

God's Invitation to Communion

Romans 12:9-18 (NRSV) 1 Corinthians 11:17-26 (CEB)

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Romans 12:9-18

Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good; love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honor. Do not lag in zeal, be ardent in spirit, serve the Lord. Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer. Contribute to the needs of the saints; extend hospitality to strangers.

Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. Live in harmony with one another; do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly; do not claim to be wiser than you are. Do not repay anyone evil for evil, but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all. If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all.

1 Corinthians 11:23-26 (Common English Bible)

I received a tradition from the Lord, which I also handed on to you: on the night on which he was betrayed, the Lord Jesus took bread. After giving thanks, he broke it and said, "This is my body, which is for you; do this to remember me." He did the same thing with the cup, after they had eaten, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Every time you drink it, do this to remember me." Every time you eat this bread and drink this cup, you broadcast the death of the Lord until he comes.

Because it's World Communion Sunday today, the other morning in the Women's Bible Study participants talked about some of our favorite memories of communion. One woman mentioned that when she was growing up, whenever they would have the Lord's Supper at her church, everyone would gather after the service and congratulate everyone else on their sins being

forgiven. So we might want to try that after you leave today! Another talked about having communion in Saudi Arabia where it practically had to be done in secret, and how she felt her faith strengthened by the example of these faithful Christians.

My favorite story was from a former Catholic who was feeling overwhelmed by the challenge of taking a number of young people on a ski retreat. Maybe some of you work trip sponsors can relate to that! To help her get peace in the days leading up to the trip, she took communion every day at mass, and she felt Christ strengthening her to meet the challenge. It worked—she had a great time and felt at ease in ways she hadn't expected.

Maybe you have a great memory of taking communion somewhere too. Maybe one of them came up when you read along with the scripture this morning. Those words, even when read in another language, are very familiar: “This is my body, given for you; do this in remembrance of me.” “This cup is the new covenant in my blood; every time you drink it, do this in remembrance of me.” Whenever we take communion in a Presbyterian church, we hear these words and we do remember.

We remember that God invites us to meet Jesus at the communion table. God invites us to come, no matter what our background—whether we are in church every week or we hardly ever come; whether we feel unworthy or are blissfully unaware of how much we need it. God invites us to communion and gives us grace. Communion is a gift from God to us—a gift that God invites us to receive, again and again and again.

What sometimes we forget, though, is that when we accept God's invitation to communion, there's also an expectation that we will live differently—that we will help others experience the life that God wants for them. In other words, God's invitation comes with God's expectation. To understand one aspect of that expectation, let's listen now to the passage that comes just before the passage in 1 Corinthians that was read earlier.

1 Corinthians 11:17-22 (Common English Bible)

Now I don't praise you as I give the following instruction because when you meet together, it does more harm than good. First of all, when you meet together as a church, I hear that there are divisions among you, and I partly believe it. It's necessary that there are groups among you, to make it clear who is genuine. So when you get together in one place, it isn't to eat the Lord's meal. Each of you goes ahead and eats a private meal. One person goes hungry while another is drunk. Don't you have houses to eat and drink in? Or do you look down on God's churches and humiliate those who have nothing? What can I say to you? Will I praise you? No, I don't praise you in this.

Paul does NOT praise them. Basically what was happening was that the Christians in Corinth were gathering together in a home for a big meal, which included the celebration of communion. They needed the home to be big enough for the whole community to fit, which meant the host was always among the wealthy. The dining room would hold nine people, and then maybe another thirty or forty people would gather outside in the atrium, looking in. The eight other people in the dining room would be high class peers of the host, with poorer people looking in from the outside. The folks on the outside wouldn't get the same food or drink or experience.

For the less powerful folks on the outside looking in, it must have been a little like sitting in the first row behind first class on a plane. You see the more comfortable seats up there, even though you have to squeeze yourself into a seat that's more narrow than your toddler's high chair. You see the full meals, but even though your blood sugar is low and you have a headache, you have to make do with an eighth of an ounce bag of pretzels. You see flight attendants carefully hanging passengers' coats, but you are stuck trying to crunch yours between the oversized suitcases above your head.

