

Tables of Solidarity
1 Corinthians 11:17-22, 27-34
Sermon by Dan Schrock
July 30, 2017

¹⁷Now in the following instructions I do not commend you, because when you come together it is not for the better but for the worse. ¹⁸For, 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. ¹⁹Indeed, there have to be factions among you, for only so will it become clear who among you are genuine. ²⁰When you come together, it is not really to eat the Lord's supper. ²¹For when the time comes to eat, each of you goes ahead with your own supper, and one goes hungry and another becomes drunk. ²²What! 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!

²⁷Whoever, therefore, eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be answerable for the body and blood of the Lord. ²⁸Examine yourselves, and only then eat of the bread and drink of the cup. ²⁹For all who eat and drink without discerning the body, eat and drink judgment against themselves. ³⁰For this reason many of you are weak and ill, and some have died. ³¹But if we judged ourselves, we would not be judged. ³²But when we are judged by the Lord, we are disciplined so that we may not be condemned along with the world. ³³So then, my brothers and sisters, when you come together to eat, wait for one another. ³⁴If you are hungry, eat at home, so that when you come together, it will not be for your condemnation. About the other things I will give instructions when I come. (NRSV)

I

We Christians are famous for our many divisions. In the 1500s, a group of men and women divided from their fellow Catholic, Lutheran, and Reformed church members and founded a new movement called Anabaptism. In 1693, the Amish movement began when a group in Switzerland split away from the Swiss Brethren. Almost exactly 200 years later here in northern Indiana, an Amish Mennonite bishop excommunicated John and Martha Schrock, my great-great grandparents, for being too worldly. In that case, being too worldly meant installing a telephone in their house and having a photograph of themselves taken in front of their house. After that little dust-up, we Schrocks started attending Olive Mennonite Church.

Christians in other denominations divide too. In the 1800s, Baptists hotly debated slavery and eventually divided themselves into two denominations, one based in the north and the other based in the south. The Presbyterians did the

same thing, also because of disagreements over slavery. Slavery and racism also sent Methodists around the bend. When white Methodists refused to fully welcome black Methodists into their churches in the 1800s, a group of black Methodists left and formed their own denomination, the African Methodist Episcopal Church.

Starting in the 1960s, the Christian Reformed Church had a long disagreement over whether women could become pastors; and when the denomination finally said yes, women could become pastors, 40,000 conservative members of the denomination left.¹ For this reason, the CRC is now a much smaller denomination than it was thirty-forty years ago.

As you know, Christian groups are currently dividing over issues of sex and sexual identities. The world-wide Anglican church has been tussling over this for several decades, as have the Presbyterians. In both denominations, people have left. Some observers think that the United Methodist Church is on the cusp of a major split over sex. More recently, various evangelical groups are starting to get in on the action, and if the past suggests the future, then they too might split over sex. We Mennonites have our own struggles over sex and sexual identities, but we're hardly the only ones.

It's sad that when we Christians are reported in the news, the news is too often about our latest conflict, our latest division.

II

It provides some comfort to know that the earliest Christians also struggled with divisions. Consider Paul's first letter to the Corinthians, where he names some of the disagreements which were then raging in the church. The Corinthians quarreled over many things. They quarreled over who had baptized whom (1 Cor 1:10-17).

¹ https://www.crcna.org/welcome/history#The_Sixties

They quarreled over sex (5:1-13). They quarreled over marriage (7:1-16). They quarreled over whether Christians could in good conscience eat food that had been sacrificed to idols (8:1-13). At times, the quarrels became so fierce that members of the church sued each other in the Corinthian courts (6:1-7), a fact that shocked Paul.

However, the division that Paul found most troubling was the Lord's Supper—specifically, how the Corinthians were doing the Lord's Supper. To get a clear picture of what was happening, you have to know something about the physical spaces where the Corinthians met for worship, which in turn means you have to know something about Corinthian architecture.

Back in those days, Christians did not have church buildings. The handiest place for them to worship in was their own homes. Most Christians in the Pauline churches were probably poor—some were slaves, some were former slaves, and some, like Paul himself, operated small businesses from which they eked out a bare-bones income. Given their tiny incomes, these members of the church would have lived in tiny apartments scattered around the city. Thanks to the balmy Greek weather, people spent most of the day out in the streets and marketplaces of the city. Their apartments were mainly just a place to sleep. Apartments were too small for church meetings.

