

1 Corinthians 10:16-17; 11:17-22

I remember looking at my plate as a child- not thankful, mind you, but sick to my stomach at the overwhelming thought of one small brussel sprout even touching my tongue. “Our family rule is that you have to try everything on your plate,” my mom would say. “This is our table, and you must eat what is on your plate,” my dad would echo. I couldn’t wait to one day be the boss or host of my own table and eat and serve whatever comfort food I wanted. Every now and then I find myself around my table saying to my guests, “This is my table, and I’m not saying the blessing.” This is a running joke in my family of preachers.

Make no mistake about it, at this table, Christ is the host, not the minister, nor the congregation, not anyone. We’re all guests, invited by Christ to come, eat and drink. Jesus is the host, and he gets to set the rules, not us. But more than that, we’re invited by God to share in Christ’s body broken for us and in Christ’s blood poured out for the forgiveness of our sins. Notice I didn’t just say “for me.” **Communion is personal, not private.** The very word “communion” denotes community- a sharing, if you will. Communion is also known as Eucharist (which means “Thanksgiving”) or the Lord’s Supper. During communion we are NOT invited to Christ’s table because of how worthy we are. Nothing saddens my heart more than to hear people say, “I’m not taking communion because I’m not worthy enough.” If that were the case, I dare say any of us would be invited to Christ’s table. Or someone might say, “I’ve not been baptized or I don’t know what I believe, so I’m not going to participate in communion.” I wonder sometimes if

experience and practice precede belief, rather than the other way around?! You see I'm what they call an experiential learner. There's a lot about faith and life that we come to trust, believe, and understand **only after we've experienced different things**. I read this week of a pastor who has no idea if the 29-year-old twin brothers in his congregation, whose parents push their wheelchairs forward for communion, "believe in Jesus." Their cerebral palsy is too severe for him to make meaning of the sounds they speak. But he places the juice-soaked bread in their mouths nonetheless. 'Love is or it ain't,' writes Toni Morrison. 'Thin love ain't love at all.' Maybe it's time we start seeing the Eucharist as Christ doling out thick love to all God's people, whether their belief is sturdy, shaky, or very much unformed" (*The Christian Century*, Peter W. Marty, 9.24.21). Regardless of where we are on our faith journey, we're invited by the grace of God to come to Christ's table, even in our doubts and confusion.

In today's text, Paul is not pleased with what he is seeing among the people of Corinth involving the Lord's Supper. Maybe they've forgotten who the host is during the Lord's Supper?! Maybe they've forgotten the whole "Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body" piece? But diversity is rarely popular among we humans, is it? The whole Ephesians text (Ch. 2:14) about Christ's flesh making us into one and the very act of who he is breaking down the dividing wall- the hostility- that is between us. The Corinthians seem to be having divisions among one another, particularly between the rich and the poor. Paul doesn't elaborate on the details; however, it's basically a

who's in and who's out thing. We must bear in mind that in the time when Paul wrote this letter, Christian worship was held in private homes, not in large public spaces. It was custom for the more wealthy folks, who owned homes, to host. The Eucharist was part of a larger community meal- like a potluck or covered-dish supper. "It's safe to assume that the host's higher-status friends would be invited to dine in the dining room while the lower-status members of the church would be placed in a larger space outside. The more wealthy folks had more flexible schedules and could arrive early, hence giving them plenty of time to overindulge on both food and alcohol. It was also custom for the guests in the dining room to be served better food and wine than the other guests. Sometimes the food and wine would run out before it got to the lower-status members of the church. Paul regards such practices- however 'normal' in respectable Roman culture- an outrage. Paul insists that the church's common meal should symbolize the unity of the community through equitable sharing of food at the meal"

(Interpretation Series, Richard B. Hays).

