

**New St. James Presbyterian Church
World Communion Sunday
Sunday, October 6, 2024**

**“As You Eat This Bread and Drink the Cup”
I Corinthians 11:17-26**

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In our Epistle Lesson, St. Paul criticizes the congregation at Corinth for the way they celebrate the Lord’s Supper. Now the problem isn’t about their understanding of the bread and wine. The problem is about community: the issue is a rupture, a break, in the community, when they celebrate Communion.

“[I]n the following instructions I do not commend you,” Paul says. “For [...] when you come together as a church, I hear that there are divisions among you [...]. For when the time comes to eat, each of you proceeds to eat your own supper, and one goes hungry and another becomes drunk. [...] [D]o you show contempt for the church of God and humiliate those who have nothing?”

Now this is a complicated situation, but it’s helpful here to understand a bit about dinner parties in ancient Rome—which were rather different from ours. For one thing, it was common for a wealthy Roman to host dinners where the guests were divided into multiple tiers: the most privileged sat at the main table and enjoyed the finest food; then there was a second area where guests were served somewhat less fancy food; and then there was an even lower level, where unimportant guests got the third-rate stuff. It was actually quite a lot like airplanes today: dinner parties featured Business Class, Premium Economy, and finally regular Economy.

And it seems that the Corinthians had imported this practice into their celebrations of the Lord’s Supper. At that time worship took place in people’s homes, and—taking their cues from multi-tiered dinner parties—it seems that they were serving up a multi-tiered Lord’s Supper: rich Christians got served the finest wines and largest portions, others had to settle for the cheaper stuff, until finally poorer members of the congregation received nothing at all.

So Paul wrote to the Corinthians, explaining that this had caused a rupture, a break, in the Christian community. “[W]hen you come together,” Paul tells them, “it is not for the better but for the worse” (v. 17). In the original language, the verb for “come together” here (συνέρχομαι) could mean either ‘to assemble’ (to meet at a designated location) or ‘to be united’ (as a real community); by telling the Corinthians that “when [they] come together it is [...] for the worse,” Paul is telling them that though they come together into one location, they do not come together as community (Hays).

And for Paul, this break in community—this doesn’t just mean that the Lord’s Supper isn’t being celebrated well; for Paul, this means that the Lord’s Supper is not being celebrated *at all!* “When you come together,” he writes, “it is not really to eat the Lord’s supper” (v. 20).

Historically, the church has often debated how Christ is present in the bread and wine—yet in the Corinthian church, the question was not about the presence of Christ in the meal but the presence of the community at the meal. For Paul, without real community and fellowship at the Lord's Table—which, among other things, meant an equal sharing the elements—then it's not really the Lord's Supper.

The Corinthian community had become ruptured, broken. That was the problem; so how did Paul correct it? You might expect him to offer rules or procedures; you know, some do's and don'ts; everyone should partake at the same time, receive the same share, that sort of thing...

But Paul doesn't do that; he doesn't give them rules. Instead, he reminds the Corinthians of something that's at the crux of the Lord's Supper, something that he hopes will transform their brokenness into unity at the Table. Paul simply tells them that Jesus "took a loaf of bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, 'This is my body that is for you'" (vv. 23-24).

The Corinthians had allowed the divisions in their society to be replicated in worship, which had ruptured—broken—any sense of community. Yet, by reminding them that this bread is the body that Christ graciously gave them all, Paul teaches them what they'd failed to grasp: that at the Lord's Table, they're not serving themselves but *being served* by Christ; that they're not helping themselves to what they think they deserve, but are being graced by the love of Christ.

Christians from all walks of life can find unity and community at the Table—because here we share equally in the grace of Christ, who gave up for us the broken bread and his broken body. As we recognize how the grace of Christ unites us at the Table, we are enabled to "come together"—not only to the same place, but into a community. Without community there is no Communion; yet at the same time, with Communion, we can also shape and form and sustain community.

I'd like to tell a story; it involves my son, Iver, who is happy for me to share this from the pulpit. During my PhD, I was the part-time Interim Pastor at St. David's Presbyterian Church, a lovely little congregation in Campbellville. This was ten years ago: it was a Communion Sunday, and just as the service was starting—maybe during the opening hymn—I noticed a couple of elders quietly file out of the Sanctuary with trays of communion glasses. I didn't think much of it; maybe attendance was high and they figured they needed more glasses to serve.

The service went well; everyone shared in this meal at the Lord's Table, including my son, who at that time was three years old. But after coffee hour, Meredith came over and asked me: "Were the elders upset about what happened?" "Upset? No, nobody's upset," I said. "Why? What happened?" At St. David's, in a practice dating back probably a hundred years, the linens were not just draped over Communion elements; the linens were tucked under the trays. It looked lovely—but of course it meant that the elders needed to remove the linens very gently.

Now the thing about toddlers is that they're very curious—and they can move very quickly. My son had spotted those linens, mysteriously covering the Lord's Table, and he wanted to know just what was underneath; so, he managed to escape from parental reach just long enough to

dart over to the Lord's Table, grab those linens, and pull them back. By the time adults could intervene, it was too late—and many of the communion glasses were upended.

That same night, there was a church event—and all the elders were in attendance. So—feeling somewhat embarrassed—I went up to a few elders and said, “Oh, sorry about what happened at Communion.” “Why, what happened?” they asked. When I explained, they said, “Oh, that makes sense; I saw some trays getting replaced... So, what do you think of the weather were getting?” I went over to another couple of elders, and again tried to apologize, but again they had no idea; “Oh, I saw that there'd been a spill; I didn't know what had happened... Anyway, so how about this rain?”

I know churches where, if such an incident had transpired, they would hire private security to ensure that no toddler ever disturbed the Table again. But at that church, not only did the elders respond calmly when it happened, but—to my amazement—they didn't gossip about it or complain about it or even tell each other about it. It turns out, hardly anyone in the church actually saw it happen (it was over quickly and toddlers are small)—and the elders wanted to keep it that way. So all they did was collect the spilled cups, refill them, and continue on with worship.

Now, it's not that the congregation didn't care about decorum; to the contrary, they treated the Lord's Supper with reverence. But what became clear was how profoundly they understood that *Communion is about community*. Had they reacted harshly to my son or complained about what happened, that would've caused a rupture, a break, in our fellowship at the Table. So they responded so calmly that almost no one ever knew it happened.

And you know what, right after that Communion Sunday service, Meredith and I were feeling embarrassed about what had happened; but then, as we started to drive home, little Iver piped up from the back seat of our car with his assessment of the Communion service. As we pulled out of the church parking lot, Iver said very cheerfully—and I quote—“Well that was fun!” He had enjoyed his place in the community, his place at the fellowship of the Lord's Table—and the kindness of that congregation had ensured that there would be no break or rupture in that fellowship that day.

St. Paul taught that Communion requires community. Today, at New St. James, as we approach the Lord's Table, let us find unity and community in knowing that, at this Table, we share equally in the grace of Christ. Thanks be to God. Amen.