

Maundy Thursday, Epistle, Year A

DISCERNING THE BODY

1 Corinthians 11:23-26

Maundy Thursday

Analysis by Paul Jaster

[Verses 17-22 address the abuses of the Lord's Supper.]

23 For I received from the Lord what I also handed on to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took a loaf of bread, 24 and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, "This is my body that is for you. Do this in remembrance of me." 25 In the same way he took the cup also, after supper, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me." 26 For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes

[Verses 27-34 address the consequences of the abuses.]

DIAGNOSIS: Not Waiting For

Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem): Bad: Not Waiting
The Christian Church in Corinth was an exasperating collection of house churches. If Saint Paul is as bald as legend has it, well, these are the congregations that made him tear his hair out. At the churches' common meal, the rich and leisurely did not wait for the lower working classes and began eating before the others arrived, which means that some of the Johnny-come-latelies went without. Some went hungry while others got drunk. This was not unusual in a Roman colony. Roman colonies were stratified like the stratosphere: Those who fly first class get

better food, drinks, and service than those in coach, who often get nothing. And a curtain of division is drawn in between.

Unfortunately, the same holds true in the church today. As H. Richard Niebuhr demonstrated in his classic work *The Social Sources of Denominationalism*, our modern denominations are built on strata, too. We have tended to separate into different church bodies distinguished by social class. And in our congregations there are different degrees of “insiders” and “outsiders.” Many comfortable Christians do not feel in their bones and sinews the connection between the Lord’s Supper and the needs of the poor and disadvantaged.

Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem): Worse: Not Discerning the Body

Paul regards the insult of “not waiting” as an outrage. Despite all of the Corinthians’ extraordinary gifts (speaking in tongues, wisdom, prophesying), this act is not “commendable.” Those who eat before the others arrive are not eating the Lord’s Supper. They are munching down their own private meal. They are not discerning “the body.” That is, the “body” of Christ—which is not only Jesus’ own physical body in the bread and wine, but also the one, interconnected “body of Christ” that all believers become when they swallow the meal Jesus gave.

Oddly, Paul observes that it is “necessary”—“divinely necessary!” (dei)—for there to be divisions in order to expose those who are truly Christ’s people (the church) and who are not. By dissing the lower classes, the upper classes reveal that they are part of the problem, rather than part of the solution provided in the body of Christ—both on the cross and in the meal that conveys its benefits as a “new covenant,” God’s will being done on earth as in heaven. By mistreating members of the church, the Corinthians repeat the sort of sin that made the death of Jesus “necessary” (dei). They show contempt to the

church of God (and, therefore God!) and humiliate those who have nothing.

Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem): Worst: Eating and Drinking Judgment against Oneself

When those who eat and drink the body and blood of Christ show contempt against God and Christ's church and humiliate the poor, they are eating and drinking judgment against themselves. By not waiting for the lower classes and by not discerning the "body" of Christ as the church, they are not waiting for the coming of the Lord nor are they proclaiming the Lord's death until he comes, which is, of course, Christ's purpose in instituting Holy Communion. Uncommendable behavior by inconsiderate louts leads to the experience of condemnation in the world. "For this reason," Saint Paul points out, "many of you are weak and ill, and some have died." A foreshadowing of their ultimate fatal future.

PROGNOSIS: Waiting on

Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution): Fantastic!: Christ Given & Shed FOR YOU!

As an antidote to the judgment, sickness, and death that comes from not discerning the body (the interconnectedness of the church), Paul hands on to the Corinthians what he had received from the Lord—the body and blood of Christ given and shed "FOR YOU!" This is good news for us. Fantastic news! For the giving of the Lord's Supper was not meant for just the 12 disciples (minus one) or for the first-generation Christians, but is meant to be handed on from generation to generation until Christ comes and replaces Holy Communion with a greater feast, the messianic banquet. That is to say, Holy Communion is a foreshadowing of a very different kind of ultimate future—the one prayed for in the Lord's Prayer.

What is so neat about the Lord's Supper (vs. our suppers) is not only that it feeds our deepest hungers with Christ himself, it also proclaims Christ's death. As Paul will say three chapters later (14:25), the Lord's Supper is part of that proclamation (prophecy) of the Messiah's death that will cause a non-believer upon entering the assembly to exclaim, "God is really among you."

Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution): Better: This Meal "FOR YOU" Is "FOR the BETTER"

No longer do we eat and drink God's judgment against ourselves. Rather, when we are judged by the Lord, we are also "discipled" so that we may NOT be condemned along with the world. Think Romans 8, "There is...no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus—no condemnation!—for the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set you free from the law of sin and death."

"Discerning the body" means recognizing the community of believers for what they are: the one body of Jesus Christ. Paul tells the Corinthians not just to wait for one another but to receive one another as guests. Paul is calling the more affluent Corinthians to break down the barriers of social status and to receive the poor members as guest in their homes, sharing their food with those who have none. The Lord's Supper is to express the community's unity as the new covenant People of God. Those with more resources must stop shaming the poor and begin sharing their food with those who have nothing. [See Richard B. Hays, First Corinthians].

Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution): Best of All: Waiting for & Waiting on

Best of all, those who "discern the body" not only wait for all to come together as the church, but they also wait for the coming of the Lord via that precious trinity of "faith, hope, and love." And, to take it one step further, not only do they

“wait” on the coming of the Lord, but they also “wait” on the lower ones in society, as in “waiting on tables” and “sacrificial serving” and “flying coach.”

They are not only beneficiaries of Christ’s New Covenant (Jeremiah 31:31) but they are also participants in it. They are part of what we pray for in the Lord’s Prayer—God’s kingdom coming and God’s will being done on earth as it is in heaven. The New Covenant is the same as the Original Covenant (Gen. 15) except 1) it is given not only to Abraham and his biological descendants, but to ALL who trust in God’s promises in Christ, 2) the gift involves not just the land (of Canaan), but the entire WORLD, 3) the blessing is Christ and the proclamation of Jesus Christ crucified, 4) it is remembered and handed on in the holy sacraments instituted by Christ himself, and 5) it is kept and not dismissed, for it is written on one’s heart and not in stone.