

Discerning the Body of Christ

A message by the Rev. Dr. Jon M. Fancher
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- Scripture: 1 Corinthians 11:23-29 ²³ For I received from the Lord the teaching that I passed on to you: that the Lord Jesus, on the night he was betrayed, took a piece of bread, ²⁴ gave thanks to God, broke it, and said, “This is my body, which is for you. Do this in memory of me.” ²⁵ In the same way, after the supper he took the cup and said, “This cup is God’s new covenant, sealed with my blood. Whenever you drink it, do so in memory of me.” ²⁶ This means that every time you eat this bread and drink from this cup you proclaim the Lord’s death until he comes. ²⁷ It follows that if one of you eats the Lord’s bread or drinks from his cup in a way that dishonors him, you are guilty of sin against the Lord’s body and blood. ²⁸ So then, you should each examine yourself first, and then eat the bread and drink from the cup. ²⁹ For if you do not recognize the meaning of the Lord’s body when you eat the bread and drink from the cup, you bring judgment on yourself as you eat and drink.

Two religious activities that most clearly identify the Christian Church are baptism and communion. All of the various Christian denominations and fellowships conduct baptism and communion, though there are variations in how they’re done. In the Presbyterian Church baptism and communion are regarded as “sacraments” (literally, “sacred things”). Some Christian bodies have other religious activities they also consider “sacraments,” but the Presbyterian Church limits sacraments to just those two: baptism and communion. Today let’s think about communion for a moment.

Communion is a remembrance of the Last Supper that Jesus shared with his disciples in the Upper Room just hours before he was betrayed and arrested. You’re probably quite familiar with the story:

- after they shared the dinner meal Jesus took some bread, then a cup of wine;
- he gave thanks to God, then urged his friends to eat some of the bread and drink of the cup;
- as they did, Jesus told them to remember the flesh and blood of his earthly body which he had devoted to serving God’s will.

That simple act, using ordinary table foods, was the inspiration for the sharing of communion by followers of Jesus to this very day.

Communion is sometimes called Holy Communion or the eucharist (from the Greek word for “giving thanks”). We get the term “the Lord’s Supper” from the apostle Paul. Paul described it in his first letter to the Christians in Corinth, Greece – a faith community Paul himself had spent a year and half establishing.

After Paul had moved on, the church reached out to him with questions and concerns. One concern in particular was how some people were misusing the Lord’s Supper, and he wrote his response in 1 Corinthians Chapter 11.

Ironically, if the Corinthians hadn’t experienced difficulties in how they observed the Lord’s Supper, we might never have known that the early Christians even engaged in it: this is the only time in all of Paul’s writings that he mentions the Lord’s Supper.

One of their concerns was how some people were misusing the Lord’s Supper as an occasion for gluttony and drunkenness. Let me explain.

First, let’s remember: there were no church buildings set aside solely for Christian worship in the early decades of the Christian faith. In the earliest days, Christians

gathered in private homes—like you’re doing right now! Usually the hosts were more prosperous people whose homes could accommodate a crowd. The gatherings included a fellowship meal. During or after the meal, the ritual of communion was celebrated.

Apparently, some complaints arose that hosts were inviting their friends to arrive early for the fellowship meal. They got the best food and cups overflowing with wine. When the less influential and poorer Christians arrived at the time appointed for the fellowship meal and the prayers, they discovered that the food was picked over or gone entirely. What’s more, some of their fellow worshipers were overcome not by the Holy Spirit but by their overconsumption of spirits.

When Paul learned of this, he was, well, appalled. To paraphrase what he wrote to them, “That’s not the Lord’s Supper you’re eating. The Lord’s Supper isn’t an advantage for a privileged few; by its very nature our Lord’s Supper is an act of sharing, of respect; it’s inclusive, considerate.”

Then Paul provided the New Testament’s only description of how the Last Supper of the Upper Room was being remembered by Christians living about 30 years after the time of Jesus.

“For I received from the Lord the teaching that I passed on to you,” he wrote. Then in words that are familiar to many of us Paul described the actions of Jesus in the Upper Room, sharing bread and then cup with instructions to “Do this in memory of me.”

Paul’s letter then gave this guidance for how believers should approach the opportunity to share in the bread-and-cup ritual instituted by Jesus himself. Starting in verse 28 Paul instructed them, “Everyone ought to examine themselves before they eat of the bread and drink from the cup. For those who eat and drink without discerning the body of Christ eat and drink judgment on themselves.”¹

What does Paul ask them—and us—to do when preparing to receive communion? He used the terms “examine” and “discern.”

What should we examine? We examine how our spirit conforms to the love and mercy of Jesus. Remember the story in the Beatitudes² where Jesus described someone preparing to worship with an offering, but they suddenly remember a grudge someone holds against them. Jesus said, “Leave your gift and go make peace with that person. *Then* you’ll be in the proper spirit to offer your gift to God.” We examine our spirit to better attune ourselves with the spirit of Jesus.

You might wonder, “How Christlike do I have to get to be worthy of receiving the Lord’s Supper?” There’s no answer, because God’s grace alone makes us worthy of receiving all good gifts. We come to the table not because we deserve to be there, but because God in Jesus Christ offers a gracious invitation.

So before we eat the bread and drink the cup Paul said we are to examine ourselves... *and* that we also are to “discern the body of Christ.” When we discern the body of Christ we’re actually recognizing two things:

For one, we recognize the body and blood of Jesus as symbolized by the bread and the drink. The bread and wine don’t *become* flesh and blood; they remain bread and wine. But they cause us to remember that Jesus the Son of God walked the very earth we inhabit, that he touched people with blessing and healing, that he lived a life of

¹ 1 Corinthians 11:28-29 New International Version

² See Matthew 5:21-24

obedience to his Heavenly Father to the point that he gave up his life for the sake of those he loved.

In the elements of bread and wine – or whatever we use in their place – in bread and wine in this setting, in this moment, consumed for this purpose we remember the body and blood of Jesus. That’s one way we “discern the body of Christ.”

The other way we “discern the body of Christ” is by recognizing that all who receive these symbols of the Risen Christ are united with us by faith. By sharing in the Lord’s Supper we recognize that we are part of the “body of Christ” which is his church alive and at work in the world. In partaking of these elements we are:

- united with sisters and brothers in faith at Rocky River Presbyterian Church;
- united with believers in the other churches of Rocky River;
- united with souls in other Presbyterian Churches across the country and around the world;
- indeed, we are united with the faithful in other churches of every denomination in every place who in every language declare faith in Jesus Christ as Lord and Master.

Today will be a first for you and me: celebrating communion together even though we aren’t together. For you, you’re experiencing something akin to those earliest believers who worshiped not in a church but in a home.

As we respond to the invitation of Jesus to take our place at his table, let us “discern the body of Christ”:

- remembering Jesus of Nazareth who we worship and serve, and,
- remembering one another because we inspire, comfort and strengthen each other as we try to live Christlike lives.