

February 16, 2020 Winter Communion Service
I Corinthians 11:17-34 "First Class or Coach?"
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The Lord be with you. I don't know if you've ever done much flying, especially international flying. It is a marvelous thing though at times, especially when you hit some turbulence, it can be a little nerve racking. But one thing that always strikes me as a mystery is "what's behind the curtain." You know what I'm talking about. This isn't about some game show; no this is about riding in economy or coach all the time and wondering what it is like up there, behind the curtain in first class.

I actually had a friend willing to trade places with me for a little while on an international flight. It was a foreign experience. Leg room, imagine that, real leg room. Seats that reclined, fully... without plopping into the lap of the person behind you. Food, real food and fine wine; and hosts who were attentive. It was hard to imagine we were on the same airplane. But we were.

This is the image that comes to my mind as I read Paul's letter, his harsh words here in chapter 11 to the church in Corinth. Something is amiss. And in our egalitarian society, it doesn't quickly dawn on us.

The subject is the Lord's Supper, but the context is the culture, or rather a culture that had not been redeemed at the Table of the Lord. The Corinthians it seems, were allowing the divisions that characterized their culture to shape the way they celebrated their common meal in Christ. And Paul, to mildly put it, was not happy about it.

It is hard for us to fathom in our day but the Greco-Roman culture of the New Testament was socially stratified, meaning that the population was divided into social levels or strata. Status is always relative: my high status only has meaning when contrasted to your low status (or the other way around). Flying first class only means something as long as there is an economy class. But people in the Greco-Roman world always knew their status relative to others. It was as natural as breathing. And virtually all social interactions were shaped by this hierarchy of status.

In the church at Corinth, we can glean from Paul's writings that it had members of relatively high status as well as people of relatively low status. The trouble came when the culture of status crept into the church.

Now, our modern sensibilities would be taken aback by the fact that it was common for guests of high status to be served better food and drink and more of it than the guests of lower status who would be served less food and drink and of poorer quality. First class up in the front of the plane gets the steak dinners; economy class or coach gets the wafer like cookie and a bag of nuts. Maybe this isn't so hard to understand.

But back to the first century; you see, social stratification was so taken for granted that it was shaping the practice of celebrating the Lord's Supper at Corinth. It wasn't that these folks

were trying to be mean to one another. This is just how it was. But how it was, was not how God wanted it to be.

We gather from this letter that the Corinthians observed the Eucharist, the Lord's Supper in conjunction with a common meal. And at that meal, social divisions were visible in a way that Paul believed compromised the Gospel. Different sorts of people received different amounts and qualities of food and drink at these common meals. Unless Paul is exaggerating (and he may have been for effect, he does seem a little sarcastic), some people had so much wine that they were drunk, while others had to be content with so little food that they remained hungry.

And while this way of behaving might have been "normal" in the culture of Corinth, for Paul it is unacceptable, especially since the Lord's Supper was intended to demonstrate the unity of the church that is founded on the mutual dependence on the grace of God shown in the death and resurrection of Jesus. Didn't matter whether you were a big shot or a nobody. Didn't matter. It was all about God's Grace. Whether in the 1st century or the 21st century, the church is not founded on and nor is it to emulate cultural divisions.

In other words, the church was going through the motions, the words that recalled the Last Supper. But their actions were preaching a completely different message. I remember my first pastorate and bumping heads with an individual whose first response to just about any of my suggestions of doing things differently was, "but this is how we've always done it."

It takes a lot of courage to look at the culture of something and understand and hear what God is saying to us in the midst of that culture; especially if it is going to affect those of us who like the perks of flying first class or the privileges that we've grown accustomed to, even if we fly coach.

*Gerald Mast, professor at Bluffton University, wrote a book entitled "Go to Church: Change the World." In this book he has a chapter devoted to our Anabaptist understanding of Communion. Mast writes:

"In Jesus' life and ministry we find the most miraculous social and economic transformation taking place around the most ordinary practices: sharing bread and drink together around a table. Whether by including sinners and social outcasts at his table, by providing wine at a wedding celebration, or by feeding five thousand people with loaves and fishes offered by a young boy, Jesus showed that inclusive and just table fellowship is a central feature of the reign of God... In Paul's letter to the Corinthians he challenges the church to overcome social stratification that became obvious during the sharing of bread and wine, when some people were getting drunk while others were left hungry. By contrast, when Christians from different classes actually shared food equally around a table, they were demonstrating that the messianic age had arrived."

I would be surprised, because I know this is true for myself, but I doubt that many of us, as we gather around the communion table think about that this act demonstrates the new messianic age. We tend to think of the transaction, of the bread and the cup, of Jesus dying for our sins. That's what this is about. Right? Yes, but there is so much more!

Jesus came ushering in a new kingdom. And sometimes this new kingdom looks as simple as this. People, diverse people gathered around a table, breaking bread. A new identity seen in a new clustering of people.

But here is the deal. Jesus didn't promise that this new community will always get it right. And what we have read from Paul this morning is a good example. But with the help of the Holy Spirit, we can move forward, seeking to become the people that God has created us to be. People of God's Grace.

**We here at Waterford Mennonite Church, I believe strive to be such a community. We strive. On our best days maybe we live up to our potential and our hopes; on our worst days, let's be honest, not so much. The pain, the division, and apathy in our culture can easily creep in and seep in to our lives without us really realizing it.

**Paul is reminding the gathered community in Corinth, and us today, how we are to be in relationship with each other. The church is hard work. Relationships are messy. Relationships take time, and energy, intentionality, understanding and mutual forgiveness. Relationships can be the source of great delight and the source of utter agony.

**Sometimes the church, the community, is a place where healing is realized. Sometimes the church, the community, is the place where wounds are inflicted. I wish it wasn't so, but our culture of brokenness still creeps in. The question is, what are we going to do about it? Run away? Strike back? Allow people to be our enemy? Allow the culture to dictate our responses?

At Mary Gingerich's funeral last week I spoke of how sometimes, through God's redeeming work, enemies become friends. Through the death and resurrection of Jesus, death, our enemy in which there was no future, becomes a friend with a future. How relationships in my life that started out with animosity had been redeemed into 40 year friendships; and how we would not be who we are today, what God imagined for us to be, without that redeeming work. It wasn't the work of the culture. Culture was propelling us in opposite directions. It was the redeeming work of God, and only the redeeming work of God that caused this to happen.

**In a way that transcends human understanding, in a way that speaks of the mystery of the Spirit, we need each other. To catch a glimpse of the fullness of God's kingdom, we need each other. To reach our potential to be agents of peace and healing in this world, we need each other. To not conform, to not give in to the corrosive patterns of our 21st century culture, we need each other. We need one another to remind us of our true identity and to which kingdom we belong. We need one another in order to celebrate and practice just table fellowship.

**When we receive Communion how often do we really see who we are breaking bread with? How often, as we embrace the bread and the cup do we look across the table and declare to our sister or brother - "You are part of me, and I am part of you. Together we become the body of Christ. I need you, you need me, and in an act of grace and mystery we are joined as one as we are hosted by Jesus."

**The Communion Table calls us to a different way of living, loving, and relating. Here we are all welcomed and stand as equals before God. Here forgiven sinners embrace other sinners and forgive those who have sinned against them. Here the walls that our culture tries to erect based on our differences are torn down and we stand as a community, before the God that unites us all. Thanks be to God.

*Gerald Mast, *Go to Church: Change the World* (Herald Press: Harrisonburg, Virginia), 95-96.

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