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## COMING TOGETHER

1 CORINTHIANS 11:17-34

A SERMON PREACHED IN DUKE UNIVERSITY CHAPEL

ON SUNDAY, OCTOBER 4, 2020

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It is one of my favorite things that happens in worship at Duke Chapel. Perhaps those of you who've served or received communion here will know of this experience. On a typical Sunday when the Lord's Supper is being served, our blue-robed ushers dismiss each pew, and worshipers head down the aisle to join one of the communion station lines. Before going to receive the elements, another usher points worshipers in the direction of a particular station to receive the gift of God's grace in the form of bread and wine. The stations at the front of the Chapel are in the crossing: that space where the two arms of our cross-shaped building intersect. Some might call the movement that happens in the crossing during communion liturgical dance. People shimmy and shake, stutter step to the left and then to the right and then back up—a kind of awkward Cupid Shuffle—as they try not to run into others heading to a different station. Often people act a little embarrassed when they take a step and almost bump into another person. Yet in those potentially awkward moments, worshipers give their attention to their sisters and brothers who've come to dine at the Lord's table. People are almost forced to turn their focus away from themselves and to other members of Christ's body. In other words, the flow of worshipers to and from the stations encourages us to discern the body.

The memories of these times are so rich because they emphasize some of the best parts of worship in community—the journey of faith, the receiving of God's good gifts, and the recognition that we are not alone. These memories make me long to be together with other worshipers, with the body of Christ who gathers in this space, with each of you. They make me miss the community that gathers around the meal to encounter our Lord there. I know I'm not the only one who senses this longing to come together. I've had more than one conversation with teary-eyed university students describing their deep need and longing for coming together with others for worship and community. Maybe you've felt it in yourself as we continue worshipping online and being physically distant from neighbors and friends. Something deep within us compels us to come together for social and spiritual connection. We truly were made for communion.

But we should also keep in mind that even when we come together, we can still be apart at times and not have true communion. The church at Corinth demonstrates this. When they come together, things fall apart, which is why Paul tells them, "When you come together it is not for the better but for the worse." There are factions. There are divisions. There are cliques. There are theological and political camps. There are socioeconomic class societies. The haves and the have-nots. The rich have the best food and drink. The poor have-nots have nothing; they go hungry while the gluttons get drunk, eating their "own supper." There's no sharing of food or resources. No eating and drinking together. No true communion.

No helping hand, perhaps just a back hand. Mistreating one another, actually humiliating those who have nothing. And all of this happens right in the private confines of someone's home because the Lord's supper in that context was a meal eaten by a community in a private home as part of the common meal. So, in someone's home, around the dining table, there are those who don't wait for the others to start eating and those who disregard individuals who have nothing to eat. Talk about bad table manners!

We hear a lot about battles over sacramental theology throughout the history of the church, but pastor Paul is not dealing with wrong sacramental theology but with wrong social relations in the church. He's dealing with "practical ecclesiology," as one scholar calls it (Margaret Mitchell). Ignoring a human need to sup at the table of selfishness. This supper of unity is one of disunity for this ancient congregation. They're not being one, and they don't care. There's no sense of the common good. No sense of true communion. They forget how to love God and each other. They forget what it means to be Christian, and "demonstrate an odd amnesia about Jesus' death" (Richard Hays).

Paul responds to this amnesia by reminding the Corinthians of Jesus's death. The way he centers Christ feels like an interruption to his chiding and critique of these Christians. Perhaps it truly is a holy interruption to the problematic gathering of the people. Perhaps Jesus's invitation to communion with him is the precise disruption of the social status quo the church needs. In the very moment when Paul is challenging the Corinthians because they are focused on their own wants, needs, and desires, he lifts up Jesus and his self-giving death.

You likely know the story. How on the night Jesus was betrayed by his closest companions, by those who had journeyed with him during his ministry of healing and forgiveness and restoration, he shared a meal with them. But this meal was different. When Jesus shared the bread with his friends, he said, "This is my body that is for you." And when he shared the cup, he said, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood." My body and my blood for you. Jesus gave the sustenance of life and the cup of joy to his betraying companions saying, "I'm giving myself to you and for you." Then, as if he's trying to drive his point home, Paul adds to this, "For as often as you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes." In the middle of his message to a community who is not paying attention to each other, who is not caring for the neediest and most vulnerable among them, who is acting more like the society around them than they are like the Christ around whom they gather, he proclaims Jesus's self-giving death. Paul tells the Corinthians they are not coming together for the better but for the worse. They are not coming together for the *Lord's* Supper but for their *own*.

