

Inclusive as the Love of God

sermon digest

October 5, 2014

1 Corinthians 10:16-21,31-32

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Christian history has provided several words for what we do here today. The *Lord's Supper* refers to the meal Jesus shared with his disciples on the night that he was arrested. Because it was the final meal before his arrest and crucifixion, it has sometimes been called the *Last Supper*. The time of Jewish Passover and the new meaning given to the bread and cup has led some to speak of a *Christian Passover or Seder*. The New Testament words of blessing in the institution of the bread and cup, "when he had given thanks," has associated the Sacrament with the Greek word *eucharisto*, "giving thanks." In the Catholic, high church tradition this is the *Holy Eucharist*, the thanksgiving.

Most Protestant churches prefer to speak of *Holy Communion*. The word is *koinonia* taken directly from our reading today. As a parenthesis in a long discussion about the antiquated issue of eating meat offered in pagan sacrifices, Paul speaks of the cup as *koinonia*, communion, sharing, in the blood of Christ, and the bread as *koinonia*, communion in the body of Christ. *Koinonia* is communion, fellowship, partnership, or sharing. William Barclay (NTWB p72) calls Christian *koinonia* that bond which binds Christians to each other, to Christ and to God. The John Fawcett hymn of 1782, "Blessed Be the Tie that Binds," has become a traditional Table hymn because it speaks to the *koinonia*: "the tie that binds our hearts in Christian love, the fellowship of kindred minds is like to that above."

The Table has been a symbol of exclusion for churches. Influenced by the theology of Baptist Landmarkism, my home church practiced *close communion*. Instead of a door of welcome, the Table was a wall of exclusion. The service was a rare experience, occurring two or three times a year at the most and never really connected to the morning worship experience. It always seemed like an appendix or afterthought. At the end of the normal worship service, the pastor would thank visitors for coming and announce that the service to follow was for members only. Then he would offer a prayer of benediction, and as we sang a hymn, non-members were excused. As a small child of a member family, I got to stay and watch as my older sisters and parents participated. The children were closely guarded to be sure that we did not get too curious and sneak a piece of the bread or taste the grape juice.

In seminary, one of my friends was pastor of a small country church. Chatting over coffee one morning, he complained that his parents had visited his church on Sunday. The service was a celebration of Communion, and they sat with folded arms refusing to participate. They were conservative Baptists who did not believe in taking Communion from any but their local congregation. He groaned, "they excommunicated their own son."

Actually Baptist exclusion from the Table has not been unique. Other denominations and churches have had their own version of close communion, acting as gatekeepers for the grace of God, protecting the church from being corrupted by aliens and rationing salvation to the world. In 1933, Shadyside Presbyterian Church in Pittsburgh decided to celebrate Communion as a symbol of global Christian fellowship. They invited other churches to join together with them in Christian unity on the same Sunday. Three years later the Presbyterian Church US adopted the annual practice and World Communion Sunday gradually began to spread to other denominations.

In 1 Corinthians, Paul struggles to provide guidance for Christians living in a pagan society. He refuses to attribute any mystical power or meaning to the pagan sacrifices, so he admits that eating meat offered to idols will not make you sick or damn your soul. Food is just food. Whether it is received from a pagan temple or a church does not give it any special power to help or hurt. But eating pagan sacrifices might imply participation in pagan worship, so Paul argues that Christians need to avoid the pagan meat. Just as the bread and cup are *koinonia* with Christ, the pagan sacrifices are *koinonia* with demons, even though demons are powerless.

Paul does not try to hide or close the Table from the pagan world. He never suggests that the Table is the wall of Christian exclusion. Paul finds common ground for Christians in the bread and cup. The Table is a symbol of our family ties in Christ.

For Christians, koinonia must be more than symbol of our communion. Symbols have always been important for worship, but symbols are mockery if they do not affect our attitudes and practice. If

the Table is a symbol of *koinonia* of inclusion in the life of Christ and community with one another, the people who gather around this Table ought to be the most loving and inclusive community around, better than the State, more open to outsiders than any commercial institution. The evidence of communion is not just in our words at the Table. The real *koinonia* emerges in our behavior.

It was the early-nineties. Scott was a young single father of two boys. His wife died with AIDS, infected from a blood transfusion during pregnancy. By the time they had discovered her infection both of their children were HIV-positive. Scott's father was a respected pastor in the denomination. Scott wanted his children to experience the loving community of church that he had known as a child, but he felt that he needed to be honest and did not want to be a problem. He phoned churches in town to ask if his HIV infected children could attend Sunday school. A minister of one of the more conservative churches, after a conference with superiors, called back with the word that attendance would not be allowed, but they would be happy to provide the boys with videos to watch at home. In other words, "you can watch us, but you cannot be a part of us." No *koinonia*!

Scott called one of the more liberal-progressive churches in town. Again he was referred to an associate minister who told the young father that he would have to check for church policy and get back to him. Somehow the question got lost in the administrative network, and Scott never received a return call. Local newspapers picked up the story, and it soon became a national scandal.

In the 1990's, the whole nation was terrorized by the threat of AIDS, about like the fear associated with Ebola today. The need to protect children from infectious disease came into direct conflict with the church's call to love one another as Christ had loved them. The story was something of an expose' of the churches, but it was also a call to action.

When the story broke, I felt strongly that my church needed to get our act together. This was not just about policy or problem; it was about people. We decided to bring in a specialist in infectious disease control to meet with our children's workers to provide guidance for a safe environment for all of the children. It seemed that the best practice was to manage contact and cleanliness so that any infection could be controlled regardless of type or awareness. Then we issued a public statement welcoming all of God's children, making specific reference to the issue of the day—HIV.

The word *koinonia* has called us beyond Paul's immediate call to communion as the tie that binds us to Christ and to one another. I believe we have moved toward the Christ who called us to love enemies and toward the message of Paul, who envisioned Christ breaking down our walls of division. If this church is the body of Christ, we must be as inclusive as the love of God.