

SEQUOYAH HILLS
PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

“Come Together: Broken Tables”

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1 Corinthians 11:17-26

February 5, 2023

We’re in our second to last week in this “Come Together” series, a look at how our faith inherently calls us into deeper connection, into closer fellowship with each other, not as a secondary thing, but as a primary way of how God is at work among us. Too often we shuffle off the notion of fellowship as corollary, as something that happens as a side effect, and therefore something that’s not quite as important or as worthy of our attention in the life faith. And as we’ve seen, that couldn’t be more wrong.

We’ve looked at some of the theological moorings of connection, of the pitfalls of isolation, of the joy of coming together as the church. We were blessed just last week by the testimonies and preaching of Graham and Jackson, two of our high school seniors, sharing of this same topic of fellowship for Youth Sunday.

And this whole time, honestly, there’s been a lingering question, maybe you could call it an objection, hanging over everything we’ve been saying about fellowship. What if the church doesn’t live up to it? Let’s go to God’s Word together.

In the following directives I have no praise for you, for your meetings do more harm than good. In the first place, I hear that when you come together as a church, there are divisions among you, and to some extent I believe it. No doubt there have to be differences among you to show which of you have God’s approval. So then, when you come together, it is not the Lord’s Supper you eat, for when you are eating, some of you go ahead with your own private suppers. As a result, one person remains hungry and another gets drunk. Don’t you have homes to eat and drink in? Or do you despise the church of God by humiliating those who have nothing? What shall I say to you? Shall I praise you? Certainly not in this matter!

For I received from the Lord what I also passed on to you: The Lord Jesus, on the night he was betrayed, took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, “This is my body, which is for you; do this in remembrance of me.” In the same way, after supper he took the cup, saying, “This cup is the new covenant in my blood; do this, whenever you drink it, in remembrance of me.” For whenever you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord’s death until he comes.

1 Corinthians 11:17-26

The Word of the Lord. **Thanks be to God.** Will you pray with me? Holy God, for the Word spoken and heard today, may it not be mine but yours. Amen.

Throughout this series, there's been someone in mind. Well not one particular person, but definitely a specific *kind* of person in mind. It's the person who, as we've talked about the joys of fellowship, about the blessings of connection in the life of faith, simply doesn't buy it. And it's not that this person doesn't buy it because they think it's silly or unimportant. That's not it. Those are valid thoughts and questions, to the point that if you share any of those, let's talk more. But that's not the person that's been on my mind this whole time we've been talking about fellowship.

The person that has been on my mind is the one who simply doesn't buy it for a very different reason. It's not the person who keeps community at arm's length because they don't think it's all that important. It's the person who keeps community at arm's length because they once did believe that it was so central, so crucial, and they did dive in and embrace it, and they got burned. It's the person who, during all this talk about fellowship, about the community of the church, is saying in the back of their mind, "Yeah, there was a time I bought into that. Now look at the scars I have to show for it."

The reason that this person, this specific kind of person has been on my mind throughout this series is because, one, this isn't a theoretical exercise we're talking about here. The kind of person I'm talking about isn't some number on a chart. For many, they're not here at all. The damage done was too deep, and they've written off the church. For others, you are here. And I'm glad you're here. Most people would've said, "That's it. I'm out," a long time ago. But you're giving this church thing another shot. Maybe that's where you are today, right now, and if this is you, I hear you, and I lament, I grieve for the wounds that the church has given you. Maybe it was another church; maybe it was this church.

Because there is a specific, tragic, and all too common kind of injury that is caused when the church fails at being the place of gathering, of welcome, of grace that we are called to be.

Sadly it's not a new thing. We find an example of it all the way back in the church's first generation, here in Paul's letter to the church in the Greek city of Corinth. If you were to read that letter, the letter of 1 Corinthians, a word looming large in this world would be *division*. Paul's writing to a divided church, and it's seeping out of the pages. The church is split according to ethnicity, according to which teacher they followed, according to practices in worship, according to sinful behavior within the congregation. And maybe the biggest one: between rich and poor.

All these lines drawn within this congregation, popping up all over the place in the life of the church, but perhaps no more tragically than in one place in its communal life: the Lord's supper.

Paul writes: "Now in the following instructions I do not commend you, because when you come together it is not for the better but for the worse." Right there we know something is seriously wrong. Coming together should be a church's bread and butter, when there's a sense of joy in the fellowship. When gathering, instead, doesn't improve things, but only makes things worse, that's a big problem.

Continuing in v. 18, "For, to begin with, when you come together as a church, I hear that there are divisions among you; and to some extent I believe it. Indeed, there have to be factions among you, for only so will it become clear who among you are genuine." I think Paul's being a bit sarcastic here. He's been writing about their divisions this whole time, even pointing out a kind of intellectual elitism at work within the congregation, so I think he's poking at that here.

But then in v. 20 he really starts going after it, "When you come together, it is not really to eat the Lord's supper. For when the time comes to eat, each of you goes ahead with your own supper, and one goes hungry and another becomes drunk. What! Do you not have homes to eat and drink in? Or do you show contempt for the church of God and humiliate those who have nothing?"

