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### Communion and Community

I have a very distinct memory of my first communion. I was with my mom, at her church, and I was around 7 or 8 years old. We were a small congregation, and we stood in a circle. In the center were perfectly square pieces of white bread and what smelled to be Welch's grape juice. This was unfamiliar yet familiar. At my dad's church, a Catholic church, people went up for what looked like a little wafer and some wine, and I figured this must be some sort of toned down version of that. The pastor looked somber, and told us that if we took this bread and juice and we weren't right with God, or with each other, it would be like asking for our own death. Being 8 and not having yet mastered the art of simile, I began to panic. I knew I had some sin deep down in my heart that was unresolved, I probably wasn't right with all my fellow church members, so clearly, I was about to participate in my own demise. I started backing away from the circle but quickly felt a jab in my ribs which was always my mom's signal to stop moving. Since this was life or death, I ignored it and walked away, only to have my arm yanked by my mom, planting me firmly in this death circle. Why was everybody so calm? Was everyone really that holy? I'm sure if I would have started crying or made some kind of fuss I could have gotten out of the death ritual but being a child who was taught above all else to "behave myself" in public I took the bread and the cup. I'm assuming I came to some sort of acceptance of my fate. Because I feared my mother, and probably because of Jesus, I was going to die an early death. I remember assuming this was going to work like some kind of poison, so I went to the women's restroom where there was a lounge area, as I figured I may as well be comfortable, and I lay back on the couch in anticipation of passing from this world to the next. But nothing happened. I was fine. My mom came looking for me, admonishing me for not being in church. I tried to explain my rationale for what looked like napping, but she told me to stop being so dramatic.

So where did this come from, this rigid, dogmatic view of the Lord's Supper? From Paul, of course. First Corinthians 11:26-32. Paul has just finished talking about head coverings. He's just about to talk about speaking in tongues. It should also be noted that Paul has also said there is no condemnation in those who are in Christ Jesus, yet he seems to put that on the shelf for a moment to talk about condemnation. Paul is really "in his feelings" here. He states, "Whoever, 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. <sup>28</sup> Examine yourselves, and only then eat of the bread and drink of the cup. <sup>29</sup> For all who eat and drink [\[h\]](#) without discerning the body, [\[i\]](#) eat and drink judgment against themselves. <sup>30</sup> For this reason many of you are weak and ill, and some have died. [\[i\]](#) <sup>31</sup> But if we judged ourselves, we would not be judged. <sup>32</sup> But when we are judged by the Lord, we are disciplined [\[k\]](#) so that we may not be condemned along with the world."

So what is Paul really saying? Thinking, as I was taught to do, that looking at the early Anabaptists solves everything, I looked up what our Anabaptist forbears thought of the Lord's Supper. I found touchy, reactionary treatises given as correctives to Catholic doctrine. I found men arguing with other men about the "real presence" of Christ in the elements, "inward change" vs "outward change," nothing addressing Paul's feelings completely. No one quite seems to agree and as Mennonites it seems we kind of took what we liked from people like Pilgram Marpeck and others and sort of made our own theology...which we sometimes preach on, on the 4 or so times a year when we serve the Supper. We make sure we partake in the Lord's Supper when we want to come together and be unified, like during an election or after some difficult time that leads us to wanting ritual. After this week, I believe we are in a time that warrants some type of ritual. Or a happy time that leads us to wanting ritual. But as ritual isn't really in our wheelhouse like it is for some other denominations, sometimes we're left with the question, why are we doing this again? Am I damning my soul to hell by taking this? Celebrating Jesus' life? Mourning his death? Remembering my baptism? One of the early Anabaptists, Balthasar Hubmaier, I think really accurately captures how Paul encouraging us to think, but more on that later.

This scripture passage needs a little context. Paul is speaking to the church in Corinth, and by reading the passage that comes before the famous “condemnation” passage, we see that the practice of the Lord’s Supper is a bit of a mess. People are eating too much, getting drunk and likely disorderly. Several commentators note, and I should also say that no one can really agree on this, that this might have been an early Greco-Roman carry-in. Wealthy folks would have brought food and drink for themselves, and eaten to their heart’s content without thought to their neighbor. Another scenario might have been that the host provided the food, but served the wealthiest among them first, leaving scraps for the laborers who likely came later. Likely the “host” of this supper was a wealthy member of the community, as they would be the kind of person who would have space for everyone in the church. It has been posited that they might have invited their friends to come and recline in some of the inner most rooms, and everyone else could sit out in the atrium. Greco-Roman folk tended to only socialize with people in their own socioeconomic strata. Making this even worse, some scholars believe that there may have been a famine in Corinth at the time.

So what we have is a rather obnoxious scene of wealthy folks lounging, eating rich food, getting drunk, leaving out their fellow church members in every sense of the word, leaving them to eat either table scraps or meager portions in a completely different part of the building.

What seems like a harsh rebuke from Paul is actually a caution for the church in Corinth to check themselves. The purpose of the supper is to provide unity, and to create solidarity. One cannot eat of the bread and drink of the cup without having regard for one’s neighbor. One scholar said that Paul is not creating a theology of communion here, Paul is trying to correct something that has become a bad habit.