By contrast, the houses of the wealthier members were much larger, and it was here in these houses where the earliest Christians met for worship. This meant that every time the church met for worship, the dynamics of hospitality were always in play. At some level, the rich owners of the house were always functioning as hosts for the poorer church members, while the poorer church members were always functioning as guests in a richly furnished house of a kind they would never be able to own.

That immediately set up sticky social dynamics that we do not have here at Berkeley. In our congregation, no one person owns this building. We equally share in the ownership of our land and buildings, regardless of how much money we earn. When we arrived for worship this morning, there was no rich owner standing at the front door, shaking our hands and welcoming us to his house, making the rest of us feel inferior for being poor and having to live in a dark, stinky, shabby little apartment because that's all we can afford.

From archaeological evidence, we know a few things about the typical layout of the wealthier houses in the Greco-Roman world. A typical house had one room called a *triclinium*, which functioned like a dining room. This was where the wealthy owners ate meals with close friends, who were generally other wealthy people. From the typical size of the room, it appears that only nine people could eat in the *triclinium* at a time. And they ate while reclining on couches. Another room in the typical house was the atrium, which could have accommodated 30-40 people for a meal, either standing or sitting. From today's text, we know that the Lord's Supper was actually a full-fledged meal, not just a symbolic meal of a tiny piece of bread with a tiny sip of wine.

The picture that emerges, then, goes something like this. The Corinthian Christians worshipped in the private homes of rich members. When they celebrated the Lord's supper, which was a full-course meal, the 9 richest people spaciouly reclined in the *triclinium*, while the other 30-40 members of the church squeezed into the atrium, standing or sitting. This arrangement automatically separated members of the church into two social classes.

On top of this, it seems that the people in these two social classes could have eaten different food. In airline flights, we're used to the distinctions between first-class fliers and regular-class fliers. The people in first class get nicer seats, more room, and better food, while the people squeezed into regular class get

ordinary seats, less room, and maybe just a bag of peanuts and a cup of Coke. That's similar to what happened during those early celebrations of the Lord's supper: regular poor folk in the atrium got plain food, maybe something like plain lentils, while the special nine in the *triclinium* got meat, well-seasoned entrees, and great wine.²

III

When Paul hears about all of this, he is shocked—and angry. This is not the Lord's supper!, he says. Some of you are getting drunk on food and wine, while some of you are walking away from the meal hungry (vv. 20-21)! This meal, which our Lord instituted at the end of his life, is supposed to be a meal of solidarity. It is supposed to unite you around the same purpose and the same sympathies. Examine yourselves! Instead of uniting you, the way you're doing the Lord's supper is making the social distinctions worse. It's tearing you apart.

The implication behind Paul's argument is that the Lord's supper, if practiced in a way that allows all social classes to participate equally, can help to unify the church. The Lord's supper can create among us a kind of solidarity that persists even in the middle of our divisions.

However, even if the Corinthians celebrate the supper the way Paul wants them to, Paul does not say that the Lord's supper will magically fix all the divisions in the church. Instead what he seems to be advocating for is a renewed practice of the Lord's supper that concretely symbolizes the church's spiritual and social unity—even while the members of the church continue to struggle over issues about eating meat offered to idols, sex, marriage, and so on. Amid our differences, disagreements, and divisions, can we nevertheless find continuing unity in the Lord's supper?

² Richard B. Hays, *First Corinthians* (Louisville: John Knox, 1997), 192-197.

Today is the final installment in our summer series on hospitality. Appropriately, at least some of us signed up to participate in the Guess Who's Coming to Dinner? event today at noon. Whether you will be participating in that or not, perhaps at today's lunch you can reflect on how your meal does or does not symbolize unity among the people gathered around the table. In what ways do your eating habits promote unity among Christian believers? What can you point to and say, "There, in that moment, around that table, Christ was present to us in the power of the Holy Spirit."

May our eating and drinking build among us a bond of peace.