

“Divisions Deny and Damage the Body” 2015
1 Corinthians 1:2-3, 10, 11:23-29

I was visiting my parents and attended Sunday worship with them
at a Presbyterian church of a different denomination.
My parents were pleased to introduce me to their friends,
and I enjoyed the spirit of Christian fellowship we shared.

At their church, they celebrated Communion every week,
and their pastor made a pretty big deal about stressing
the importance of “fencing the Table”, i.e. making sure
no one participated in the Lord’s Supper unworthily.
I was a Christian so I didn’t really think too much about it.

But when the elder came around with the bread for Communion,
before offering the loaf for me to break off a piece,
he looked to my father, questioning whether I was worthy
and qualified to participate in their Communion...
... which seemed odd since that elder and I had been speaking earlier
about how my journey of faith had let me to pastoral ministry.

I was offended because it was embarrassing and created a barrier.
I felt excluded, an uninvited outsider who didn’t really belong,
and that the Christian fellowship I thought we had in common,
was just an illusion they didn’t really intend to practice.

That elder’s attitude was destructive and damaging; an offence
against the unity of the body of Christ as the Church universal,
not to mention being **a defective theology of exclusion
that missed the point of Paul’s letter entirely.**

Paul begins his letter to the church in Corinth
by stressing the unity that all Christians share ... 1 Corinthians 1:2-3, 10

To the church of God that is in Corinth, to those who are sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be
saints, **together with all** those who in every place call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, ... Now I appeal to
you,... that all of you be in agreement and that there be **no divisions** among you, but that you be **united in the
same mind and the same purpose.**

The point is whether the church is in Corinth, Las Cruces or Juarez,
whether the language of worship is French, Korean or English,
we are all one in Jesus Christ, of the one body and united
in our call to proclaim the Gospel, **that’s our true purpose.**

Throughout this letter to the Christians living in Corinth,
Paul addresses topic after topic about how they are letting
issues, preferences and status **divide and separate them...**
... loyalty to a particular leader, the food someone eats or doesn’t,
lawsuits among fellow believers, leadership & spiritual gifts,
charismatic gifts, slave or free, resentments, Jew or gentile,
rich or poor, and even the way they celebrated Communion.

Paul points out, to divide people by status into separate groups,
is to deny and reject the truth and power of the Gospel,
that all are equally precious, loved by God and one in faith.

No human defined division, grouping or sense of superiority
is greater or more important than the truth of God’s grace...
... that all of us come as lost sinners, are saved by grace alone,

and if we forget or stray from that one critical truth,
then all our religious practices become empty and futile,
and even deadly-destructive to our unity and purpose
which is the faithful proclamation of the Good News.

In this part of Paul's letter he focuses on the Lord's Supper
and how by excluding and segregating some believers,
they were humiliating and mistreating fellow Christians...
...thereby missing the whole point of coming together as the Church.

Earlier in this same letter, Paul wrote: 1 Corinthians 10:16-17

The cup of blessing that we bless, is it not a sharing in the blood of Christ? The bread that we break, is it not a sharing in the body of Christ? Because there is one bread, **we who are many are one body**, for we all partake of the one bread.

In our sharing of the Communion bread and cup,
together we are sharing the one body of Christ,
remembering, we who are many become the one body of Christ
...& anything less or exclusive is to miss the point of the sacrament,
given as a sign that **all are equally loved and cherished by God.**

I remember as a boy, our pastor's stark and frightening warning
against anyone participating in Communion unworthily,
which I supposed referred to the proper form and liturgy,
or if any unconfessed sin in my life, then I was unworthy.

But listen carefully to what Paul is really saying: 1 Corinthians 10:27-29

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. Examine yourselves, and only then eat of the bread and drink of the cup. For all who eat and drink without discerning the body, eat and drink judgment against themselves.

Clearly, to eat or drink in an unworthy manner
has to do with doing so, without discerning the body...
but what does that mean, and how do you discern the body?

