

A Dinner Invitation

^{NRS} **1 Corinthians 11:17-22, 27-28** Now in the following instructions I do not commend you, because when you come together it is not for the better but for the worse. ¹⁸ For, to begin with, when you come together as a church, I hear that there are divisions among you; and to some extent I believe it. ¹⁹ Indeed, there have to be factions among you, for only so will it become clear who among you are genuine. ²⁰ When you come together, it is not really to eat the Lord's supper. ²¹ For when the time comes to eat, each of you goes ahead with your own supper, and one goes hungry and another becomes drunk. ²² What! Do you not 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! ²⁷ 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. ²⁸ Examine yourselves, and only then eat of the bread and drink of the cup.

A Dinner Invitation 2.0

When we read the gospels, it seems like every time we turn around, Jesus is eating with somebody. He's dropping into Mary and Martha's house for a meal, eating with a crowd on a hillside, telling Zacchaeus that he's coming to his house, and eating with various Pharisees. After the resurrection, we're told about Jesus having dinner in Emmaus and fixing a fish breakfast on the shore of Lake Galilee. What's more, he seems to have been willing to eat with just about anybody. Sometimes he ate with community leaders, or folks who were especially devoted to God - the "right" people. Sometimes he ate with sinners, or people of ill repute, or whoever showed up - the "wrong" sort of people.

^{NRS} **Luke 7:36** *One of the Pharisees asked Jesus to eat with him, and he went into the Pharisee's house and took his place at the table. ³⁷ And a woman in the city, who was a sinner, having learned that he was eating in the Pharisee's house, brought an alabaster jar of ointment. ³⁸ She stood behind him at his feet, weeping, and began to bathe his feet with her tears and to dry them with her hair. Then she continued kissing his feet and anointing them with the ointment. ³⁹ Now when the Pharisee who had invited him saw it, he said to himself, "If this man were a prophet, he would have known who and what kind of woman this is who is touching him-- that she is a sinner."*

It seems that Jesus did a lot of eating and drinking. In fact, when it came to eating and drinking, Jesus had a reputation - and he knew it. Jesus said, ^{NRS} **Luke 7:34** *the Son of Man has come eating and drinking, and you say, 'Look, a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!'* Jesus had a reputation for eating with riff-raff and for enjoying those meals.

Jesus has promised that we are not alone, that where we gather in his name, he is with us. So, as we gather around the Lord's Table we should remember that Christ is at the table with us. We tend to think about the bread and the cup on the table and see that as body and blood. But, it is not so much that Christ is on the table as it is that Christ is at the table.

The letters of Paul were written before the gospels, so the oldest account we have about the Lord's Supper is in First Corinthians. It's obvious from our reading this morning, that Paul is upset. He's mad. This isn't the Lord's Supper that the folks in Corinth are having. No, it's become something else. What is the problem here? " *it is not the Lord's Supper you eat, ²¹ for as you eat, each of you goes ahead without waiting for anybody else. One remains hungry, another gets drunk. Do you despise the church of God and humiliate those who have nothing?"* The folks in Corinth are being selfish and inconsiderate. They're violating any sense of hospitality and courtesy. Communion has degenerated into individual

eating instead of a community meal. We call the Lord's Supper "Communion" for a reason. It's supposed to be communal. We eat with each other in community. We understand this. We enjoy eating covered dish dinners. But the folks in Corinth have lost that communion, that community. Some are over indulging while others are going hungry. Jesus said we are to love one another as I have loved you, but they've lost sight of that. Paul is rightly upset and he asks, "Do you despise the church of God?"

He says we should examine ourselves before we eat the bread and drink the cup. It is at this point that this passage has been so misused. Many of us have been told that we must confess our personal sins and be forgiven before we take communion. Don't come to the table with dirty hands or a dirty soul! But our personal individual shortcomings are not what Paul is talking about in this passage. No, he's talking about how we take communion and how that is related to how we act as a church. Paul is saying that we are to examine our lives and ponder if we are loving one another - or if we are being selfish. Are we sharing with our brothers and sisters? Are we living out the virtue of hospitality? Are we being community - or are we just being individuals? Paul says we are to recognize the body of the Lord, "discern the body" it says in some translations. Over and over, Paul tells us that the church is the body of Christ and here he says we must recognize the body of Christ. That's exactly what the Corinthians had not been doing. They had been thinking of themselves, not each other.

When we gather around the Lord's Table, it's a memorial meal. It is an occasion to remember our Lord. We tend to be solemn and sad and serious, because we think of it as a memorial and we think that's the way a memorial should be. Well, it is serious, to be sure. But there should be all kinds of memories of Jesus as we gather at the table. Memories of a wedding feast in Cana, memories of throngs of people eating on the hillside, memories of meals with Mary and Martha, memories of the cross, and memories of a glorious resurrection.

We call gathering around the Lord's Table "Communion." Communion is exactly what we strive for as we gather there. Commune means to share. Communication means to share information. At the table we share the meal, we share the bread and the cup. We communicate our love and caring for each other as we come together in community. In the Holy Spirit, Christ is with us at the table and we commune with Christ and with all of the saints. The table extends around the world to wherever Christians come together to eat the Lord's Supper. We commune with them and they commune with us and together we are a community.

As we eat the bread and drink the cup, we're nourished by the meal. The body of Christ, the church, is fed and strengthened by the Spirit as we examine ourselves and remember God's steadfast love and generous grace.

We sometimes say that we celebrate communion. Some of our brothers and sisters speak of this as the Eucharist. How very appropriate those words are. Eucharist means thanksgiving. Paul refers to "*the cup of thanksgiving for which we give thanks.*" The cup of thanksgiving. We give thanks for the life of Jesus as he lived with us. We give thanks that he gave his life for us. We give thanks for his resurrection. We give thanks that he joins us at this table. Sisters and brothers, this is the ultimate thanksgiving meal. And, yes, we celebrate communion because, as we gather in community, there is so much *to* celebrate! Like the Passover meal that Jesus ate with the disciples, we celebrate God's saving actions in the past. We celebrate as Jesus is with us at the table here in worship. And we look forward to the great heavenly banquet when we will gather around the table and feast with Jesus as our host. The past, the present, and the future all give us glorious reasons to celebrate!

Thanks be to God for coming in the Flesh and for being with us in Spirit. Amen