

Sharing the Bread of Life  
1 Corinthians 11:23-32

In her book "The Church of the Dog," Kaya McLaren says through one of her characters: "I don't believe those ministers know anything we don't. I figure, why deal with a middleman when you can buy wholesale, you know? Ministers remind me of used car salesmen. I believe religion is what happens when ego contaminates spirituality. I believe the truth is in our hearts. God lives in our hearts. God speaks to us in our hearts if we shut-up long enough to listen." I think there is a popular sentiment in our culture that is expressed by this book. The church, government, organizations, and community in general are things to be distrusted and even discarded. Even people who think that faith has some value often tend not to join a church because they have learned to distrust community. Organized religion has earned its reputation in many ways: Being inflexible or intolerant, covering up sex scandals, excluding those who are considered sinners, building huge cathedrals while people in their neighborhoods are starving, not allowing people to ask their faithful questions, and so on. The Church of Jesus Christ has not always lived up to its own standards. The Church has often mirrored the prejudices of society and the culture of consumption.

Our scripture reading today from 1 Corinthians shows a good example of how the church can get lost in the practices and sins of the culture. In the verses we read today, the Apostle Paul was trying to address the church in Corinth to help them see how they needed to conduct themselves when it came to communion. Somehow the church in Corinth was mirroring their culture in the ways they treated the poor among them. Corinth was a town located about forty miles to the south-southwest of Athens in ancient Greece. In Paul's time, Corinth was a very important city and a commercial and religious hub. Corinth was perhaps best known for its artisans' products, such as bronze, but it also did a thriving business in pottery and earthenware. Corinth had a reputation for being a wealthy city without much culture, a city that abused the poor. The congregation at Corinth reflected the socioeconomic and religious makeup of the city. In keeping with the "steep social pyramid" which was typical of that culture, very few believers were rich, and most were poor (1 Cor 1:26). But only wealthy persons had homes and a staff large enough to host the church. It was the wealthy who provided for the church's celebration of the Lord's Supper. In verse 21 we see that the problem that Paul was dealing with is that the rich people of the church would arrive early because of their privileged social and economic status. Then they would eat the food and drink the wine before the others arrived.

The wealthy were expected to share with the poor. But they did not, so the poor went "hungry" (v. 21). This showed a lack of love, at a love-feast. The Corinthian Christians not only abused the Lord's Supper but they also lost their basic sense that the life of faith was a life of community. They privatized their worship and their faith to fit what they liked. Paul had to remind them in his letter that at the heart of the Lord's Supper was the story of a community, the people of God being led out slavery and into freedom. They forgot that the elements of bread and wine that Jesus used were the same elements that Abraham shared with Melchizedek, the Canaanite priest of the temple in Jerusalem. They forgot about the blessing that was given to Abraham and his community through the love of another community of faith. The Corinthian Christians forgot about the gift of Christ celebrated at the table. They forgot that the table was not truly theirs. It was that of Christ himself who was the host and also the very food presented to them. His presence and his love were the true marks of the Christian community. They forgot about the spirit of the Apostle Paul who shared the faith with them and helped them establish the church in their town. But ultimately the church was the place where many of the Christians of Corinth found their true transformation to live a life that was not defined by the norms of their day, but by the Spirit of God's love.

So, as we come to the table today seeking the bread of life for our lives, we are haunted by the spirit of individualism in our culture. We are even tempted to mirror that culture in our faith by making it exclusively about personal gain and consumption. We are tempted to make church fit “my needs” so that I, the consumer, can be satisfied. We are also haunted by the spirit of individualism in our culture to the point of seeing faith as only a personal matter and one does not need a community to grow in faith. As we are tempted by these experiences that drag us into the path of individualism, I hope that we are able to be energized by the transforming power of the Bread of Life shared in community. The Christians in Corinth had to learn over and over again about the power of the table of our Lord Jesus Christ to overcome the divisions of their society. The Spirit and presence of God’s love at the table are there to heal those divisions and move us to a place of sharing. Because at the heart of our sharing is our true humanity and happiness. God created us to be a people of love and connections. We don’t come to this earth to live alone. We come into this world into the loving care of a community called our family which includes our parents, our extended families, our neighborhoods, our cities, our countries and our world. We come with our different views and experiences, yet we are connected to each other in ways that cannot be broken. This past week with the election of a new president, some of us are very happy, yet some are very disappointed and hurt. Yet, we are connected to each other not just because of our country which we love so much, but because of our love for God. This table today is the feast of that love and connection. We come to it with all of our different experiences and views, yet it is the same bread and cup of love that we share.

There was once a good and sincere man who was searching for the way to happiness, searching of the way to happiness and truth. One day, he went to seek out a wise old man who, so he had been assured, would be able to show him the way he was searching for. The wise old man received him warmly, as he sat at the door of his tent. After serving the seeker a glass of mint tea, the wise old man readily revealed the secret of the route to happiness and truth. “It’s a long way from here, to be sure,” he said. “But you can’t miss it. You will come to a village that I will describe to you, and right at the heart of that village, you will find three little shops. There, the secret of happiness and of truth will be revealed to you. It was indeed a very long way. The seeker passed along many valleys and across many rivers. Eventually, he arrived at the village, where his heart told him, “This is the place. Yes, this is the place you are seeking.” And sure enough, there in the heart of the village were three little shops. But when he went inside them the seeker was deeply disappointed. In the first shop, all he found were some reels of wire. In the second, there was nothing more exciting than a few pieces of wood. And in the third, there was just some roughly shaped metal. Weary and discouraged, he left the village again, and found a resting place for the night in a little clearing not too far away. Night fell. The full moon filled the clearing with a gentle glow. And just as he was on the point of falling asleep, the searcher heard a sublime melody coming from the direction of the village. What magical instrument could be giving rise to such perfect harmony? When he went to the village to find out what it was, he was very surprised. He discovered that the celestial music was coming from a man playing a zither. And the zither was made from the wire, the wood and the metal pieces he had so despised earlier in the day, when he had seen them for sale in the three shops in the village. At that moment, he understood that happiness is the union of everything that has already been given to us.

The bread and wine we share today are common elements of this life, but when we come to share together in the Spirit of Christ, they become to all of us the amazing gift of love that transforms all of life. May the love of this community and the Spirit of this love-feast inspire and transform all of our tables and all of our communities.