

---

---

# Until He Comes

1 Corinthians 11:23–26

A sermon preached in Duke University Chapel on April 9, 2020 by the Rev. Dr. Carol Gregg

---

---

The chalice is empty. There is no bread here the napkin. Today, on this Holy Thursday, when we remember our Lord's last meal with his disciples, we are not celebrating the sacrament of the Lord's Supper. This is a difficult moment. We long to gather around this particular physical table. We want what is good and holy, yet, at the moment, it is out of our reach. Tonight, our hands are empty.

We long for communion. We long for the sacrament that we cannot have and for the fellowship of brothers and sisters gathered around one table. We are not alone in this longing. In this season of sheltering in place, faith communities around the world are gathering virtually rather than in person. While some communities may invite their congregants to consume bread and wine while listening to a worship service, we are not going to do that tonight. Likewise, some may have the presiding ministers receive the sacrament on behalf of the congregation; we won't do that when our front doors are locked. I imagine there are already a variety of scholars discussing virtual sacraments in academic papers. In the years to come, I would not be surprised if there were more than a few PhD dissertations on worship and the sacraments in the context of physical isolation. We are not going there tonight. Tonight, I suggest we stay with the longing for what is not yet available.

We are not the first ones to long for communion. The scripture reading for tonight from First Corinthians is familiar; they are the words of institution of the Lord's Supper. Jesus gives the bread and cup to his disciples saying "Do this in remembrance of me." ( I Cor 11:24) If we have heard these words frequently, their familiarity may bring comfort. What we haven't heard tonight, is the text that comes before and after these words of institution. Tonight's passage is sandwiched between strong language addressing divisions and thoughtlessness.

The Apostle Paul, the author, writes, "I do not commend you, because when you come together it is not for the better but for the worse." (I Corinthians 11:17) There was division in the early church. The early Christians did not gather in a separate building to eat a ritual meal the way that we do. Instead, they gathered in a private home. The typical home would have space for, at most, nine people to recline to eat; they would consume a full meal with food such as rice, beans, meat, vegetables, olives, and wine. In the midst of the common meal, they would share the symbolic bread and cup, remembering the last supper that Jesus had with his disciples.<sup>1</sup> While the host and a select few were reclining and enjoying a good meal, there may have been 30 or 40 other guests standing or sitting in a nearby atrium. These would be the lower-status members of the church. They, too, would be given something to eat, but it would be quite modest in comparison to what the host and his special guests were eating.<sup>2</sup> Imagine standing in the atrium, crowded with other worshipers, smelling the aromas of good food, and glimpsing some of the action in the dining room. They must have longed for true communion. Imagine their desire for a real place at the table.

One of the things that is interesting about this is that all of the Corinthians probably thought the situation was entirely ordinary. Class distinctions were perfectly normal in the ancient world. The wealthier folks may well have thought of themselves as generous by inviting the poorer folks into their homes and giving them a bite to eat. Perhaps those who were standing in the atrium couldn't really imagine themselves reclining at the table, knowing they would never be fully included, yet it is hard to imagine they would not have wanted to be included.

---

<sup>1</sup> Richard Hays, *First Corinthians*, p. 193

<sup>2</sup> Richard Hays, *First Corinthians*, p. 196

The Apostle Paul scolded the Corinthians for these divisions. He was sharp with his words. While Corinthians did not see the table as a place for spiritual and practical unity, Paul did. He did not want some to feast while others went hungry. He gave the church some practical suggestions, such as eating before gathering and waiting for all to come together. Mostly, Paul wanted the remembrance of the Last Supper to be a reflection of the unity we have in Christ. Communion was to unify, not divide.

Those standing in the atrium in first century Corinth, and us standing around an empty table, are not the only ones to long for communion. In our country, many of those who are incarcerated cannot participate in the sacrament or worship. Some prisons have chaplains that beautifully meet the spiritual needs of prisoners, and yet I am sure there are others who miss the sacrament and the fellowship of believers. The same is true for the homeless population, whether they are living on the street or couch-surfing with friends and relatives. Again, while some find worship opportunities, others find their circumstances, and our churches, prevent their inclusion in worship. Physical limitations also hinder access to communion. Illness and injury keep some at home for weeks or years. Just like the early Corinthians, we see these divisions as perfectly normal and entirely ordinary.

In other lands, is it political realities that keep people from the table. In China, Pastor Wang Yi was arrested in 2018 and charged in December 2019 with the crime of "inciting subversion of state power." He was sentenced to nine years in prison and has no opportunity to receive the eucharist. Dr. Xi Lian has written a book<sup>3</sup> on Lin Zhao, another Chinese political prisoner. She was imprisoned in the 1960's and executed in 1968. Her prison cell, which was stripped of all materials except party propaganda, was where she held her weekly one-person "grand church worship" (as she put it) starting promptly at 9:30 am, using hymns ("Rock of Ages, cleft for me" was a favorite) and biblical verses she recalled from her student days at a Methodist mission school. Dr. Lian noted recently that there was no Zoom for her.<sup>4</sup> Imagine how these political prisoners, both past and present, must long for the sacrament of communion and the fellowship of believers.

We are not alone in our longing for what we can not yet have.

A few weeks ago, we heard the story of the raising of Lazarus. In that passage from the gospel of John, Jesus stands before Martha helping her see the new reality that was right in front of her. If Jesus spoke with more punctuation than is grammatically correct, as we sometimes do today, his declaration to Martha would have been "I. Am. The Resurrection. And Life." (John 11:25) Here and now. Jesus is already present. Already bringing life into the world. This is true.

It is also true that God's work in our world is not yet done. We want what is holy and good. We want this table to be filled with all those who would come. We want the imprisoned and the homeless and the homebound to be equal and regular participants at a common meal. We long for that day of spiritual unity. We pray for a time when all will gather around the Lord's table, never to be hungry or thirsty again.

That is not our reality, yet.

To the Corinthians, Paul wrote, "For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes." (I Corinthians 11:26) Until he comes. Paul fully expects something more. There are promises yet to be fulfilled. There is hope for what is yet to come. This moment we are in -- Maundy Thursday -- is not the end of the story. God's story will continue, revealing divine mercy and grace in ways that tonight we may not be able to imagine. Just as the Lord's disciples, gathered around a meal, could not imagine what the next few days would bring.

---

<sup>3</sup> Xi Lian, *Blood Letters*, 2018

<sup>4</sup> Email from Dr. Xi Lian, April 7, 2020

I am humbled to recognize all that I have taken for granted. I don't want to return to what was "normal". Instead, I want to long for and lean into what, by God's grace, could yet be.

God is trustworthy and God's promises will be fulfilled.

Thanks be to God. Amen.