

**February 2, 2014**

**TEXT: I Corinthians 11:17-26**

**TITLE: Christian Divisions**

In honor of today's Super Bowl, I will begin with a word about football. George Will has argued that football combines the two worst things about America: violence punctuated by committee meetings. No one disputes that violence is a bad thing, but why are committee meetings so problematic? Why do they make us groan? More broadly, why are things often difficult when people come together? Why can't we just get along? It's an age-old question and an age-old problem.

When the apostle Paul wrote to the church in Corinth, he opened his letter with some pleasantries about how they have been called into the fellowship of the Lord Jesus Christ. Then he quickly shifted gears and challenged them to get along better, saying "I appeal to you by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ that there be no divisions among you." He listed off how, for some odd reason, they had broken into church "clubs" – some saying they had come to faith through Paul, so they were in "Paul's Club"; others said, "Well, I'm in Apollos' club" or "I'm in Peter's club" or the high and mighty ones, hoping to trump them all, said, "I belong to Christ's club."

For ten chapters, Paul challenges this fractious mindset. He insists over and over again that different people have different gifts, but they are all to be used for one purpose - the common service of our one Lord and Savior. So don't divide up the Christian community. Don't create clubs and divisions; don't sue one another or claim privileges over one another. Rather come together as one body and in that coming together literally be the body of Christ in the world. That is the central message of Paul's letter to the church in Corinth.

So isn't it ironic that the one Christian act designed to exemplify this principle has become the source of some of the most lingering divisions the church has ever seen? Communion – the Lord's Supper – coming together to share a meal has sadly become a witness to our brokenness as people of faith. As Paul wrote in chapter 11, verse 17: *When you come together it is not for the better but for the worse.* He could have written that for us today, split into Catholic, Orthodox, and Protestant Christian communities; Presbyterians vs. Lutherans vs. Episcopalians vs. Baptists – sharing the name of Christ but gathering too often at separate communion tables. In talking about communion, I need to walk a fine line, because the temptation is to explain the sacrament in such a way that I end up presenting our Presbyterian doctrine as the best option of all. And I'm admittedly biased toward the Presbyterian approach. But there are strengths in all forms of how communion is celebrated, even as all churches, Protestant and Catholic alike, can benefit from hearing anew Paul's admonition not to make things worse when we gather at the Lord's table.

Paul tells us that when Jesus was at the Last Supper, he took bread and said, “This is my body that is for you” (I Cor 11:24). The communion problem centers around what Jesus meant by the little words “this is.” We have traditionally assumed Jesus was talking about the bread, but if it is now his body, is that a literal statement or a metaphor? Is the bread identical with Jesus’ body or symbolic of Jesus’ body? From early on, the church believed that the act of coming together in this ritual meal caused the bread to be transformed. It became holy, sacred, the body of Christ. Therefore, it needed to be treated respectfully and people (priests) had to be set apart to handle this sacred bread. That was well and good and pretty much the standard interpretation for about 1500 years.

But then others, like Martin Luther, wanted to move away from a somewhat magical view of the communion bread. Instead of the bread changing in the sacrament, Luther taught that Jesus simply joined with the bread to make it sacred and holy. Imagine being a kid approaching a playground where others are playing, and upon seeing you you’re invited to come join their game. Luther taught that in communion, Christ intentionally joins the bread, participates in and through the grain and yeast, during that holy meal. That was also well and good.

But the Swiss reformers did not believe that when Jesus said “This is my body,” he meant it in a literal, physical way. Rather they believed Jesus meant it in a spiritual way. John Calvin looked to the story in John 6, in which Jesus fed a huge crowd of people from a few loaves of bread and then told his disciples, “Don’t work for food that perishes but for food that endures for eternal life, which the Son of Man will give you” (Jn 6:27). Jesus went on to say that this bread of God comes down from heaven and gives life to the world (Jn 6:33). When they asked for that bread, Jesus said, “I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry.” In a way, for Calvin, when we come together around the communion table, when Jesus said “This is my body,” Jesus wasn’t so much referring to the bread as he was referring to the gathering itself. It is in that coming together over bread that Christ’s spirit descends from heaven and gives life; that is how Christ is spiritually present among us, nurturing us in the ways of eternal life. That is why, as Presbyterians, we don’t elevate the bread at communion; we extend it so that it goes out to become the body of Christ through our gathering together at the table. And this belief is also well and good.

Now, to Catholics, Lutherans, Presbyterians, and all Christians, Paul offers an important corrective. In I Corinthians 11, Paul is not criticizing the church for doing the communion ritual wrong. He’s not angry because they have messed up the words or not worn the proper robes or not treated the elements with due respect. He is angry because they have treated one another wrong. It is supposed to be a common meal – a time of equality and respect and mutual service. But instead some folks have brought their own suppers and are eating by themselves, not sharing a single thing. Others have eaten so much at these

meals that there's no food left for anyone who arrives late. Or they've drunk so much that they've become tipsy and disrespectful of the meal's purpose. In Paul's eyes, more important than the bread and wine ritual was the spirit in which the bread and wine were shared. More important than defining where the body of Christ was present was defining how well the committee meeting around the table reflected the body of Christ.

The new pope, Pope Francis, has generated a lot of positive attention for the choices he has made. For example, a reporter asked him why he doesn't live in the traditional papal apartment. He tells this story. "When I took possession of the papal apartment, inside myself I distinctly heard a 'no.' The papal apartment in the Apostolic Palace is not luxurious. It is old, tastefully decorated and large, but not luxurious. But in the end it is like an inverted funnel. It is big and spacious, but the entrance is really tight. People can come only in dribs and drabs, and I cannot live without people. I need to live my life with others." So Pope Francis lives in an apartment in Casa Santa Marta, which is a residence that hosts visiting bishops, priests and lay people, and where he joins in the morning public mass and eats in the refectory with everyone else. As he says, it helps him "feel part of a family." He also said, "I'm trying to stay the same and to act as I did in Buenos Aires because if you change at my age you just look ridiculous."

In the end, the solution to Paul's critique is simply to reverse Paul's critique. When we come together – in committee meetings, social gatherings, times of fellowship, communion meals – Paul has criticized that too often it is not for the better but for the worse. Therefore, isn't the solution as simple as making sure all our gatherings and coming together are for the better and not the worse? Can we truly go far astray if our every inclination is to welcome, not to exclude? Can we really damage the kingdom of Christ by expanding its borders rather than tightening up its entry gates and barricades?

And if that is true for what happens here and around this table, why wouldn't it also be true if it is done with sincerity and respect in all our human interactions? Why shouldn't this quality guide our national policies, our immigration debates, our government spending priorities? Why isn't Pope Francis' language about "family" at the centerpiece of these conversations, as opposed to current language about "us" vs. "them," "entitlements" and "national security"?

Christ's words "This is my body" were never meant to be limited to the communion bread. He was referring to the communion gathering, a coming together across all human divisions – all Christian divisions – done, as Christ commanded "in remembrance of me." Every time we gather, we have the chance, thanks to God's grace, to reverse Paul's critique and get it right. Let that spirit begin here today. And let it extend to all your interactions, all our relationships, all that is good and true and holy and life-giving for us and all people, the family of God.

AMEN