

All Things New | How the Incarnation Changes Everything

People of the Table

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1.4.15 (Epiphany Sunday)

1st Corinthians 11.17ff

But in giving this instruction, I do not praise you, because you come together not for the better but for the worse. ¹⁸ For, in the first place, when you come together as a church, I hear that divisions exist among you; and in part I believe it. ¹⁹ For there must also be factions among you, so that those who are approved may become evident among you. ²⁰ Therefore when you meet together, it is not to eat the Lord's Supper, ²¹ for in your eating each one takes his own supper first; and one is hungry and another is drunk. ²² What! Do you not have houses in which to eat and drink? Or do you despise the church of God and shame those who have nothing? What shall I say to you? Shall I praise you? In this I will not praise you. ²³ For I received from the Lord that which I also delivered to you, that the Lord Jesus in the night in which He was betrayed took bread; ²⁴ 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." ²⁵ In the same way He took the cup also after supper, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in My blood; do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of Me." ²⁶ For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until He comes. ²⁷ Therefore whoever eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner, shall be guilty of the body and the blood of the Lord. ²⁸ But a man must examine himself, and in so doing he is to eat of the bread and drink of the cup. ²⁹ For he who eats and drinks, eats and drinks judgment to himself if he does not judge the body rightly. ³⁰ For this reason many among you are weak and sick, and a number sleep. ³¹ But if we judged ourselves rightly, we would not be judged. ³² But when we are judged, we are disciplined by the Lord so that we will not be condemned along with the world. ³³ So then, my brethren, when you come together to eat, wait for one another. ³⁴ If anyone is hungry, let him eat at home, so that you will not come together for judgment. The remaining matters I will arrange when I come.

Today's a special day for a number of reasons. It's our daughter's birthday (Maddy is 19 years old). It's the first Sunday/Lord's Day of 2015. It brings both congregations together here at St. Andrews (the 8:30 people and the 11:00 people). It's Epiphany Sunday, celebrating the appearance (epiphany) of Jesus Christ to the Gentiles and the visit of the "Magi".

Today we come to one of the most often quoted passages in the whole Bible... it'll be quoted today in millions of churches all over the world: Paul's famous "Communion" passage.

Sadly, only the middle verses are usually read AND we miss some huge ideas in the larger context, WHICH, if we'd get them, might give US a kind of Epiphany. There are ideas here that can REALLY help our lives and our walk with God as we move into 2015.

When the Church at Corinth tried to celebrate this sacrament (which Jesus Christ gave/commanded) in Corinth it brought some issues to the surface. It revealed some basic ways they approached life that were at odds with the MAIN message of Christianity. AND it turns out, those same antithetical ideas (in different forms) ALSO plague US. This Table gives us a prime venue to unearth some ways of thinking and relating that the Gospel confronts and changes. This Table is a kind of examination table BUT also a treatment table where we can be healed and freed.

Today, many people describe themselves as spiritual but not religious... Lots of people have been turned off by organized religion and would rather practice some form of spirituality on their own... You may criticize/scorn that modern/post-modern way of thinking BUT YOU MAY be more influenced by it than you think. OR you may be a person who is drawn to the Person and teachings of Jesus Christ but you feel like, "I JUST CAN'T do the organized religion thing!"

Well, let's see today, in this passage and AT this Table that the radical togetherness of real Christian life and worship is different from organized religion AND different from modern South Florida privatized spirituality...it leads to a new way of spiritual practice and a new way of relating to others.

1 – The Problem AROUND the Table #2 – The Solution ON the Table and # 3 – The Practice OF the Table

The problem for the Corinthians and for us is separation. Today, we live individualized/private lives independent from others and so did they (only for different reasons).

This whole passage is the Apostle Paul confronting a way of life in that young church and IN that affluent, trendy, touristy city where the church was situated.

