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Maundy Thursday C
Peace, Seattle
March 24, 2015
1 Corinthians 11

BODY AS COMMUNITY

I love this letter Paul wrote to the people of Corinth, because it tells us that just about anything that COULD go wrong DID go wrong there, and for some strange reason, I find this HOPEFUL!

The problems at Corinth were many.

- There were **factions** based on personalities and factions based on pedigree.
- There were **disagreements** over marriage, sexual mores, and dress codes.
- **Skirmishes** were breaking out over the proper Christian diet.
- Members were **taking each other to court**.
- And a tug-of-war over **spiritual gifts** had everyone up in arms.

Just about everything that could go wrong, did go wrong at Corinth.

And while Paul affirms the great GIFTS that are present in the community, he doesn't pull any punches when it comes to the issues they face.

By the time we gets to chapter 11 and their behavior around celebrating the communion meal, Paul's really worked up a head of steam.

What was the problem? The problem was the meal, was not being celebrated in the manner in which Christ intended.

> WHEN YOU COME TOGETHER, writes Paul, IT'S NOT REALLY TO EAT THE LORD'S SUPPER. FOR WHEN THE TIME COMES TO EAT, EACH OF YOU GOES AHEAD WITH YOUR OWN SUPPER, AND ONE GOES HUNGRY AND ANOTHER BECOMES DRUNK. WHAT! DON'T YOU HAVE HOMES TO EAT AND DRINK IN? OR DO YOU SHOW CONTEMPT FOR THE CHURCH OF GOD AND HUMILIATE THOSE WHO HAVE NOTHING? WHAT SHOULD I SAY TO YOU? SHOULD I COMMEND YOU? IN THIS MATTER I DO NOT COMMEND YOU!

This Meal was supposed to be a meal that would unite, that would lift up the oneness that Christ's self offering had brought about for all who received him in faith.

But in the Corinthian community the meal had become a sloppy sideshow that only deepened the divisions which were already apparent.

> WHOEVER 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, writes Paul. FOR ALL WHO EAT AND DRINK WITHOUT DISCERNING THE BODY, EAT AND DRINK JUDGMENT AGAINST THEMSELVES.

What's Paul really saying here? What he's saying is, "you Corinthians are not treating one another as persons for whom Christ has died."

For many years within the Lutheran community, the phrase "discerning the body" was interpreted as mandating a high bar—the ability to apprehend how it is that a piece of bread could be, at the same time, THE BODY OF CHRIST.

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"Discerning the body" accordingly, required a certain level of intellectual maturity.
And so, in Lutheran circles, first communion became tied to the rite of confirmation; a kind of rite of passage by which one was welcomed to the Table only after one had endured three years of catechesis and parsed out the subtleties between transubstantiation and consubstantiation.

A closer look at the text compels us to ask, is this the issue Paul is really addressing?

The more you look at the context of the entire letter, and the specific context of this chapter, the more apparent it becomes that ***"discerning the body"*** is not about intellectual or theological acumen, it's about *engaging in practices which honor the other members of the community—my brothers and sisters for whom Christ died.*

Participating in this meal means becoming connected to Christ and to my neighbor.
The body Paul's referring to is not the bread from the meal but the community itself!
What he calls, in the next chapter, *"the body with many members which is one in Christ."*

When we understand Paul's admonishment this way, a whole new world opens up.
Eating or drinking in an unworthy manner then means eating or drinking without considering how my behavior is affecting my sister or brother, for whom Christ gave his life.

Conversely, eating or drinking in a *worthy manner* means waiting for one another, making sure everyone has food, not separating into cliques based on social status, but gathering together as one to share a supremely counter-cultural meal of grace.

For as we receive him we become more than a group of individuals; we become his body, his community in the world; a people called to proclaim his story, to live his legacy, to embody in our community life the way of life Jesus showed us.

For over a decade, the people of Calvary (LCMS) and Peace (ELCA) have met around this table, in spite of the fact that our church bodies forbid it.

Like siblings in a family feud, our Churches have had a dickens of a time talking to one another.
But we just haven't allowed that official incapacity get in the way of our table fellowship, our shared preaching, our creative encounters with texts and scriptures, and the teamwork we've been building on during Lent for 11 years running.

Friends, this is not insignificant. Our partnership has enabled us to lean toward the kind of Table hospitality Jesus practiced with his community, and in so doing it has broken down dividing walls and made us one.

When Jesus, in John's gospel, takes off his robe, takes up a towel, and begins washing feet, he's acting out the same radical, hospitable servanthood that Paul is pointing to...
a servanthood that recognizes the other as one for whom Christ also has died.

DO THIS, he said, IN REMEMBRANCE OF ME.
I HAVE SET YOU AN EXAMPLE, THAT YOU ALSO SHOULD DO AS I HAVE DONE TO YOU.

And so we do. And so we will. Amen.