The practice that Paul is singling out is how the church would observe the Lord's supper, otherwise known as communion, or the eucharist. It was practiced a bit differently than you often see today. Usually you see something like this table, with common elements, then everyone gets the same thing. Not how it went. The Lord's supper was often celebrated as part of a larger meal, something like a good old-fashioned church potluck. Everyone brings something to share, and at some point in the supper, words would be shared to celebrate the signs of bread and cup to the body and blood of Christ our Lord. And that works. That's great. In fact, we'll be looking to do something similar to that in Holy Week for Maundy Thursday.

But that shared meal as a part of this sacrament isn't what was going on. Apparently, the rich and poor divisions within the congregation would become especially clear. Those with means would bring their own food and drink, arrive probably a bit earlier, since they had more food to last longer, and those without would show up later. Meaning, the wealthy would come early, enjoy lavish meals, getting drunk on their wine, while the poor would show up later for leftovers, if anything at all. "Do you not have homes to eat and drink in?" Paul asks. "Enjoy your fine meals at home, if you like," he could be saying, "but don't let it be a wedge between you and another within the church." That was the problem. It wasn't being shared. Or if it was being shared, it was being shared in a way that humiliated those with little.

Now for those who are just now learning these things about this particular church and about this particular practice, you might be thinking, what's the big deal? Sure, it's not exactly polite and doesn't make for good community. But the wealthy doing things that the poor can't? That's not new. Plenty of other things for Paul to get up in arms about. Why single this out?

The big deal is because of what this meal is supposed to signify, and more broadly what this gathering of the church is supposed to represent.

You see it's one thing for something or someone to just be harmful or hateful. No shortage of that in a broken world, unfortunately. It's another thing when something or someone is supposed to be a sign of something good, supposed to be healing, but isn't. That's not just harmful. There's betrayal in that. Trust is broken, trust not just in the particular thing or person but also in the very thing they're supposed to represent.

You might think of it like Lotso Huggin' Bear. You know who I'm talking about? Lotso Huggin' Bear is a character in Toy Story 3. You might be chuckling to yourself, but don't let the G-rating fool you. Lotso Huggin' Bear, or Lotso as he's known, is one of the most menacing, disturbing villains I've ever seen.

If you don't know the movie, I'll spoil it. Woody the Cowboy and Buzz Lightyear and all their toy friends mistakenly get sent as a donation to a local daycare. At the daycare they're greeted by a friendly, welcoming purple stuffed animal called Lotso Huggin' Bear. They think, "Ah, this is nice. A big bear hug of welcome. A promise to get played with—every toy's dream. All of it being led by this kindly, warm teddy bear named Lotso."

But then it's revealed that Lotso isn't so cuddly. Instead of welcome, what he has set up at the daycare is a pyramid, and he's at the top, getting the cushy assignments of gentle hugs from the older children at the daycare. The new arrivals are relegated to...the Caterpillar Room, where the new toys are routinely used and abused by the youngest children at the daycare.

And what's so disturbing about Lotso isn't just because what he's done is despicable—it is. It's disturbing because it's coming from a teddy bear, this childhood sign of safety and warmth, when in reality Lotso is anything but. So when Lotso shows his true colors, there's not just harm, but there's betrayal too, because teddy bears are supposed to stand for something better.

That's the betrayal at work in the heart of this church in Corinth, and at work at the broken table they share. A meal, a celebration that's supposed to bring the church together, to unite them in fellowship, instead is a place of division and exclusion, of reminding everyone all too poignantly that the same divisions that were at work in the world around them were still very much in force as they came together as the church. The pains of those dividing lines were nothing new to the people in that church—they saw them, they felt them every day. But the church was

supposed to be something different. So when it's not, it's not just people being excluded. It's a betrayal of the very thing the church is supposed to represent.

That's why I've had in mind that particular person this whole time, because for some of us, the church hasn't been a place of connection and joyful fellowship. The church has been a place that was trusted, but that trust was broken and betrayed.

Sadly there are any number of reasons why that could happen. Abandonment by the church. Neglect by the church. Abuse at the hands of the church. Rejection by the church. Conflict in the church. Basically anything other than the church's extension of the radical love and grace of Christ, and that's a long list. And if that has happened to you, for what little it may be worth coming from someone like me, I'm sorry.

There's a lot the church has done that should not make us proud, for the pain it's caused, for the trust it's betrayed, for the Lord it's misrepresented.

And yet there's always cause for hope, not because of ourselves, but because of the Lord we worship and seek to glorify.

I don't think it's a mistake that the very thing that Paul saw as so despicable in the Corinthian church might also be the means by which grace sows renewal within this divided community: the communion table. This was a table at which Christ himself shared fellowship with those who would deny him, abandon him, and betray him. And yet even knowing that, it is back to this table that he is inviting them, calling them to remember how his body was broken for them, how his blood was shed for their forgiveness.

And my hope for all of us, whether we are the ones who have been abandoned or betrayed by the church, or whether we are the ones who have abandoned or betrayed the call of Christ, is that we would hear the invitation to this table and come, because this table isn't a place of remembering how swell or wonderful a people we are. It's a place of remembering how grace is embodied, how welcome is extended, and how love is shown by the Lord who gathers us, even when those who are gathered fall short of it.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.