

---

## Eating Together

1 Corinthians 10:14-22

A sermon preached in Duke University Chapel on Sunday, October 7, 2018,  
by the Rev. Dr. Carol Gregg

---

I have some dating advice for you, because I am sure that is exactly why you came to church today! If you are having dinner with someone you like, after they order a meal, say, “That sounds good. I’ll take that too.” And if you are the first person to order, and your companion is vegetarian, don’t order steak, to make it possible for them to say “That sounds good. I’ll take that too.” Now if you are a well-established couple (I might as well move on from dating advice to relationship advice), it’s OK to order different meals, so long as you nibble off of each other’s plates, or at least taste their entree.

This is the take-home advice I gleaned from Ayelet Fishbach’s research on food. She is a professor in the business school at the University of Chicago. Her study found that similar food consumption promoted trust and cooperation.<sup>1</sup> It is no surprise that eating together builds relationships; this research takes that notion a step farther by showing that eating the *same* foods makes a difference. In her research, she assigned volunteers to roles of union leader and manager, then gave them an assignment to negotiate an agreement. If both individuals were eating the same snacks, they came to a resolution faster. If one was eating a salty snack and the other a sweet snack, well, the result was more days on strike.

Her article on this research concludes with this:

Although similarity in food consumption is not indicative of whether two people will get along or whether someone is trustworthy, we find consumers treat this as such, feeling closer to and more trusting of those who consume as they do. In this way, food serves as a social lubricant and is especially beneficial for new relationships where people have limited information about the other person and are forming first impressions. In consuming similarly, people can immediately begin to feel camaraderie and develop a bond, leading to smoother transactions from the start.<sup>2</sup>

You see how dating advice comes right out of social science research?

In our reading today from First Corinthians, the Apostle Paul comes to a similar conclusion, though his is much more forcefully stated and he is not addressing romantic or labor relations. This section of the letter is the conclusion of a long discussion regarding meat offered to idols. Should a Christian eat it or not? In what circumstances? Apparently, there were some Christians in Corinth who attended the local festivals. The festivals were major social events in the community, which the people may well have attended prior to hearing the gospel of Jesus Christ.<sup>3</sup> These were religious as well as social events - pagan festivals. The Christians did not believe in the gods that were worshiped, so they saw no harm in attending. Richard Hays describes their train of thought as “what possible difference can it make if they accept friendly invitations to other meals that just happen to be located in the shrine of some imaginary god?”<sup>4</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> “A recipe for friendship: Similar food consumption promotes trust and cooperation” by Kaitlin Woolley, Ayelet Fishbach, 2016  
<http://faculty.chicagobooth.edu/ayelet.fishbach/research/WF%20JCP%20Food%20and%20Trust.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> Ibid

<sup>3</sup> New Interpreter’s Bible Commentary vol 10, p. 917

<sup>4</sup> Interpretation I Corinthians by Richard Hays p. 159

At first glance, we may be inclined to agree with these enlightened Corinthian Christians. Indeed, what difference could it make? They are just having fun, just socializing with their neighbors. And earlier in chapter 8, Paul writes, “Food will not bring us close to God. We are no worse off if we do not eat, and no better off if we do.” (I Cor 8:8) In this section he is speaking only of the meat, not the festival or worship, and claims the food in and of itself is not a problem for Christians. He does, however, warn against causing problems for fellow Christians who may begin to blur the lines between Christianity and paganism. So, one could reason that if it is not causing a problem for someone else, why not? I’m not hurting anyone, so I can do what I want. It’s my life; I’m not bothering anyone else. What’s the big deal?

The Apostle Paul happens to think it is a very big deal. “My dear friends, flee from the worship of idols.” (I Cor 10:14) Flee. Run. Escape. Now.

Paul makes his point by turning to the sacrament of communion. “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?” (I Cor 10:16) The Corinthians knew that the sacrament connected them to Jesus. Now Paul is claiming that the sacrament also connects them to one another. “Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body” (I Cor 10:17a). In a similar way, he claims, Jewish sacrifices and meals bound people to one another and to God. So, he argues, the same would be true for the pagan ceremonies and festivals. By participating in the festivals, the Corinthian Christians connected themselves to the pagan idols and their adherents. For that reason, he admonishes the people to flee from the worship of idols and avoid provoking the Lord’s jealousy.