So keep in mind that when we come together for the communion meal, this is the Lord's supper, not our own supper. And that makes all the difference. Because Christ's meal, Christ's supper, is "for you"; my body and my blood for you. That means it is for the other. It is other-wise. We are called to turn our focus away from ourselves and toward other members of Christ's body. If not, it's not the *Lord's* supper and true communion.

This means that coming together for true communion is not simply about eating the right things. We can come together with bread and a cup and never truly experience communion with the body of Christ. We can come together without truly being together and never experience true communion because we are too focused on ourselves to recognize and discern Christ's body around us. And this kind of gathering is not for the better but for the worse. This kind of gathering is not to be commended because it forgets the selfless "for you" emphasis of the Lord's supper.

That's why, after reciting what we call the words of institution and proclaiming the Lord's death, Paul tells the church to "examine" themselves, to "discern the body," and says, "when you come together to eat, wait for one another."

Paul declares the death of Christ because the cross inaugurates the turn of the ages and calls the Corinthians to turn toward God's way of being in the world, God's way of being in community where the worldly status of wealth and power does not privilege the rich over the poor or the strong over the weak. Rather, there's mutual respect and love for one another and a deep sense that we need each other even as Paul teaches them to never say, "I have no need of you." Or, what gospel artist, Hezekiah Walker, sings, "I need you to survive." You. My body and blood for you. "For you" the Lord says, which means the supper is deeply communal. There is no true communion without discerning the needs of others.

We're challenged to come to a deeper understanding of true communion even when we can't come together in person because we can live out the "for you" emphasis and be for each other, just as the death of Christ shows us.

If you're wondering today how to come together for the better, how to experience true communion, the scripture lesson today is clear, simply look to Jesus's death. Can't you hear the calling and challenge for the church, for us, to a different kind of coming together, a different kind of communion, than what we so regularly experience today? Can't you hear Paul's voice echoing through time, calling to us in our present circumstances? Church, each time you gather virtually, in your cars, outdoors, or even inside, your gathering should proclaim the Lord's self-

emptying, self-giving death. If you want to know how to come together, just look to Jesus. Church, Jesus's death shows you how to have true communion. And each time you come together for the Lord's meal instead of simply your own meal, each time you lift up the interests of others and not merely your own, you can experience true communion. Church, when you look like Jesus in his death, you will truly come together to experience the depth, blessing, and joy of true communion with God and each other.

Christ's death shows us how to gather in a way that is for each other in order to experience true communion. Acts like wearing a mask to keep others safe; tutoring a learner struggling to read; organizing for equitable housing policies in Durham, North Carolina; marching for racial justice in London, England; and even worshiping from home in St. Ann's Bay, Jamaica, all encourage true communion.

The blessed opportunity of these days comes in the remembering and discerning of the most vulnerable, most at-risk, most ignored or unseen members of Christ's body all over the world, be they at a refugee camp in Dara'a, Syria, in a nursing home in Nashville, Tennessee, in a detention camp in Laredo, Texas, or a crossroads in Abidjan, Côte d'Ivoire. Any action in which we turn in self-giving love to the needs and interests of our neighbors near and far encourages true communion. Any time our focus shifts from ourselves to others, we come closer to a commendable coming together. Any time we have the same mind as Jesus when we gather around this or any table to remember the Lord's death, our supper becomes the Lord's supper and not merely our own.

As Paul says to the Philippian Christians, "Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross" (Philippians 2:5-8).

We serve the elements of the Lord's table in the crossing of the Chapel because we long to experience the communion of a cross-shaped community. Deep down, we long to be with a community of people who are characterized by being for each other. Our body and our blood for you.

A few years ago members of a United Methodist church gave their bodies to a family of brothers and sisters in Christ, one of whom was undocumented. This church committed to provide housing, food, healthcare, English language lessons, and other resources to assist them during their difficult and trying situation. These were God's vulnerable children, and the church wanted to serve them as faithfully as they could, following the self-giving love of Jesus.

One day, surprisingly, authorities came for the father and husband, the brother in Christ, who was undocumented. It shocked this church's members into tears and anguish, and as this gentleman was placed in a car to be driven away to an unknown future, the church members came together, surrounded the car, locked arms, sang 'Amazing Grace,' and fervently prayed. Their bodies were given for him. They came together to share the pain of this family while experiencing the joy of true communion.

The calling for us is to discern how we might also come together for true communion.

Isn't it time for us to come together?

Isn't it time for us to experience true communion?