Paul's not having any of this around the communion table. When those early Christians accept God's invitation to communion, they also accept God's invitation to welcome everyone to the table, equally. Paul may have in mind his words to the Romans in today's other passage:

Outdo one another in showing honor... extend hospitality to strangers... Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep... Do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly.

Remember, God's invitation comes with God's expectation. When God invited the rich Corinthians to communion, God was inviting them to put themselves in the shoes of their poorer colleagues—to think about how it must feel to be excluded. Through Paul, God was reminding them that they should use their power to show honor to others...they should weep with those who weep from the outside looking in. God invites the Corinthians to have empathy--they should reach out to the powerless, so that things can change for them...so that the powerless can experience more of the world that God dreams for them.

Now, when we celebrate communion here, we are careful about making sure that everyone feels welcome at the table. We do a great job of extending God's invitation to grace. We don't make any distinction between anyone's wealth or race or gender or any other divisions. We are careful to use gluten-free bread, so that everyone can share in the meal, regardless of their dietary restrictions. We use grape juice instead of wine, so that people who avoid alcohol won't have to avoid the cup. Paul would be happy there's not a first class and economy section at this table.

But before we get too confident, I think Paul would challenge us to make sure that we are always putting ourselves in the shoes of people who have less power than we do. I think he'd want to make sure that at the church we greet and welcome guests and visitors with the same hospitality we reach out to long-time friends. He'd want us to outdo each other in showing honor to those whose lives are not as comfortable or as secure as ours. He'd want us to weep with those who weep.

He'd want us to do all this, but not just in the church. God's invitation to communion it also has expectations about our life in the world, and how we care for the marginalized.

Over the last year, we have been reminded again and again that victims of sexual violence often feel disempowered as they weep. The #metoo movement gained steam a year ago this month, and it has reached into all sectors of society—entertainment, the church, politics, sports, business. The purpose of the movement was to help those of us who have never talked with a victim of abuse about their experience to understand the magnitude of the problem.

The statistics are shocking. According to the Rape, Abuse, and Incest National Network, one out of every 6 women is a survivor of attempted or completed rape in her lifetime. If those statistics hold true for us, that would mean about 25 or 30 women here on any given Sunday have suffered sexual violence. About 3% of males are survivors of sexual assault—on any given Sunday here, that would be four or five men.

For many who have suffered unwelcome sexual experiences, the last couple of weeks have been excruciating. The country's focus on this issue

has dredged up unwelcome memories. In their minds, many survivors have been forced to return to the scene of the crime, reliving the pain and shame.

I've been thinking about how to relate this to our passages for this morning, and I think one way is to think about who has power in these situations, and how is God inviting the powerful to show honor to all. The power dynamics cut in lots of different ways, but what I want to talk about here is that those of us who have never suffered a sexual assault are less injured, and survivors are ones who have been disempowered, as they struggle with pain and the fear of speaking out.

What would it mean for us as a church to weep with those who weep? How can we show empathy to those who feel so powerless in situations like these? What does it mean to listen when survivors speak up? What does it look like to help survivors to have hope that one day, somehow, they will experience more of the life that God wants for them?

I'm still figuring out how to answer these questions. To be honest, I didn't really even want to bring up this whole topic. It's so tricky and it feels very risky that I'm going to say something hard to hear that I didn't intend. I'm guessing there are many of you who wish that I hadn't brought it up, either.

But I feel compelled to proclaim the good news of the Gospel that if you have experienced sexual activity without your consent, God invites you to this table. You need not be ashamed. Jesus feeds you to give you the strength to move forward, step by step. And if you look back on your life and wonder if you may have participated in this kind of violence, God invites you to the table too—a table of repentance and grace.

God invites all of us to a meal which strengthens us to do what we could never do otherwise. God's invitation is joined by God's expectation that we will live differently. That we will honor and care for the disempowered. That because we have taken the bread and the cup, not only our lives look different, but that others' will too.

In Jesus' name. Amen.