

“One Body”

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10-1-17 World Communion Sunday

Based upon 1 Cor. 11:27-29; Eph. 2:14-22

There’s a new kind of Japanese restaurant growing in popularity these days in the U.S., which is already a hit in Japan and Hong Kong. It isn’t like the Benihana’s, which were popular when I was a child, or the Sakura’s of today—Japanese restaurants which feature stir-fry-making as entertainment, complete with knife juggling, onion volcanos, and shrimp catching games for the guests who sit gathered with strangers around a grill. At Ichiran in New York, and other similar restaurants, you won’t see a show or be seated with a stranger. In fact, you won’t really see any one at all. Instead you are invited to eat ramen noodles by yourself in a cubicle, which is sort a cross between the ones you probably studied in in college and a prison cell, complete with a small window through which disembodied hands can slide you your food. **[Slides of restaurant shown.]**¹ You fill out a piece of paper to place your order, wait for it to appear without any commentary or a smile from a server, and then enjoy your hypertension-inducing happy meal alone, in silence, with walls protecting you from the prying eyes or off-putting presence of others. Call it fine dining for extreme introverts, or an embarrassment-free eating experience for those who find themselves out on the town without friends, family, or a book to read. But whatever it is, this new form of solo dining is a success. When Ichiran opened last year in New York, people waited in line for two hours for the privilege of not sharing a meal with others, although they could have had a similar meal out of a Styrofoam cup in front of their kitchen sinks. Ichiran claims that the food tastes better when you can concentrate solely on it, without any distractions.

Although the introvert in me can see the appeal of this kind of low-pressure dining, the Christian in me finds this new trend too depressing for words. Is this what we have come to in our divided and divisive age, where the cult of the individual is worshiped above all? We now want to surround ourselves with actual walls to keep the mere existence of others from interfering with our dining pleasure? It’s bad enough that we walk around like zombies staring at our phones and ignoring each other so much these days, but to take the one experience which has always brought people together across the world, sharing a meal, and reduce it to an experience of culinary solitary confinement seems to me to be nurturing pathology and idolatry far more than fine dining.

But then again, maybe this trend isn’t actually teaching isolationism, but simply responding to our love of it. Maybe all it is doing is honestly demonstrating how many people already believe that “good fences make good neighbors.” It’s not as if before these restaurants existed there were no walls to separate us. Human beings have put up dividing walls between each other for millennia so that we don’t have to associate with people of other races, nationalities, or ethnicities, genders, ages, political and theological beliefs, social and economic status, or yes, even food preferences. Some of these walls have been physical, others social, emotional, or cultural. But in all cases the walls have always been very isolating.

¹ See Abrams, Margaret, “*Eating Alone Is an Art at This Bushwick Ramen Restaurant*,” OBSERVER, Oct. 17, 2016, retrieved Sept. 26, 2017 from <http://observer.com/2016/10/eating-alone-is-an-art-at-this-bushwick-ramen-restaurant>

As we see from today's Scripture lessons, in Paul's day, the people did the same thing. The Christians in Corinth were divided on multiple grounds. But in today's text, the specific problem was that their economic and social differences had created a wall that was ruining Communion. You see in those days the Christians used to gather for dinner in people's homes before sharing the Lord's Supper. They would have a potluck *agape*, or "love feast," which was then followed by the sharing of bread and cup. But the problem was that the rich, who could afford to live lives of leisure, were coming early to dine and eating everything before the poor, who had to work a full day, could get to church. So the tired, working-class people would show up expecting to have a nice refreshing meal while communing with God and neighbor, and instead find a bunch of drunk, over-stuffed rich people and nothing left for them to eat. Instead of feeling loved, they felt disdained and rejected. Instead of feeling fed physically, emotionally, and spiritually, they felt starved on all fronts.

Paul was incensed when he heard the people were eating this way. So in addition to telling them the obvious, "When you come together to eat, wait for one another. If you're hungry, eat at home, so that when you come together, it will not be for your condemnation," Paul also told them, "Examine yourselves, and only then eat of the bread and drink of the cup. For all who eat and drink without discerning the body, eat and drink judgment against themselves." Unfortunately, I know Christians who have been scared by this passage so much that they have stopped having communion altogether. A lovely woman once told me that she was "too much of a sinner" to take communion and refused to come forward no matter how many times I invited her. That broke my heart because if being a sinner was an obstacle to Communion, then none of us could eat. But she had gotten the idea that the Lord's Supper was booby-trapped by God to catch and condemn unrepentant individuals.

