for Christian worship.³ The Lord’s Supper was an actual meal eaten by the community in a private home, implying this was not a ritual act.⁴ Thus as we read the passage, we need not imagine this as taking place in a sanctuary or places of worship.

This relates to the second issue when we read this text. What Paul seeks to address is not necessarily a problem of sacramental theology as much as it is a problem of social relations within the community.⁵ People are eating together based on social status and excluding others because they are not in their class. Paul takes this as an opportunity for them to emphasize a new understanding of community and to expand their views. While strongly worded, Paul’s counsel is to help them see the new life they have in Christ together. For us, the letter helps us with our understanding of community, the memory of Jesus’s death, and discernment for us on God’s judgment of how we live with one another.

¹ Hays, Richard B. “First Corinthians,” *Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching* (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 2011), 193.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid. 194.

Application

As we read this passage, we of course might understand how Paul's words lead us to see this act as comparable of Holy Communion. In fact, much of our liturgy in the United Methodist Church reflects the language Paul gives to the Corinthians. With our understanding of the sacrament in our polity, we should see how this passage speaks to how we are called by God to live today.

It has often been noted the great hour of worship in our country is also the most divided hour. While this relates to race and how you still see churches forming by racial ties, this also relates to issues around class and privilege. It can also relate to the tribal nature of our communities and how people see their identity.

Yet I have also seen how this hour can transcend those lines and bring people into contact with one another. One of the beautiful understandings of the sacrament of Holy Communion in the United Methodist Church is how this table does not belong to a local church or to the denomination. This is the Lord's Table and it is open to all. All who come may receive the body and blood of Christ.

If we pay attention to the liturgy and the story though, we also begin to see how this means of grace transforms us. As we receive the body and blood of Christ, we also receive grace and nourishment to go out into our world and see others in a new light. We see how God has created us to live in community with those around us.

One of the joys I have in serving Holy Communion after leading in the liturgy is being able to see people as they receive the elements. As a pastor, I often have the privilege to know most of the people. Sometimes I marvel at who comes to receive the elements as they kneel together. Sometimes it is family or a close friend, but other times it can be someone who votes differently or folks who don't really talk to each other. At other times, I see people who have been at odds with someone who just received the elements and I pray for there to be resolution between the two. And then there is always the joy of watching children or those new to the sacrament in receiving this means of grace for the first time.

The prayer I have seen come true is watching how this sacrament along with the Word proclaimed helps to move people to love and treat others with kindness and dignity. It is watching the star jock pay special attention to his peer with learning disabilities who is not as socially aware. It happens as you see people who don't agree politically engage in something fun with one another. And it happens when you see people changing their mind or seeing people different from them in a new light.

A few weeks ago in this commentary, I referenced lessons I learned from Bishop Pennel, a retired Bishop who taught many of my United Methodist courses at Vanderbilt. One thing I still hold to is his counsel to shape churches by constantly receiving Holy Communion. As we have the moments to gather and receive this means of grace, we grow in how we understand life and how God made us for one another. It is hard to hate someone when we see they too have a place at the table of our Lord. We become more aware of how all are hungry for love in this life. And we begin to see how other people need Jesus just as much as we do.

Why do you think Holy Communion is "a great equalizer?" How does receiving Holy Communion break down tribes and social class? What do you think would happen

if churches started receiving Holy Communion more often? How have you seen Holy Communion bring healing to a congregation? Who do you need to pray for the next time you receive Holy Communion?

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