At Christ's table, everyone is equal and thus should eat together of the same bread. At Christ's table, all are invited to examine their lives and decisions. At Christ's table, all are received by our host, Jesus Christ, and are forgiven. The Lord's Supper is not just another meal; it is not just another get together of believers. No, for Paul, "participation in the Lord's Supper is the fundamental, even defining, community action of believers. Like no other activity, this sacrament epitomizes believers' relation to Christ and to one another in pristine clarity. Through the

power of the Holy Spirit- during communion believers can inescapably see that they stand only in and by God's grace; they look with confidence toward the future when the end of the ages will come; and they see most clearly how they relate to and with each other" (*The New Interpreters Bible*).

What does Communion mean to you? I don't know if Paul asked them this question. Depending on the context, this question can be answered in many different ways. Paul is really frustrated with the Corinthians. Sharing a fellowship meal was and still is a big part of communities of faith. Communion means that in eating bread and drinking wine (or grape juice) we, not one of us but all of us- through the power of the Holy Spirit, are reconciled to Christ and to one another.

What does communion mean to us? The meaning of these simple acts of sharing a meal can never be exhausted, as the act of communion is a mystery. One scholar defines communion as "a meal of thanksgiving in which we give thanks for the presence of Jesus the Christ not only at table, but in our daily lives with their joy and trouble." That's a great definition, but it still doesn't answer what Communion means to us. In today's secular and pluralistic world, there's some confusion about what distinguishes Christians from non-Christians. As followers of Christ, we testify that God came to this earth with flesh on- as a human being known as Jesus of Nazareth and that through his life, death and resurrection, we're continually made new and whole. We remember Jesus every time we eat bread and drink from the cup and are sent out-

feed and renewed- to serve God, who is already at work in the world. Look around this sanctuary. We may have not chosen to be together but God has chosen for us to be together. Christ invites us to sit at table with him. Around the table in the ordinary, everyday elements of bread and juice, “we aren’t promised to have our suffering erased; we are promised transformation, [reconciliation, and hope]. By loving one another, even through pain, we will find more life in Christ. By opening ourselves to strangers, the despised or frightening or unintelligible other, we will see more and more of the holy, since, without exception, all people are one body: God’s” (*Take This Bread*, Sara Miles).

Many of the stories we know about Jesus, had to do with how much he loved to eat with people (any people, the more social outcast, the better). Christ’s table is a place where grievances are buried, the wealthy eat with the poor, the women eat with the men, and enemies become true brothers and sisters in Christ. This is what Communion means to me...when we can come together as a group of sinful friends and strangers- invited by Christ to come and eat together- and we’re transformed and renewed by the Holy Spirit and reminded of God’s love for us through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, our Lord. Communion means that it’s not just about us but about how God is at work constantly in us and in our sisters and brothers in Christ.

What does communion mean to us? One of my most favorite communion scenes in a movie comes from *Places in the Heart*. So...*Places in the Heart* came out in 1984 but the movie takes place in a

small town in TX in 1935. You all have studied history and what life was like then during the Great Depression. Sally Fields, the main character, was married to the Sheriff and they lived on a farm with their two children. One day the Sheriff is killed by a drunken gunman, who also happens to be black. His death leaves Sally Fields character raising two children and working on a farm by herself. Along comes Danny Glover's character, who isn't the most trusted man in town, and he offers to help her on the farm. Living there also is a blind man by the name of Will. He's there to pay rent so that Sally Fields character cannot lose her house to the bank. In this- the last scene of the movie- everyone is in church for communion and the hymn, "I Come to the Garden Alone," is sung by the congregation. I wish I could show y'all this powerful communion scene, where at Christ's table the adulterer sits beside his wife and there is forgiveness, the murderer sits beside his victim and there is forgiveness, the person of color sits beside the white person and there is peace and reconciliation, the young sits beside the old and there is respect, the woman sits beside the man and there is no gender division, the dead sit beside the living and are remembered in the communion of saints. What a powerful image of what communion means: a wide table of grace. Theologian Rachel Held Evans said it best when she said, "God's kingdom is like a bunch of outcasts and oddballs gathered at a table, not because they are rich or worthy or good, but because they are hungry, because they said yes. And there's always room for more" (*Searching for Sundays*) at Christ's table. Pull up a chair. For, not I, but Christ invites you. Thanks be to God! Amen.