In the original Greek, discern is a legal term that means,
to legally recognize or acknowledge something as the truth.

So to discern the body, as Paul uses the term,
is to have a proper sense of the body of Christ.
In Scripture, the body of Christ is used as a metaphor
that refers to all Christians everywhere of every kind,
the Church universal that includes the whole body of Christ...
... even those we would more easily ignore, exclude, reject or deny.

So 'an unworthy manner' refers not the method of serving Communion:
It's not whether you stand, sit, kneel or lie down,
nor whether in the pews, up at a rail or around a table.
It's not the kind of bread, whether wine or grape juice.
It's not about being good enough to deserve God's pardon.

BUT rather, it's about Christian hospitality and welcome.
It's about our unity, our love for one another and Christ,
and by our determination of who is in and who gets fenced out.

Partaking unworthily is failing to recognize all of Christ's body.

It's to reject any of those whom we consider unworthy or less,
but who in fact, actually are loved and cherished by God.

**So, if I am going to come to the Lord's Table worthily,
then I've got to give up any notion of judgment or control,
and give up any idea of limiting who will be there with me.**

It's tragic that the very symbol Christ gave to unify His church,
has historically been so frequently misunderstood and abused,
by using it to divide Christians into competing groups,
and even split churches over how it is administered...
... **which is in shameful violation of the Body of Christ in unity.**

But it doesn't have to be that way.

We were in Damascus Syria, shopping out in the marketplace.
A priest recognized that we were Christians,
so he stopped us and was adamant that the next morning,
we had to worship with them at Syrian Catholic Church.

He gave us explicit directions for locating the church
and instructions for getting past groups of armed Muslims
there to discourage anyone from attending Christian worship.

Turned out that the next morning, only 5 or 6 of us were willing
to make our way past the glaring guards with machine guns,
and with some relief we slipped into the church service.

We sat in the back, not wanting to interfere or attract attention.
The service was in Arabic, and we understood very little of it.
When the people went forward to receive the elements,
we respectfully remained back in our seats.

We were surprised when the priest vigorously waved us forward,
urgently inviting us to share in the Eucharist,
eating the bread and drinking from the common cup.

And after the priest pronounced the blessing and benediction,
the most amazing and wonderful spontaneous thing happened.

The people got up, surged up from the pews and swarmed around us,
as with smiles, kisses, handshakes, hugs, even some with tears,
they welcomed and held us, treating us like long lost family.

It was such an amazing-powerful moment of wonder and delighted joy,
truly a foretaste of heavenly worship that awaits us,
of praising God in the fellowship of all believers,
as we celebrated our unity **as the ONE body of Christ.**

That day, I experienced clearly and powerfully what it means
to truly be the body of Christ in a wonderfully dramatic way;
and for me, Communion has never been the same since.

That day they couldn't speak English, and we couldn't speak Arabic,
yet we communicated God's grace, and we shared our faith
in the holy language of Christian love and fellowship.

That day I saw the precious grace and hospitality of God -
as the Gospel of Jesus Christ was being enacted without words.

Our God is so awesome, and the breadth of his love so broad,

that he stoops down to our human traits and particularities,
that he accepts and welcomes us into worship, whoever we are...

... with our different cultural tastes, our various traditions,
our talents, our interests, our loves, our sense of holiness,
all that makes us who we are, special, unique and welcome.

**It is that same truth we celebrate today, World Communion Sunday,
a very special service at First Presbyterian Church today...**

... where four unique worshiping communities, traditional worship,
Iglesia del Pueblo, Korean Presbyterians, Faith & Fellowship
have all come together today with each contributing,
to praise & celebrate the unity we share in Jesus Christ.

Clearly, God is up to something very powerful and wonderful
here at First Presbyterian Church of Las Cruces,
**so friends,
let us come to the Table with joy, and let us be one.**