

It is a spiritual meal—a love feast

1 Corinthians 11: 17-34a

At the beginning of this week, I thought this will be an easy sermon to write. It's World Communion Sunday. We have a familiar text. This sermon will write itself. Just to let you know-whenver I say think this, it always turns out the other way around. I think it is the universe telling me to pay attention to the moving of God's Spirit and to not jump to conclusions too quickly.

Because in reality, when it comes to communion, when it comes us gathering at the Lord's Table, partaking the bread, partaking the cup, when it comes to remembering and celebrating that moment when Jesus gathered in the upper room with his disciples, it never does us any good to jump to conclusions or ignore the Spirit of God. Because, the fact of the matter is, and what we as people of faith seem to ignore or forget most of the time is that, when we gather at the Table, it is in that moment, we make our loudest proclamation of God's love and God's grace for all the world to hear. It is in that moment we proclaim the life, death and resurrection of our Lord and Savior who came so that all may know that they are claimed and named as God's own. It is in that moment, our faith becomes

tangible and even more life-changing. And that moment always starts with the same few words:

On that night, when Jesus was betrayed...

We know these words. They stir our hearts. They comfort our souls. They remind us of how much God loves us. We know these words. But as always, these few words do not stand on their own. They are surrounded by verses before them and they are surrounded by verses after them. They are part of the full message of God for the people of God and when we step back and see how they fit into the larger picture, the larger picture of how God is constantly at work in our world, working to bring healing and wholeness to God's creation, then and only then, can we truly experience the full life-giving power behind Paul's words.

In order to do that, I want to share a little bit of the context that surrounds these familiar words. Now, as we may all remember, Paul is writing to the group in Corinth because word has gotten back to him that they are behaving in ways that do not reflect the principles and values of God's grace and love. Instead, rather, this church is arguing and fighting. This church is trying to figure out who is the greatest and all their words, all their actions are dividing them as the church instead of building it up.

So Paul writes to them to remind them that they are called to be the Body of Christ here on earth, that they are called to live in unity and one of the ways they can proclaim this unity to the world the loudest is by partaking in the Lord's Supper together.

Paul is writing to this group to tell them that instead of creating unity, their practice and celebration of the Lord's Supper has created too many divisions within their community and it is tearing the Body of Christ apart.

Now we need to remember two things when it comes to this text. First we need to remember that during this time, people weren't gathering in church buildings on Sunday morning for worship. They were gathering at people's homes. And usually, the group gathered at the home that was the largest which meant it was probably owned by someone fairly wealthy. The house needed to be large enough to host a group of about 10-20 or more people and usually only the wealthiest had homes large enough to do that.

The second piece we need to remember about this text is that when people gathered around the table, they didn't pull up chairs to sit at it. Instead, They usually reclined around the table which limited the available space in the room. The reason why this piece of information is important is because when it came time to celebrate the Lord's Supper, only a few people could actually gather

around the table and the rest had to take seats in another room. And let's just say, the people who usually got a spot at the table, were the home owner's friends, which also meant that they were fairly wealthy as well.

It wasn't because they were able to purchase a spot at the table. Nothing as profane as that. They were chosen to be at the main table because simply that was how the Corinthian culture worked. It was part of their social structure to favor the wealthy. The Corinthian culture honored the rich and was based on divisions in society due to class.

Okay, so picture it. What has gotten back to Paul is that When it comes time for celebrating the Lord's Supper in the Corinthian church, part of the group goes into one room and the rest goes into another. And if that isn't enough to make Paul's skin crawl, this next part certainly sent him over the edge. Paul was told that When it came to serving the meal, the choice foods were put in the actual dining room with the wealthy and the rest of the group ate whatever could be scrounged together or ate nothing at all.

Paul realizes that the group in the dining room was treating this gathering, where they were supposed to be celebrating the Lord's supper, Paul realized that this group was treating it as their own personal meal. They were completely forgetting about the people in the other room. They were completely forgetting

why they were coming together around the table in the first place. They were Completely forgetting that the table was God's table, not their own personal potluck.

So it is no surprise that Paul is furious when he was writing this part of the letter. He reams them up one side and down the other. He tells them this was not their own personal party. That what they are celebrating and remembering is a moment that brings to our minds Jesus' death and sacrifice. The moment that shows us as people of faith, shows us over and over again just how far God's love extends. The moment that reminds that we are called to come together as one Body of Christ and proclaim to this world that there is another way.

Can't you just imagine Paul's fury at this moment? Here is a group that is forgetting that this table is God's table, a place of grace, a place of love, a place where all are invited to come and partake and be recognized as a beloved child of God and this group at Corinth has turned it into their own personal party. Can you imagine? I hope you hear the sarcasm in my voice. Because that still seems to be what we as the church are forgetting each and every time we gather and celebrate the Lord's Supper. We are forgetting, we are ignoring that this table is not our table, led by our own rules and regulations but rather that this is God's table. And God's only rule is that we love our God with all our heart, mind and soul and that we love our neighbors as ourselves.

This point was brought home for me this week As I was doing some sermon prep. A commentator said that it would probably be hard for us modern day readers to understand just exactly what Paul was thinking or feeling in that moment, that it would probably be hard for us modern day readers to understand a society that was based on divisions in class and, that it would probably be hard for us modern day believers to understand why divided world goes against the very celebration of the Lord's Supper.

Really, Really, Mr. Commenter? We as modern day Christians wouldn't understand a world that demands one up man ship, we wouldn't understand a world that tells us we all are to strive to prove that we are better than everyone else? Really? We as modern day Christians wouldn't understand a world that divides itself into the haves and the have-nots, and does everything it can to make sure that it stays that way? Really? We as modern day Christians wouldn't understand how counter-cultural it would be for all to be accepted and embraced as a Beloved Child of God? Really?

