

Steve Hayner was a pastor, a professor, and later in life, the President of Columbia Theological Seminary until his untimely death from pancreatic a few years ago. He once told us a story to illustrate the importance of learning a congregation's practices when it comes to communion, also sometimes called the Lord's Supper or the Eucharist.

Dr. Hayner had accepted an invitation to supply the pulpit as a guest pastor on a Sunday morning, and on that Sunday, the congregation was planning to celebrate communion and had invited Dr. Hayner to preside at the Table. Having never been to this church, he got lost on the way and arrived just as the prelude was beginning. He had no time to check in with any of the elders or other church leaders about any nuances to the service, but he observed that the communion table was set with a large, shiny loaf of bread atop a beautiful linen cloth, so he assumed that all was ready.

He preached a very fine sermon, and then it came time for communion. He assumed his place at the table, picked up the loaf of bread, and said the words of institution, reminding the people of God that on the night of his betrayal, the Lord Jesus took a loaf of bread, gave thanks for it, and broke it. And Dr. Hayner picked up the shiny loaf off the table with both hands and tried to break it.

Except it wouldn't break. Dr. Hayner thought perhaps it was just a bit

stale, so he gave it a little more force. And it still wouldn't budge. And so, Dr. Hayner gave it everything he had, and suddenly, that loaf of bread shattered into a thousand pieces, showering the horrified elders seated on the front row with shards of hardened bread.

It turns out that the shiny loaf of bread that Dr. Hayner destroyed had been brought back from the Holy Land years ago and shellacked, and the bread for the actual communion of the people was under the beautiful linen cloth atop the table. But since Dr. Hayner had been late in arriving, no one had time to brief him, and he had unintentionally destroyed that congregation's prized artifact before their very eyes.

Dr. Hayner imparted two very important lessons to his aspiring pastors-to-be. First, don't be late. Second, remember that each congregation has particular norms and customs when it comes to the Lord's Supper.

Our text this morning comes to us from the Book of First Corinthians, which of course isn't a book in the traditional sense, but a pastoral letter. It was written by the Apostle Paul to a group of Christians living in the first century city of Corinth, which lies in modern-day Greece, astride a narrow strip of land linking the Peloponnesian Peninsula with the mainland. Consequently, first-century Corinth was a major seaport and center of trade, and consequently, it was full of every kind of

diversity imaginable. People of vastly different languages and cultures and religious convictions lived and worked within the city of Corinth.

The Apostle Paul visited Corinth on one of his missionary journeys and planted a church there. It appears that after Paul's departure, several matters of controversy had cropped up within the Corinthian church, so the leaders of the Corinthian church had dispatched a letter to their organizing pastor asking him to weigh in. His letter of response has been preserved and handed down to us as the Book of First Corinthians.

One of the matters of controversy that Paul felt compelled to address had to do with the Corinthians' customs and practices around the Lord's Supper. Some of the Corinthian Christians were wealthy and privileged, while others barely scraped by. In the earliest days of the church, the Lord's Supper was just that – a supper, that is, a full meal. Apparently, in Corinth, the wealthy and privileged were arriving early to the meal, eating up all the bread and drinking all the wine, and when those who arrived later because of work or family obligations, there was nothing left for them but crumbs.

And so, Paul finds it necessary to offer a pastoral corrective to his sisters and brothers in Corinth. He says, in Ryan's 21st century Southern translation of Paul's first century Greek, "You Corinthians need to get a few things straight. This isn't just about you, and

this isn't just any church supper. I received instructions about this from the Lord himself, and I'm handing them on to y'all, so listen up. When y'all eat this bread, and when y'all drink this cup, y'all are doing more than sharing a meal. When you eat this bread and drink this cup together, together, y'all are proclaiming the saving death of Jesus until he comes again."

All the diversity of viewpoints and backgrounds and customs in the Corinthian church was one of its great strengths, a key part of its testimony to the world about the reconciling power of Christ. That's why elsewhere in his letter to the Corinthians, Paul describes the church as the body of Christ, with each diverse part of the body working in concert with all the other parts.