I would push back against that. I believe Paul IS trying to create a theology of communion here, while correcting a bad habit. Paul is pushing us to look at the inner life AND the outer life, to borrow some thinking from those early Anabaptists I mentioned earlier. Are we worthy to proclaim the death of Christ when we are disregarding our neighbor? The root of this practice of

the Lord's Supper is in Jesus' loving sacrifice. Whatever your views are on the atonement, the death and resurrection of Jesus are rooted and grounded in deep love, a love that's not just for you, but for everyone.

So with some of that context in mind, what does it mean to partake of the bread together and this common cup? Aside from proclaiming the Lord's death? It also means solidarity. You are taking on the burden and the joy of your neighbor, you're pledging to provide for them in their time of need, to celebrate with them in times of joy. In essence, yes, you are renewing your baptismal vow to give and receive counsel and participate fully in the life of the church. That means you are celebrating. You are also lamenting.

But there is also a missional aspect to this ritual. The church extends outside our walls and into our community. Are we like the church at Corinth? Are we so overflowing with resources that we're leaving others to go without? Are we the ones lounging in our little corner of the world, only interacting with people who make us comfortable? If so, maybe we are the ones partaking in communion in an unworthy manner, and maybe we also need to check ourselves like Paul asks of the Corinthian Christians.

In essence, I don't believe this passage is meant for us to be perfectly blameless and sinless before taking communion. I don't believe we were meant to focus on the condemnation and judgment that many have derived from this passage. But we do need to examine what might make us unworthy. Traditionally, that would be sin. That would involve looking at what's separating you from God, making amends, etc. But while there's nothing wrong with taking a look at our personal morality, we can get so caught up nitpicking sin/not sin/maybe sin that we forget that it's about more than us. There is systemic sin. Sin greater than the sum of its parts. Because there were likely some really righteous and holy people lounging in the inner rooms in Corinth. People that probably gave money to the church, and to other good causes. Treated their families well. Prayed. Fasted. But when it came to the Lord's Supper, they continued to practice exclusion, probably second nature to Greco-Roman culture. They were fighting centuries of systemic sin.

Sin can be both personal and communal. To borrow words from Sarah Arthur, it's more than just laying personal sins at the foot of the cross and moving on, knowing you're forgiven. It's a group project. How are we postured to our neighbor? What sins have we committed, or are committing, against them? Are we giving others a place at our table? Because they are just as worthy as we are to receive what can be found by eating the bread and drinking the cup.

For those that know me well, I talk about my time with Pathways to Housing DC quite a lot. Before moving to DC, I asked God to make me like Dorothy Day, to be able to wade into the lives of the very least of these, to truly make a difference.

I was naive, and too much of a fixer, both of those things were remedied quickly by the people I met. Pretence, niceties, and usually manners fly out the window when working with those who literally have nothing but what they're wearing and carrying around in a shopping cart. I realized I had a lot. A whole lot. And the charge that I felt Christ was giving was more than sitting back and saying, "It sure makes you grateful." It more often than not meant sharing my food. It's hard to get anything accomplished when you're hungry. It meant getting uncomfortable. Sounds, smells, ways of interacting with the world, it was best to get over yourself if you were offended. It meant looking at the city in a whole different way, because your surroundings are a lot different when you're focused on survival and not thriving.

I had been lounging with my friends in the house, and I let people who have nothing eat my leftovers. I supported, through my silence, or my giving of funds, systems that caused the income gap to widen. I chose not to see things, focusing on the "inner," never the "outer." If the Corinthians were guilty of condemnation, so was I. And the work that I did was a drop in the bucket of a need that seems to never stop growing.

Balthasar Hubmaier, one of the early Anabaptists I was mentioning earlier, really "got" the communal aspect of the Lord's Supper. He states that we, the congregation, are the bread. He says, "We conclude that the bread and wine of the Christ meal are outward symbols of an inward Christian nature here on earth, in which a Christian obligates themselves to another." He also says, very

poignantly, words that I personally love so much I have them written multiple places to remind me, "...as the body and blood of Christ became my body and blood on the cross, so likewise shall my body and blood become the body and blood of my neighbor."

It may sound like I'm saying that we are all condemned because we haven't done enough for the poor and needy in our community, and therefore, we're not worthy the ritual we are about to do. I really hope I haven't done that. We are not called to condemnation, but through the life and death of Jesus we are called to an over abundance of grace and love. But we are also charged with loving our neighbor as ourselves. We are charged with loving and caring for the people in our church, and the people that exist outside of these walls that are no less God's children. I hope that we can allow the bread and the cup to change our posture, our orientation, to not only the inward but also the outward, to seeing Christ in the world and asking God where God would have us sit and dine. Just as you are generously given this symbol of grace, may you then be able to be Christ's hands and feet in the world.

What does that mean for Berkeley? I admit, I have not been here that long. But I do know we are in a time of transition. I know I personally am in a time of transition. Transitions are a time to look inward, but we can't neglect to also look beyond ourselves. It's really double the work. And during transitions, it's important to know who your community is, who your people are, and commit to being there for one another. So by partaking in this ritual, and by participating in the life of the church, you are partaking in community, committing yourself to your neighbor by sharing this bread and cup. And you're also committing to others. The words of Jesus state that this bread, our communal body, is the bread of life, and this cup is grace for the world, not just us, but for the world. Unless we partake, unless we, the bread, give of ourselves to each other, we have no life in us. May the power of the death and resurrection of Christ make us worthy of this holy gift.