We as modern day Christians wouldn't understand that it says something that even we as people of faith can't come around the Lord's table without divisions, without worrying about who is in and who is out, without worrying about who is allowed to serve at the table and who is not, without worrying about if we have the right credentials to partake of the bread and the cup?

Really, Really, Mr. Commenter? We wouldn't understand a world like that?

I don't know what world that person was talking about, but it certainly isn't the world that I know and have experienced. Because it seems like that although Paul wrote these words two thousand years ago, he could have easily written them for the church and for our world today.

We know a world divided based on class. We know a world that honors the rich and denigrates the poor. We know a world that cannot seem to understand that All means all. We know a world just like the one Paul describes because it is the world we experience every day.

That's why Paul gets so mad. He knows that The Lord's Table is the one place where we as people of faith should be getting it right. The Lord's Table is the one place where we as people of faith should be doing things God's way because the truth of the matter is, it is not our Table. It is God's table and we have no say in who is out and who is in. God does and in case we were all wondering, God decided the rules along time ago. It was decided the moment Jesus died on the cross for all of God's children.

People of God, The Lord's Table should be the one thing we get right when it comes to gathering as people of faith because it is the loudest proclamation that we have about God's love and God's grace. This cup, this bread, this table is not

our table. It is God's table and all are invited. All are welcomed. All are seen and recognized as beloved children of God.

I know I have shared this story with you before but I am going to share it with you again because it constantly stands as a reminder to me of the importance of an open table. I was serving my first church as a student in seminary. And I can still remember my first worship planning meeting with the Senior Minister. I was trying to adjust to the fact that this church didn't have communion every week when the Senior Minister shared with me the fact that I was not allowed to stand at the communion table or say the Words of Institution.

This took me by surprise. I have always done these things. So I tried explaining to him, "Well, if this was because he thought that I was just a student, than don't worry. I have the credentials. I was licensed through the region of KY. I was able to marry and I was able to bury according to the Christian Church (DOC) in KY. So don't need to worry about that. According to KY, I was minister with credentials.

And then the Senior Minister looked at me kind of strangely and said "Well, that's nice but really doesn't have anything to do with what I am talking about... You are not an elder in our church. You are not a member of our church. You are not

allowed to stand at the communion table or say the Words of Institution, well, because you are not a part of this church.”

My face took on this blank stare and I was confused. For as long as I could remember, I had been allowed to come to the table. I could remember summer camps where my fellow campers said the Words of Institution. I could remember youth retreats where I stood behind the table and broke the bread and blessed the cup. I could remember working on camp staff at Christmount, planning worship services and wondering how exactly we were going to do communion. Would we use goldfish crackers and juice or could we just use cookies and milk?

For as long as I could remember, I had been saying the Words of Institution. For as long as I could remember, I had been allowed at the communion table. For as long as I could remember, I had been a part of the Lord’s Supper....And now...he was telling me that I was not allowed, that I could not stand behind the table, that I was not allowed to say the most meaningful, the most forming words for me as a Christian, simply because I was not a member of that church.

I didn’t understand. All I could hear was this minister telling me that although it was the Lord’s table I was not invited.

That's why Paul's words are so powerful, are so meaningful. He is writing to the Corinthians to remind them that it is the Lord's Table that brings them together as people of faith. That this life-forming moment when Christ broke the bread and gave it to his disciples is for all people of God. That this most meaningful moment when Christ blessed the cup and gave it to his disciples is for all of God's children.

With just a few words, Paul reminds the Corinthians that this meal that was handed down to him was not given to him by just by anyone. This meal was handed down to him by Jesus Christ.

And each and every time that we come together as the people of God, we remember Jesus' death, a death that was not only for a few but a death that was for all of God's children.

When we gather at the table, we know that long ago, Jesus welcomed all his disciples to the table that night, knowing that one would betray him to the Romans, that one would deny him three times, and that the rest of them would scatter. Jesus welcomed his disciples to the table that night to remember the Passover feast, to remember God's saving acts in the past of God's people. And Jesus welcomed his disciples to the table that night once more to show them that God was still

working, that God was doing saving acts in the lives of God's people, that God's love was for all.

Jesus welcomed all of his disciples to the table that night. Jesus did not exclude anyone from his table. He welcomed all: sinners tax collectors, prostitutes, the sick, the lame, the wealthy, the poor, the righteous, and the stranger. And that is what Paul wants us to remember each and every time we come to the table, each and every time we say the words that are the most meaningful and the most life-forming for us as Christians. Paul wants us to remember that this is God's Table, not our table.

When we as Midway Christian Church, say "Welcome: Open Table, we are proclaiming loudly that everyone is invited. When we as Midway Christian Church celebrate our "Open Table, we are saying that this is the Lord's Table and all are invited to come to it. When we as Midway Christian Church say we celebrate a table where all are welcomed we are saying Come. All are welcomed as a child of God to partake of the bread, to drink for the cup, to be a part of the Lord's Supper that reminds us that Christ died for all of us.

When we say we celebrate an open table, we are proclaiming our unity through one simple act, the act of gathering at the Table, and we know that this one

act can become the loudest proclamation that we ever make about God's grace and God's love. And we do it with just a few simple words:

On the night when Jesus was betrayed...

May these words always be shared as signs of God's love and grace and more importantly may they always be signs of our unity as the Body of Christ here on earth. Amen.