But Paul knew that when faced with great diversity, we tend to want to break the body of Christ into smaller and smaller and smaller fragments. That had already begun to happen in Corinth – the segmenting and fracturing of the church along socio-economic lines. Paul knew about the tendency of the body of Christ, when confronted with diversity, to become hard and crusty and even sharp, like so many pointed shards of shellacked bread raining down on the front pews.

And so, Paul says, again in Ryan's words, "When you come to this Table, come together."

Did you know that there are over 14,000 ways to have a drink at Starbucks? Someone studied the menu and did the calculations a few years ago, and accounting for different sizes, hot or iced or blended, different shots of flavors, fully leaded or decaffeinated, and on down the list of options, they figured that there are over 14,000 different ways to order a single beverage at your local Starbucks.

And all of that is fine and good, I suppose. But one of the things that our Reformed Presbyterian way of being the church emphasizes about the Lord's Supper is that it's far less about me, than it is about us, and what we say and do together as the body of Christ.

That's why in our branch of the Christian family tree, we don't do private celebrations of the Lord's Supper. When we serve communion in the hospital or in homes or in any other setting, it's always with the understanding that it's an extension of the church's corporate worship, never a private sacrament.

This is the communion of the saints, plural. We believe that there is something sacramental happening here – that is, this is a gift, a visible sign of God's grace active and at work in the world. We believe that when we break the bread and pour the cup, the Holy Spirit lifts us up like the arms of a loving parent gathering a child, and we are brought into the spiritual presence of Jesus and all the saints. In our

Presbyterian/Reformed tradition, this is more than a just a ritual. When we break the bread and pour the cup, we get a little glimpse, a little foretaste, of that great heavenly banquet that awaits us in the life to come, when they will come from north and south and east and west and sit together at table in the kingdom of heaven.

In many ways, 21st century Athens, Georgia, is much like first-century Corinth. People from all over the world are coming to our city to study, to start businesses and raise families, or to retire. And they are bringing with them all kinds of customs and traditions and points of view, and just like the Corinthians, they are carrying those customs and traditions and points of view right into the church. And we still carry that same tendency, when confronted with diversity, to retreat, to fragment, to segment ourselves into smaller and smaller pieces. It's a natural human instinct. But when we come to this Table, we are to come together.

Earlier this week, a friend of mine shared a testimony with me. She didn't call it that, but that's what it was – a story of how the Holy Spirit had shown up in her life in surprising ways. She has a friend with whom she was once close but had begun to lose touch over the years. Life got busy, things happened, and they just didn't see each other as much as they used to. On top of that, had become apparent that they had drifted to opposite sides regarding so

many of the issues dividing our nation today. But the Spirit had moved in her life, and in response, she felt convicted to extend an invitation to her long-lost friend for breakfast.

And though she didn't put it in these terms, as they broke bread together, as they shared their hearts with each other, as they found a way to discuss difficult subjects with civility, honesty, and love, something eucharistic happened. Together they were lifted in the presence of Christ, and just for the tiniest moment, they had the smallest glimpse, the smallest taste, of the kingdom of God, breaking into the world, right there in the middle of the café. For just the tiniest moment, they had a glimpse of that great heavenly banquet when they will come from north and south and east and west and sit together at table in the kingdom of heaven, with the risen Lord Jesus as their host.

As you go into your world this afternoon, as you head to school and work and into life tomorrow morning, I invite you to be on the lookout for those eucharistic moments.

Go looking for opportunities to break bread with people who might look and think and act and speak differently than you.

Go looking for those moments when you might suddenly be aware of the presence of the Holy Spirit breaking

into your regularly scheduled programming.

Go looking for those little glimpses, those little foretastes, of the inbreaking kingdom of God.

For every time we eat this bread together, and we drink this cup together, we testify to Athens, and indeed, to the whole, world about the saving power of Jesus Christ until he comes again.

And he is coming.

Thanks be to God. Amen.