That is not what Paul was saying here when he warns about God's judgment. This passage is not about individual sinfulness at all; it's about communal sinfulness. He was saying that it is hypocritical for Christians to participate in a meal called Communion without actually communing with those around us. It is sinful to seek to partake of the body of Christ through bread and cup, when we have no intention of trying to live as the body of Christ in the world. As today's lesson from *Ephesians* then explains in a different way, the reason that it is sinful is that God's grace in Christ has broken down the "dividing wall that is the hostility between us." Through Jesus' life, death, and resurrection, we all have been reconciled to God. This was not just so that we would not have to fear judgment from God; it was so that we also could be reconciled with each other. If we are all equally loved and forgiven by God, then there is no reason for us to separate ourselves one from another. God has knocked down the cubicles we create with love, so that we can be God's love for each other. God has made us into one body, the body of Christ, and intends to dwell in us.

In *Ephesians*, the author was addressing divisions between Jews and Gentiles rather than between rich and poor. But the point is the same. There is no "us" and "them" in God's kingdom. There is only "beloved God's children." Therefore not just our individual lives, but our communal life in the Church must reflect this truth. All people must be welcomed and feel

welcomed. All people must know that they are loved by God by the way that they are loved by us. When we commune with God through the Lord's Supper, we should stop and think about the body of Christ God has given us. We should open our hearts to one another and care for one another because there is no such thing as an agape feast for one, and all God's children are invited to the table.

Most of the time, the Church universal does not model well what we are supposed to model because we have become so divided ourselves that there is neither love between denominations nor community. We bring judgment on ourselves by saying we are the body of Christ, but by acting as if the feet belong over there, and the hands over here, while secretly praying that the appendixes will be cut out and thrown away. We reveal our sinfulness and invite the world's condemnation when we talk of God's love but still want to take communion without "those people" being invited to the table. But today, on World Communion Sunday, we move one step closer. Although not all Christian denominations participate in this day yet, enough do that for a fleeting moment, we get a glimpse of the way that God really wants us to dine, and a glimpse of what Christian community really should be.

Describing what Communion could and should be, Dr. Laurence Stookey from Wesley Seminary here in D.C. wrote: "The church has the potential to be a model of community for a fractured social order—one of the few models, it seems, and one with congregations literally in millions of places around the world. Thus positioned, the church has the potential to show society what community is and the power to make the world homesick for the community it has too readily surrendered- or has never known. This potential will not be realized so long as the churches are at odds with each other, or so long as each congregation sees itself internally not as a community of service gathered around a table but as a commissary to which hungry individuals come for personal provision and then leave, essentially unaffected by anything except their own perception of faith."²

Christians may not use the same words or language to enact the meal. We may not use exactly the same kinds of breads or "fruit of the grape." We may share the feast by passing little cups, or by dipping into a common cup together. But however we administer the meal, Christians around the world know through Christ that this meal above all is about God's love. We just need to work on modeling better in our individual communities and as the Church universal the rest of the year the idea that this meal proclaims more than God's liberating love for us as sinful individuals; it also proclaims God's destruction of the barriers which would keep us from loving each other. So in a moment, when we celebrate the feast, enjoying today the blessing of being able to share it in spirit and in language with our brothers and sisters of Comunidad Presbyteriana la Trinidad, I invite you to think about who in your mind and heart are "the others" that you want to keep on the other side of a wall. Who are the ones you would just as soon have eat at a different table, or who you don't believe deserve God's love at all? Then think about how you could invite them into the personal cubicle of your heart. Better yet, think about how we all can either welcome them to this love feast or take that love out to them. They may be home eating out of

² Stookey, Laurence Hull, Eucharist: Christ's Feast with the Church (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1993), 151.

Styrofoam in front of the kitchen sink because of economic reasons, or because they do not feel that they have friends or family with whom to dine. We need to tell them otherwise.

In Greg Mortenson's bestselling book, Three Cups of Tea, the author lifts up a Balti saying: "The first time you share tea with a Balti, you are a stranger. The second time you take tea, you are an honored guest. The third time you share a cup of tea, you become family."³ Mortenson has since been disgraced because of lies he told in his book and how he spent money donated to his cause. But as far as I know that Balti saying is still true. In our world, across cultures it takes a while to break down barriers between strangers even when there are no actual walls between them because there are still so many invisible walls which keep people apart. But the good news of the Gospel is that you do not have to take Communion three times for God to treat you as a family member. Through Christ you already are. We all are. The good news is also that we are all members of the same family, whether we acknowledge it or not. But there is still nothing like sharing a cup with others to transform strangers into honored guests and guests into those we love. So let us share the bread and cup today with our brothers and sisters around the world, with the hope and the prayer that doing so will bring us, and all God's children, one step closer to the time when there are no walls, real or invisible to divide us. Amen.

³ Mortenson, Greg, and Relin, David Oliver, Three Cups of Tea: One Man's Mission to Promote Peace...One School at a Time, (London: Penguin Books Ltd., 2007).