

Of Pokeweed Salad and Caviar  
1 Corinthians 11:23-26  
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Preached April 29, 2012 at San José, Costa Rica

The Eucharist. The Sacrament of the Lord's Supper. Holy Communion. The Mass. The Agape Meal. Maybe you have heard one or more of these terms used to describe the practice of the church heeding Jesus' commandment to remember him in the act of eating and drinking. Although the terminology may be different in different Christian traditions, and although the liturgy and practice may also vary somewhat, in the end, we hope that what we are doing as we gather around Christ's table has the same meaning and significance it first did, and that it has it among all who participate in it. And so, whether we are accustomed to wafers and chalices, or to cubes and thimbles, or to ECF's recent style of rip and dip, it is important for us every so often to revisit the roots of what we have in common and make sure we are honoring what Christ has asked us to do, and to avoid the mistakes the Apostle Paul tries to correct among the early Corinthian church. I had hoped to offer a little longer series on this topic between now and Pentecost on May 27, but I didn't really look hard enough at the calendar to see that with a couple of weeks off for paternity leave, that would really only leave two Sundays, so we will have to make due with two Sundays, and if need be, revisit this at a future time.

In many of our traditions, children are not allowed to "communicate," which means to take communion, to participate in the Sacrament, until they have been

properly trained or educated in its meaning, and that is why “First Communion” is a big deal, and why churches offer Communion education classes for children and their families. The logic goes like this, that to take the Sacrament without a full and clear understanding of its significance is at best, simply a waste of the grace it demonstrates, but at its worst, an opportunity to sin, and an opening to condemnation, if our ignorance makes us unworthy, to follow the Apostle Paul’s train of thought from First Corinthians. Tonight, I am not going to debate the merits or the shortcomings of that view except to say that as with many things, a refresher course is often a good idea, and a refresher course is precisely what Paul is offering the Corinthians as well.

Now, the passage I read aloud tonight, the one which describes the practice of the Sacrament, is actually the middle paragraph of a longer section in which Paul pretty harshly admonishes the Corinthians for the way they have been practicing it. In those days, the Communion was not done “in church,” so to speak, as one section among many in an hour long worship service, but rather as part of a community meal that was celebrated most likely in the home of one of the members of the group, and probably one of the wealthier members of the group who would have had a large enough house. And so the liturgical aspect of the Sacrament, the part with the specific prayers and the breaking of the bread and the lifting of the cup, was done in combination with eating a regular meal together. Now, the problem seems to have been that despite being the bearers of Christ’s

message of freedom and equality to the world, some of the Corinthians weren't really living what they'd been taught and still considered themselves better than the so-called lower classes, and so they would bring and eat lots of good food and good wine, and leave the poor to eat only a little food and a little wine, and probably not very good food or very fine wine. Some people have described this event as a sort of potluck, and it is true that people brought their food to the dinner, but it doesn't seem to have been the practice to share the food with others. In other words, everybody brought food, but they ate their own food. And so those who could bring caviar ate caviar, and those who could only bring pokeweed salad only brought pokeweed salad, and there wasn't a whole lot of sharing going on during the meal which was supposed to be all about sharing in the first place! After all, wasn't it Christ's body and blood shared with the world that they were there to celebrate?

But wait a minute. What was that about "pokeweed salad?" I know what caviar is, but what is pokeweed? Well, pokeweed is basically a poisonous weed that grows a lot better than some of your better known vegetables, and therefore a part of the diet of poorer people who live where it grows well. The problem with pokeweed, however, is that it is, like I said, poisonous, and to make it edible, you have to cook the leaves in at least two batches of water in order to get the poison out. It is not a food you eat because of its taste. It's one you eat out of necessity, because although it may not taste very good, it tastes better than boiled shoe

leather. And so imagine showing up at what is supposed to be a religious celebration of the very generosity of God, of the grace of Jesus Christ who called to himself everyone, regardless of race or gender or economic class or disability or social standing, imagine showing up there with your bowl of pokeweed salad, laying down on what should be a common table the best you have to offer, only to see others already eating the best they have to offer, and that caviar is a lot better, mind you, but it is not ending up on the common table.

And so, Paul calls them to account for this betrayal of all Christ was about, and reminds them of that first celebration of the meal they were there to celebrate once again, how Jesus gave everything for them, for all of them, how he gave his body, gave his blood, gave his life, so that all might eat, all might live, all might share, all might love one another. “This is my body that is for you. Do it in remembrance of me.” “This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me.” Paul seems to be saying, “Are you remembering Christ? Or are you remembering how good you have it? He sacrificed his own body, his flesh and blood, for everyone, and you can’t even share your food and drink with those you claim to call your brothers and sisters in Christ?” That is the unworthiness he describes a little further on in Corinthians, an unworthiness that at best leads to judgment, but at worst to the missed opportunity of all the table is supposed to be about in the first place.

I remember hearing a woman telling the story of an experience she had

while working years ago with Habitat for Humanity in Haiti. As she was walking through the streets of Port au Prince one day, her feet sloshing through the mud because so few of the streets there are paved, she came upon a little girl scrounging around the street for anything her family could eat or use or sell. The volunteer watched for a while until the girl observed her and then she went over to her and began to talk to the girl in her awkward Creole. They walked along together and talked for a while until the volunteer reached a crossroads where she was going in a different direction. She gave the little girl a hug but was unprepared for what she received in return, for the girl pulled from her bag a piece of bread, covered with mud, tore off a piece and held it out to the volunteer. At first she didn't know what to think or do. She certainly didn't want to eat this disgusting piece of bread but she also didn't want to offend the child by returning a gift which was most certainly given from the heart. She thought about it for a moment and then she took the bread, asked a blessing from God and together the two ate their small meal together. Halting words and a shared piece of muddy bread brought together two persons in a relationship neither of them could have imagined or hoped for. Such is the gift found in the breaking of bread, in the Sacrament of the Lord's Supper, Jesus Christ, inviting us to the table to be in a profoundly deep relationship not only with God but also with one another. It is a relationship none of us could have imagined or hoped for. But it is a relationship defined for us by God's own self.

I am happy to report that I find no divisions within you to condemn, well, maybe nothing except for the scarcity of deviled eggs at church suppers, Samantha's recent contribution notwithstanding. The truth is that I am trying to imagine what that would look like in our church, but it is difficult. You see, we are just too homogeneous to pull it off. There is neither much pokeweed nor caviar here. But I also know we are not so spiritually mature as to have put off all semblance of the social inequality present at the Corinthian table. Maybe not in this room, maybe not in our Fellowship meals, but probably somewhere close by us, we are betraying what this meal represents, the overcoming of any division between us, the chance to see each other as God sees us. My prayer is that as we gather at the table once again tonight, that God might reveal where whatever unworthiness in us may lie, and give us the strength to overcome it, and experience ever more fully what Christ brings to the table. Amen.