The Roman Empire (and Corinth especially) was extremely class-conscious. Houses were built for the wealthy to REFLECT/accentuate this separation of the classes. In the front there would be a common area, a courtyard/atrium and in the back, a smaller more intimate dining area that might seat 12-15 people... And it was common practice (some ancient philosophers even wrote satires about the custom) to invite people to a party but only SOME of them would be allowed into the dining area. There would be good wine and good food in the BACK but common stuff in the front. AND there was really no question about who went where – you were born into a class and that's where you stayed.

Everyone KNEW on what side of the VELVET ROPE he or she should live. It was like "First Class" and "Coach" – you knew what kind of ticket you were holding.

And it was quite often the people with these two-tier homes who HOSTED the first Christian Churches. AND it was always the custom that if poor folks or servants or non-citizens EVER come into the back, past the VELVET ROPE, they better be holding a tray on their shoulder.

And wherever CLASS-DISTINCTIONS or race-distinctions or looks-distinctions or age-distinctions or gender or educational or COOL - wherever people make much of these things, wherever there's conspicuous consumption and flaunting or brandishing of these symbols IT'S EVIDENCE of where people in that particular society GET A SENSE OF WORTH or identity or meaning or significance or RIGHT-ness.

Every society and culture sets the VELVET ROPE somewhere and wherever that line is SET – THIS is the source of personhood and importance. "If I own property...THEN it is well with my soul"

AND if YOU OWN PROPERTY, if we have share this marker, then we have a basis for togetherness and mutuality... a basis for COMMUNION. If we share a racial identity we can affirm the basic goodness of one-another...our common rightness...a basis for inclusion.

If you're YOUNG, you're IN – old, you're OUT. Pretty you're IN – PLAIN, you're OUT. Single=IN, Married=OUT (or vice-versa) It could be TASTE in music...movies...art...humor...wine ...clothing... travel ...sports... We may get a sense of self, a sense of belonging and identity from almost any category.

And it's hard to know where I derive a sense of well-being...what is necessary for ME to feel good about life? How do I judge or categorized people? What, for me, makes a person an INSIDER or OUTSIDER?

But Paul is writing to a group who have SEEN something...revolutionary...about PRETTY PEOPLE and PLAIN... about athletic people and clumsy... about Democrats and Republicans... wealthy and poor – THIS GROUP OF CHRISTIANS in Corinth have begun to recognize that what we all have in common is the image of God...and our fall into sin...and that WE are all...outside the ONLY VELVET ROPE that really and ultimately matters – WE ARE ALL infinitely below the standard that God has set...

No one has measured up to the simple standard of LOVE that God has established. No Italian people, no blue-collar people, no gay people, no wealthy people, no law abiding citizen, no criminal – NO ONE has simply loved God with all HIS/HER whole heart, mind, soul and strength 24/7...always.

A N D the Christian is beginning to see that God loved us, when WE did not love HIM and God crossed the velvet rope...came INTO our situation and became one of US...lived among the FALLEN. And He lived up to His own simple and beautiful standard of immaculate, unceasing LOVE.

Then the Insider who came to US...and lived the LIFE I was required to live...HE then died, OUTSIDE the City on a trash mound...HE took the blame for my sin and was EXCLUDED from the company of people and the Presence of God, the Father... Jesus Christ died under the crushing weight of justice I deserved.

And in His resurrection, which was witnessed, and which changed history forever...in His RISING there's proof that ALL who believe Him are received by God. And that new rightness and NEW INCLUSION into the Most Exclusive Circle is not based on the college from which I graduated, my looks, my taste in music, my grammatical correctness or bank account – I AM ONLY included because of the Righteousness from God on the basis of faith.

And even though – OUT THERE – the believer in Jesus Christ often hears the voices (public opinion, co-workers, family, advertisers) saying, “You must be thin/sexy...must have this kind of car or purse... be in THIS GROUP or THAT.”...And though we sometimes (let's face OFTEN-times!) believe those voices OUT THERE... B U T ... not in here...not (of ALL places) NOT at this Table. This is where we see through the LIE...when we come together ... and for a few moments... we come out of the world... WE ARE THE PEOPLE OF THE TABLE.

