

One Loaf, One Cup, One Body

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At the end of her term as moderator of the Presbytery of Greater Atlanta, Agnes Norfleet preached this sermon for the opening worship and celebration of the Lord's Supper at the winter meeting of presbytery. Following worship, the presbytery debated and voted upon a controversial amendment to the constitution of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) concerning ordination standards for church leaders.

1 Corinthians 11:17-34

We are a church in great pain and conflict, and everyone here today knows it. We are a church divided, in Greater Atlanta Presbytery, and in our denomination. During the course of this meeting we will take a vote on Amendment A that will show how divided we are. On the surface of things the division appears to be about human sexuality, particularly homosexuality, and church leadership. But below the surface the division is even deeper than that. We are divided by different understandings of biblical interpretation, and Reformed theology, and by how we understand human sin and God's grace. We are a church divided and the pain of our division runs deep. No matter how the vote goes today, not one person will go home a winner, because about half of us will go home feeling defeated, and when one part of the body suffers, we all suffer together.

The similarities between the church in Corinth and the church today are surprisingly real. Corinth was, like Atlanta, an international city. It was a large commercial port and trading center between East and West, a big city with big city benefits and problems - renowned for its commerce, industry, wealth, luxury, and immorality. Many came to the city for work with the military, in government service, and because of business with foreign traders. Business was dominated by an upper class of mostly Italians, and there was an influx of Greeks, Asians, and Jews who comprised a lower, working class.

The eighteen months that Paul was in Corinth was sufficient time to begin several house churches, but not time enough to provide stability for such a diverse community of believers. All this diversity gave rise to conflict and tension which is evident in Paul's letter to the church in Corinth.

There were differing opinions about matters of human sexuality. Some had quit sleeping with their own spouses because of their commitment to Christ, while another was living with his father's wife. Some thought they should break completely with the past, refusing meat that had been offered to idols, but others had no problem with that, after all, meat is meat. There were divisions about displaying the gifts of the Spirit in worship, about the role of women in the church, about freedom and communal responsibility, about the meaning of the resurrection.¹ No wonder they wrote to Paul and said, "Help!"

Paul wrote back, and in the center of the letter he gets to the heart of the matter. The Words of Institution of the Lord's Supper are usually lifted out of this biblical context, and we lose sight of their impact. Paul is saying to a church he founded and

a people he loved, “When you come together, there are divisions among you, and this is not the Lord’s Supper which you eat.”

The central problem that Paul is addressing at Corinth is not a problem of sacramental theology. Rather it is a problem of social relations within a divided community. Remember the church met in people’s homes. Archeological study of houses from this period has shown that the dining room of a typical villa could accommodate about nine or ten persons who would recline at table for the meal. Other guests would have to sit or stand in the atrium which might have provided space for thirty to forty people. The host of such a gathering would invite a small elite group to dine in the dining room, while lower-status members of the church would be placed in the larger space outside. The higher-status guests in the dining room would be served better food and wine than the others.

A number of surviving writings from this period testify to this custom. Roman scholar, Pliny the Younger, describes his experience of dining as a guest in someone’s home saying: “The best dishes were set in front of the host himself and a select few, and cheap scraps of food before the rest of the company. He had even put the wine into tiny little flasks, divided into three categories. One lot was intended for himself and for us, another for his lesser friends (all his friends were graded) and the third for his and our freedmen.”²

This was the sort of hospitality that was being provided to the church by the wealthier Corinthian Christians. As patrons of the community hosting the gatherings, they were continuing to observe these class distinctions even when the Lord’s Supper was being served. Paul regards such practices - however “normal” in respectable Corinthian culture - as an outrage. He does not deny the right of the more prosperous to eat and drink however they like in their own homes, but he insists that the church’s common meal should symbolize the unity of the community through equitable sharing of food and drink.

You who are rich are coming early and eating all the food, and getting drunk. The poor, who are day laborers and have less control over their time, arrive late from work and when they arrive — there is no food left; they are going away hungry!

You are not making room for one another at the table, Paul is saying to the church. This kind of meal is hardly communal, much less the Lord’s Supper! In the church there is no hierarchy of status.

The solemnity of the Words of Institution handed down from Jesus to Paul to us is a sharp contrast to the first-come-first-served, me-in-you-out, kind of revelry described as characteristic of the Corinthian church. It was while he was being betrayed that our Lord Jesus took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it. In the divisiveness of the Corinthian church, the sacrament of the Lord’s Supper affirms a new covenant, and invites a new kind of community.

