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Supper Time

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United #5
1 Corinthians 11:17-26

One of my favorite quips from Churchill came in response to a comment from Lady Astor, the first female Member of Parliament. She said to Churchill, "Winston, if I were married to you I would poison your tea." To which he replied, "Nancy, if I were married to you, I would drink it."

This is high brow fighting. I am not so sure the Corinthian's were as refined in their quips back and forth but we know that they stated just as clearly as Lady Astor, in word and in deed, their disregard for one another.

Imagine the behaviors, which might have led Paul to write such strongly worded messages to you them: *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? What should I say to you? Should I commend you? In this matter I do not commend you.*

The self-absorbed, 'every man for himself' behaviors that the Corinthians are exhibiting are a source of endless frustration to Paul. For in their displays, the Corinthian's undermine the very thing they are gathering to do. They are gathering to be unified in faith around the Lord's Supper and receive God's blessings at the table. Jesus has invited them together to eat and to drink and to remember his great love for each of them. And yet there they are - one with feet on the table, one talking loudly with her mouth full, one thinking awful thoughts while refusing to eat, one checking his phone to see if there might be any better offers for dinner across town. Paul shouts, "Should I commend you? In this matter I do not commend you!"

We don't know exactly what they were doing to each other around that table other than not being focused on the real purpose of their coming together – to remember, to celebrate, to give thanks, and to be united in their love for and faith in Jesus Christ. On Super Bowl Sunday, the best illustration I can give you for the Corinthian's behavior is this: the Corinthian's are supposed to be focused on the main event – the football game – but instead they are like the people who come to the football game, having gladly brought their favorite cheese laden dip, but when it comes time to watch the game they are only really interested in the commercials. They don't care about the players, the scores, the rivalries – they talk and walk about and distract others during the game but when it comes time for the commercials – they are all in, focused and cheering. They are not focusing on the real purpose of the Super Bowl and for the ardent fans, the purists in the crowd this drives them mad.

Paul would rage: *When you come together, it is not really to watch the Super Bowl. For when the time comes to watch, each of you goes ahead with your own conversations, and one starts to talk and another becomes fidgety. What! Do you not have homes to watch the game in? Or do you show contempt for the NFL and humiliate those who care about the Rams and Patriots? What should I say to you? Should I commend you? In this matter I do not commend you!*

Okay, riff over and I have to admit to being a huge fan of the commercials. But you get the metaphor: if you are coming to watch the game then watch the game. If you are coming to the Lord's Supper then sit at table and be united and humbled and grateful. For the Lord calls us together from East and West and North and South to sit at the table in the kingdom and the Lord's Table is a glimpse of this future reordering – every time we celebrate this meal we are given a glimpse for a better way. A place where all are equal, a place where God is the center, a place where divisions dissolve, a place where love is genuine, a place where you are completely welcomed, a place where longings are fed and faith is confirmed and souls are nourished.

In order to experience this glimpse of God's grace at the Lord's Supper we need to approach the table with the right frame of mind. Baseball, it has been said, is not a game you can play with your teeth clenched. Maybe that is what Paul is trying to tell the Corinthian's – you cannot receive this meal with your jaws clenched, your hands tightened into fists, and your hearts inwardly focused – it just won't work.

I remember hearing about a Presbyterian Church a few years ago where the pastors were so at odds with one another that they could not stand to serve each other communion. The senior pastor would serve himself bread and wine and then he would set the elements down on the table. Then the Associate Pastor would pick them up and serve himself. Can you imagine the tension and the message being sent to the congregation? *What should I say to you? Should I commend you? In this matter I do not commend you!*

Paul's anger over the Corinthian's behavior has to do with this fierce belief that Jesus himself instituted this meal as a holy and essential act of our faith and expression for our Christian communities. There are only two sacraments in the Presbyterian Church, the two Jesus himself participated in and commended to his followers: baptism and communion. In both of these sacraments, we believe we encounter God in real and mysterious ways and both have the ability to bless and fortify us in life and in faith. To belittle, abuse, or misappropriate either sacrament is at best an opportunity lost.

The Reformer John Calvin writes, "For just as a building stands and leans on its foundation, and yet is rendered more stable when supported by pillars, so faith leans on the Word of God as its proper foundation, and yet when the sacraments are added leans more firmly, as if resting on pillars." I really like that description of what the sacraments can do for us. We are fortified by receiving God's graces

in water and in bread and in wine. They connect us to God, connect us to the community of faith, and connect us with our faith in Jesus. Or as Calvin would say they “sustain, nourish, confirm, and increase our faith.” But none of those things can happen if we do not approach the table with the right frame of mind.

So what does that mean for us today? Every time we eat this bread and drink this cup – we have an opportunity, an opportunity for us as individual believers and as a body of believers. Keeping with Calvin’s metaphor of faith with the foundation being God’s Word and the pillars being the sacraments. We are trying to build houses of faith – our own home where God lives and dwells and grows within our heart and also our house of faith that is the church – our corporate body and the communal expression of faith. Every time we gather for supper we can reinforce the pillars of these homes. This, I believe is largely about intention, are you here to grow your faith and build your church? If so then, you are ready to receive the Lord’s Supper. If you are focused on where you are and what you are here to do and your intentions are good then God is ready to be at work within you and around you.

The late poet, Mary Oliver, opened her famous poem *Wild Geese* with these lines, “*You do not have to be good. You do not have to walk on your knees for a hundred miles through the desert repenting.*” There is no 5-step program in order to prepare for communion, it is all about presenting as open, willing, and seeking to trust in God. And so we must work to unclench our jaws, release our tightened fists, and turn our hearts outward, to God and to one another.

You have been invited by our Lord and Savior to this table – Jesus has invited you into faith, into community, into life. We celebrate this meal in remembrance of the one who taught us about love, about forgiveness, about hope. It is because of the call of Jesus and the grace of God that we are invited. So may Christ’s invitation override any voices of doubt, voices of hurt, voices of division – so that we may come together, with good intentions, ready to be fed. Jesus is the host at this table – inviting us once again to fortify our faith and it is the best dinner invitation you are going to get.

Thanks be to God. Amen.