

Text: 1 Corinthians 11:17-34
Title: Discerning the Body
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Series: Worthy of Worship (Epiphany)
For: Community CRC, Kitchener, ON
By: Rev. Amanda C. Bakale

The first time I participated in the Lord's Supper in a Christian Reformed Church was a Sunday or two after Easter at Hope CRC in Oak Forest, Illinois.

I grew up coming to the Table since I was 8 because that's when I was baptized in my Baptist congregation, so this wasn't my first time taking the bread and drinking the cup. But this time, in the little CRC congregation I joined in my university years, I experienced Lord's Supper in a different way.

Pastor Rog stepped down from the pulpit and took his place at the Table in his black preaching robes, I readied myself. My head bowed. Ready for the reminder of my sin and my unworthiness. Ready for the warning not to eat or drink judgment on myself. Ready for the piano to play the intro to "Alas and did my Saviour bleed" and to sing the words that reminded me he died "for such a worm as I". Ready to taste the grape juice and the tiny square of white wonder bread and know my guilt.

But then Pastor Rog raised his hands and invited us to "Lift your hearts up to the Lord!" And proceeded to talk of God's grace and our thankfulness. To tell the story not only of Jesus' death, but of his life and his resurrection. And then he invited us all forward. And the piano came to life with "Crown Him with Many Crowns" and the congregation sang with joy with as we made our way to the Table.

And when I came to Pastor Rog, he offered me the bread, "The body of Christ for you", and I placed it in my mouth and it exploded with sweetness. It was a sweet and tart lemon loaf and I actually laughed out loud. It was so good.

And then the elder offered me the cup, "The blood of Christ for you", and instead of Welch's grape juice, it was white wine. For this Baptist girl, I had no idea what to do, but I took a sip and again, the taste of sweetness delighted.

And as I returned to my seat, I wanted to cry. Not from guilt or shame, but from absolute thankfulness and joy. At such good gifts of grace.

A joy of salvation I could taste.

When every Lord's Supper is a funeral service for Jesus, like it was for me growing up, we're definitely made aware of the cost of our salvation, and our guilt, but it doesn't give much room for anything else. Which is why the joy was so revelatory for me that Sunday at Hope. Their practice of having their Easter Lord's Supper services a celebration of resurrection opened up for me a deeper understanding of grace.

Our Lord's Supper practices matter because they shape our relationship to God and to each other. For better and for worse.

This is Paul's point here in this really harsh part of his first letter to the Corinthian church. He turns his attention to how they practice Lord's Supper and, well, you all heard it just a few minutes ago. It ain't good. Paul gets heated in several of his letters, but here his pastoral rage is white hot.

The Corinthians are a bickering, fractious congregation. With many divisions and little care for each other. And that has spilled out into their practice of the Lord's Supper to such an extent that Paul declares with words meant to wake them up:

When you come together, it is not the Lord's Supper you eat.

The church gathered in people's homes. Often the homes of wealthy members with space big enough to fit the congregation. And the Lord's Supper - the bread and cup - would be included as part of a big feast, a potluck dinner for the church. Meant to bring them together as one body around the Table. But that's not what's happening, because Paul calls them out on the inequality of their practice:

When you are eating, some of you go ahead with your own private suppers. As a result, one person remains hungry and another gets drunk. Don't you have homes to eat and drink in? Or do you despise the church of God by humiliating those who have nothing?

They weren't eating as one body. Some would arrive early and feast. Leaving nothing for those who came later. Feasting for some and scraps for the rest.

When they came to the Table, they left people out.

And what follows in Paul's instructions has had profound implications for the Lord's Supper practices in the Reformed tradition:

So, then, whoever, eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty of sinning against the body and blood of the Lord. 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 judgement on themselves.

This portion of Paul's admonishments to the Corinthian church became prescriptive in Reformed churches in the Reformation.

To counter the abuses of the Catholic Mass and set the newly emerging Protestant churches apart, the leaders of the Reformation raised up self-examination as the key to admittance to the Table, alongside a public profession of faith. To make sure that, unlike the Catholic Mass spoken in Latin and unexplained and not understood by those those who came to it, that in Protestant churches people would know and understand just what they were doing at the Table.

Our Lord's Supper practices matter because they shape our relationship to God and to each other. For better and for worse.