Garrison Keillor, one of America’s great storytellers, once told about two brothers who live in Lake Wobegon. They were members of a tiny fundamentalist bunch known as the Sanctified Brethren. There was in this group a spirit of self-righteousness among certain elders that defied peacemaking. They were, Keillor tells, “Given to disputing small points of doctrine that to them seemed the very fulcrum of the faith. We were cursed with a surplus of scholars and a deficit of peacemakers, and so we tended to be split into factions.”

When he was a boy, a dispute arose between two men: Brother William Miller and

Brother James Johnson, but of course they dragged others into it, too. Uncle Al had family and friends on both sides, and it broke Al's heart to see these brothers become enemies. So one fine August day, Uncle Al tried to make peace between them. To restore the love that had been lost. He arranged for them to meet at his and Aunt Flo's house one Sunday, a few Millers and a few Johnsons, not to discuss their difference in doctrine, but simply to enjoy a dinner of Aunt Flo's famous fried chicken.

It took weeks to arrange, but finally the two groups of brothers arrived — in separate cars, of course. Gaunt, flinty-eyed, thin-lipped men in dark suits came into the house and sat in awesome silence until the call to dinner. They trooped into the dining room around the long table that had been extended with two leaves so they wouldn't have to sit close.

Now, prayer was a delicate matter. Brethren were known to use even prayer before a meal as a platform, and so Uncle Al, the peacemaker, concerned lest one brother take prayer and beat the others over the head with it, said, "Let us bow our heads in silent prayer, giving thanks for the meal." They bowed their heads and closed their eyes and — a long time passed. The old clock ticked on the bureau. A cat walked in and meowed and left. A child snickered. Cars went by. There were dry sniffs and clearings.

Soon it was clear that neither side wanted to stop before the other. They were seeing who could pray the longest. Brother Miller peeked through his fingers at Brother Johnson, who was earnestly engaged in silent communion with the Lord, who agreed with him on so many things. So Brother Miller dove back into prayer, too. Uncle Al finally said, "AMEN" to offer them a way out of the deadlock. He even said it again, "AMEN," but it was no use. It was becoming the longest table grace in history.

Then Aunt Flo slid her chair back, rose, went into the kitchen, and brought out the food they were competing to see who could be more thankful for. She set the hot dishes before them. In that moment, a kind of pointed, poignant truth settled among them and they could hardly bear it. Tears ran down Brother Johnson's face. His eyes were clamped shut, and tears streamed down. And so was Brother Miller weeping.

Keillor observes, "It's true what they say, that smell is the key that unlocks our deepest memories. With their eyes closed, the smell of fried chicken and gravy made those men into boys again. It was years ago, they were fighting, and a mother's voice from on high said, 'You boys stop it and get in here and have your dinners. Now. I mean it.' The blessed cornmeal crust and rapturous gravy brought the memory to mind. And the stony hearts of two giants melted. They raised their heads and filled their plates and slowly peace was made over that glorious meal."³

I am a part of a group of ministers in this presbytery who share a meal together once a month. Ted Wardlaw and Scott Weimer, who are leading worship with me this morning, convened this group just over year ago before we voted on Amendment B. There are ten of us in it now. We serve different churches, large and small, urban, suburban, small town. What brought us together in the first place was our differences. We were, a year ago, evenly divided - half of us for Amendment B and half of us against it. Each month we gather in one of our churches, we have lunch, we talk, we laugh, we cry, we pray together. We call ourselves Common Ground.

Part of me can't stand these lunches because of our divisions. Sometimes when I go it takes me about a week to get over. My husband has reminded me that many evenings after one of these meetings I come home exasperated and exclaim, "I don't

understand why they don't think like I do!" But we keep getting back together. Out of our understanding of scripture and deep convictions, some of our group come to this vote on Amendment A feeling very strongly that homosexual persons should not hold leadership positions in the church. Some of us, including myself, count among our richest blessings the colleagues we have in ministry, ministers, elders, deacons, friends, who are homosexual. In over a year of meetings, we have not changed our minds. We are still divided on this issue. But something important has happened. In the midst of our conflict and painful division, we have, by the grace of God, made room for one another at the table.

A meal awaits us all this morning. It will not deaden the pain we are experiencing as a church divided, but it has the power to melt our stony hearts. When the tops are taken off those trays a fragrance is going to fill the air. And for a moment by Christ's body broken for us, we will share one loaf, and one cup, and become one body.

Notes

¹ Fred B. Craddock, "Preaching to Corinthians," *Interpretation* (April 1990):160.

² Richard B. Hays, *First Corinthians*, Interpretation Commentary (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1997), 192 ff.

³ Garrison Keillor, "Brethren," *Leaving Home*, 161.