While this section of Paul’s letter is not primarily about the eucharist, it does point to his convictions about the sacrament. As we gather around the communion table, we bind ourselves to one another and to God. At this table, we become a covenant community, “receiving the blessings of fellowship with God and sharing our lives with one another.”<sup>5</sup> This is a sacred fellowship, one with another. And it is an exclusive fellowship. It is “absolutely incompatible” for those who are joined to Christ to also be joined to an idol or other system of belief.<sup>6</sup> Our relationship is with Christ, and Christ alone. While our faith is exclusively focused on Christ, our fellowship, however, is inclusive. On this World Communion Sunday, we are particularly mindful of all those who gather around this table, which is why we heard the gospel in Spanish and were greeted by steel drums. There are more people at this table than we know. I would like to introduce you to a few of them.

Barbara<sup>7</sup> is at this table. I met her two years ago. She the manager for the ZOE programs in Zimbabwe. ZOE empowers vulnerable children to become economically self-sufficient, and Barbara has dedicated herself to their care. She works long, seemingly endless hours. She has high expectations for the social workers whom she supervises. She notices what the individual children need and makes sure they have the resources to succeed. She grieves for the poverty in her country and does what she can to make a difference. Her commitment for this work is fueled by her faith in Jesus Christ and her hope is strong because her hope is in God. Barbara is regularly at this table as an active member of her Methodist Church. In fact, she sold us the fabric to make this altar cloth, a sale which supported the Methodist women’s group in her church. Barbara lives in Mutare, Zimbabwe, and yet, she is here at this table.

---

<sup>5</sup> Ibid p. 173

<sup>6</sup> The First Epistle to the Corinthians by Gordon Fee p. 514

<sup>7</sup> Barbara Matsanga, <https://www.wearezoe.org/about/staff-board/>

Tom is also here. Tom is a resident of Durham, who has been participating in this sacrament since he was a child. He is a man with a big smile and a warm heart, who happens to have Down's Syndrome. He has worked in restaurants clearing dishes and enjoys taking long walks. One day when I was having lunch where he worked, he came up behind me tapped me on the shoulder, then slipped away with a big grin. He teased and played this way a time or two, which made us both laugh. Tom is very active in his faith community, and knows it to be a place where he belongs. Too often, those with special needs are ignored or overlooked. At this table, Tom knows he wholly loved and is welcomed by Jesus Christ himself.

I know Barbara and Tom, but I think we all know a Chris. Chris is here at the table and there are some things about Chris we may not like. Chris is the cousin who at every holiday meal tells the story of the time we spilled the gravy on our grandmother. The story is told as if it is funny and teasing, but in fact it is embarrassing and painful. Chris may be the neighbor whose politics are the polar opposite of yours, and you cannot comprehend how someone can hold such convictions. Worse, this neighbor offers you lots of reading material and flyers you would rather not see. It is possible that Chris is a colleague who loves Jesus as much as you do, yet in a way that makes no sense to you. Chris love to talk with you about Jesus, and you feel somewhat guilty that the conversations make you cringe. Perhaps, Chris is a public figure, an entertainer, athlete, or politician, for whom you have no kind words. Chris is a baptized believer, regularly coming to this table to receive the body of Christ. I have control over who sits at my dining room table in my dining room and I invite the people I like, but I have no control over who sits at this table. Neither do you. Jesus is the one who invites. Jesus invited Chris.

Finally, there is a spot here reserved for a newborn child. The baby is not old enough to take these elements, but that day is coming. Someone, maybe you, will tell the newborn about the birth of a baby in a manger, the death of a Savior on a cross, and the resurrection of our Lord. One day this young child or a new believer will join us right here. As a community, we are to remember that there are always additional people coming to this table, and to remember that there is a place reserved for them. There is plenty of room at the Lord's table, so we can rejoice when someone new finds divine grace.

Barbara, Tom, Chris, you, me -- at this table we eat the same food. When we eat together, we are bound together.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer in his book *Life Together* speaks of what a gift this is. He claims that it is a privilege "to live in visible fellowship with other Christians" and that "the physical presence of other Christians is a source of incomparable joy and strength to the believer."<sup>8</sup> This fellowship is long-term, for we "belong to [Christ] in eternity *with* each other."<sup>9</sup> Bonhoeffer is not naive about the challenges of living in Christian community and acknowledges the disagreements and dislikes that will be present. And yet, remarkably enough, he affirms and celebrates these challenges, knowing that they can lead to deeper fellowship. He writes, "Thus the very hour of disillusionment with my brother [or sister] becomes incomparably salutary, because it so thoroughly teaches me that neither of us can ever live by our own words and deeds, but only by the one Word and Deed which really binds us together -- the forgiveness of Jesus Christ."<sup>10</sup>

What we find here at this table, where we eat the same food and drink the same cup, is the precious, living community, the people of God, you, the Body of Christ alive and at work in our world.

Thanks be to God. Amen.

---

<sup>8</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, p. 18, 19

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid* p. 24

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid* 28