For those who grew up in the CRC, you remember the reading of the Preparatory Form the week before Lord's Supper that echoed strongly the language of Paul here in 1 Corinthians. A call to self-examine. A call to discern the body of Christ so that you don't eat or drink judgement on yourself.

And you may notice that is not part of our practice so much anymore. And that's not just here at Community CRC, but across our denomination.

And it's not because self-examination isn't a good practice, but because of the growing realization over the past few decades that by only emphasizing self-examination and public profession of faith, our Lord's Supper practices have been leaving people out. Feasting for some. Scraps for others. And that's not all that different from the Corinthian church.

By trying to avoid their bad practices, we have developed a set of our own.

A group called the Faith Formation Committee was tasked by Synod 2006 to look at the health of our faith lives in the CRC and one of the big areas was our Lord's Supper practices. And the group studied and listened to congregations and came back to report to Synod. And like Paul assessing the Corinthians' practices, but with more sadness than rage, they came back to us and said,

When we come to the Table, we leave people out.

The committee invited the CRC, a little painfully, to see that our practice of overemphasizing self-examination and requiring a public profession of faith, resulting in the exclusion our baptized members from the Table, undermined and directly contradicted our Reformed covenant theology.

Because in baptism, our covenant children are welcomed as members of the Body of Christ. But then in our Lord's Supper practices, we actually say, "Well, no you're not. You don't belong at the Table. Not really until you mean it and publicly profess your faith. Then you're a real member."

Our Lord's Supper practices in the Christian Reformed Church were not shaping our relationship to God and to each other for the better.

Paul warned the Corinthians not to eat or drink at the Table without discerning the Body of Christ.

Discerning the Body of Christ.

Which is Paul's shorthand not only for examining our relationship with Jesus, but it's also about how we are or are not in relationship with each other. Our Lord's Supper practices are meant to bring us together as one body around the Table.

The way of discerning the body of Christ is for us all to look around and ask: Are we all here? Are we here together? Is there someone missing? Is there a relationship here I have to go mend? Is there someone's forgiveness I need to seek in order for us to be together at this Table?

Paul's words to the Corinthians were not intended to erect fences around the Table to keep people out, but to help the Corinthians dismantle the divisions and practices that were keeping them apart.

Which is why his finale exhortation to them wasn't to further self-examination, but to make sure their Lord's Supper practices brought them together as one body around the Table:

So, then, my brothers and sisters, when you gather to eat, you should all eat together.

Since the Faith Formation Committee Report to Synod in 2010, congregations across the denomination have gotten to work discerning the body of Christ and reforming our Lord's Supper practices to make sure we're all eating together.

Including here at Community CRC.

In 2012, the elders approved a process here of welcoming baptized children to the table. In more recent years, we have celebrated and welcomed several of our covenant children, like Vivian, to the Table.

But as we discern the body and look around and ask, "Are we all here?", we know we're not. So if you're a baptized member here - whatever your age - and you'd like to come to the Table, come talk

to me or another pastor. To your elder or a youth elder. To your parents. Let's start the conversation and come to the table together.

We're not eating together if you're not with us.

Richard Lischer, a pastor who wrote a memoir about serving his first congregation, reflects on Paul's words here in 1 Corinthians:

Paul warned his readers in Corinth to 'discern the body' which means to be see Jesus' body in a new way. Not as a miracle of physics occurring in the elements, but as a miracle of community in which atoms of solitude are re-created into new families and friends.

And he describes how much he loves the moment he's lifting the silver chalice at the Table as he recites Jesus' command to "Do this in remembrance of me" because

when the light was filtering through our glass windows or flooding through the open doors in the back, I could just see the whole congregation reflected in the silver cup. And in the congregation, the whole church.

As we eat and drink at the Table of Jesus, may we discern the Body of Christ well. May we discern our belonging by grace alone to Jesus who invites us, and our belonging to each other as his precious Body. And may we all experience the promises of this Table taught by the HC:

For as surely as we receive from the hand of the one who serves, and taste with our mouths the bread and cup of the Lord, given to us as sure signs of Christ's body and blood, so surely does Jesus nourish and refresh our souls for eternal life.

Thanks be to God for these good gifts of grace at this Table set for those he loves.