Here, I see myself as God sees me...and I see YOU as God sees YOU and all those other categories become (not gone – I'm still a man...a plumber...a mom...a Venezuelan...) but all those categories become infinitely LESS important than the fact that I am received by God because of Jesus Christ.

Something happened in Corinth – the details aren't exactly clear... but somehow the rich folks were eating in the DINING ROOM and maybe eating the good food and wine before “THEY” arrived... but somehow the velvet rope went up again...and it was especially evident when they were at the Lord's Table. “Hey! We'll be right with YOU GUYS...we're almost done here...”

And the poor folks waited in the front atrium... like they always did... dreaming about what it would be like to be back there...to be included...and the message of the American Dream or of the Roman Empire Dream was louder than the gospel AT THE VERY MOMENT when the gospel was to drown all music but its own.

There is one loaf – one broken Body – and that makes US into one new society, a Body of believers each person...an organ...a part...of the Body...included by grace NOT by money or good looks or being cool...

Now, how to BE the People of the Table – Problem AROUND the Table, Solution ON the Table and finally, The Practice OF the Table:

First, here's a very different way to look at these verses that have sadly tormented many sensitive Christians, through the ages, who have not seen them in context. When it says in v.27, "Therefore whoever eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner, shall be guilty of the body and the blood of the Lord...For he... eats and drinks judgment to himself if he does not judge the body rightly."

This isn't about having sin in your life – we all have sin in our lives and a lot more than we know!

This is about the body, the church. This is about reverting to a view that says, "Yeah! That gospel thing is great but what's really important is whether you allow your kids to watch TV – I know I'm significant because I am a GOOD MOM! And I hang around good moms!" OR "My white-collar job..." "My income..." OR "My good diet and exercise"

Failing to discern the Body is the idea that I am better than YOU because of " (BLANK) " and then for me to treat YOU, a fellow ORGAN, a PART of this Body as if YOU are inferior because of that factor. It's about putting some other standard above the ONE standard that God accepts which is the Perfect obedience of Jesus Christ attributed to sinners who simply believe.

If you are received by God and accepted inside the rope it's not because you're successful or wealthy or Swedish or young or have good taste in clothing or manners. HERE...at this Table...we are equals. We are received by God because of Jesus Christ... therefore receive ONE ANOTHER.

That's why we JOIN a church because we see it, the church, the Body as what it is – we rightly discern the Body, the church. It's God's new society. Are we imperfect? Yes! Sinful? Yes. Do we hurt each other sometimes? Yes. Yes. Sadly, YES.

But if you're too good to be a part of US...if you have withdrawn from the church because the Church is full of hypocrites...and you're looking for one that's good enough for you – I think you're NOT getting it. You're not seeing how people get received by God. You're NOT seeing the main idea of the gospel. You're trying to stand on some claim of righteousness in yourself and THAT is a denial of the good news.

So to you who aren't members of this or SOME church that teaches the gospel – don't take the bread and wine today – but know this: we are ready to embrace you as soon as you get messed up enough. Just admit you're as sinful as we are and take the rescue that Jesus offers to anyone who joins His company.

That's the problem with Solo Spirituality AND with Organized Religion – it's self-righteous. Organized religion says, "I'm better than you OUTsiders" and solo-spirituality says, "I'm better than you insiders."

But Jesus Christ's way says, "YOU are all outsiders so I came outside to bring you IN and YOU can claim NO CREDIT for it – so enjoy it and accept one another."

Lastly, I'll say to you organs of this Body, members of this local church, St. Andrews – "excel still more". God has done great things in the way His love and grace are being demonstrated here. So, come now, eat grace in the gospel. Be fueled to love people who are different from you but who are family IN Christ and excel still more. (1 Thes 4)

"The Lord Jesus in the night in which 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 He took the cup also after supper, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in My blood (which was shed for many); do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of Me." For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until He comes.