

4-14-2022 Maundy Thursday Homily from I Corinthians 11.17-34 – Mike Eggleston

Life is full of wonders. When we're children, wonders and possibilities come at us from all directions. Eileen and I will never forget something a teacher of small children said about one of ours. She said, "It's amazing how much a child can learn while hanging upside down from his chair." Most of us as we grow older don't hang upside down from chairs anymore, we've learned to sit rightly and color within the lines. So the wonders are still present though we may not notice them quite so much. The Corinthian church to which Paul wrote, however, was a young church no more than five years old. Paul when he wrote to them as their founder and father was a young Christian himself, it could hardly have been more than 20 years since Paul met the risen Christ on the Damascus road. So in Corinth we have new young Christians still full of wonder over their new freedoms and spiritual gifts in Christ Jesus. And we have Paul like a brother fifteen years older trying to appreciate and educate his wild and woolly family. Last week I zoomed with an old friend who grew up as the eldest daughter with eight younger siblings. She knew what it's like, with parents out of the house, to love each of the youngers but still somehow make them clean up and get the house in order before your parents return. That may be a fair analogy for I Corinthians. Paul keeps telling them, yes, Christ has given us marvelous gifts, I love them too and I love you, but we gotta get this house in order because Christ is coming home soon. Christ wants to find us growing up and pulling together in love.

I Corinthians 11 is a wonderful chapter. It's the earliest written document we have telling anything about the Last Supper or the Eucharist. This is written 15 to 30 years before Mark, Matthew, or Luke wrote about Christ's Last Supper, and it's written 30 to 40 years before blessed John told about the footwashing. So the window that Paul opens on the Corinthians is a very early glimpse into how early Christians were meeting and worshipping. We see they were gathering for a shared fellowship meal, probably once a week, probably in the evening after the day's work in the home of someone who had a home big enough to host 10 to 40 people. They arrived at different times depending on when they were able, and they brought food and drink though the host maybe brought the most. What did they do when they met? Well, they ate, they drank, they sang, they shared their life experiences, they prophesied, they shared revelations as they received them, they prayed, they may have read from the Old Testament, they spoke in tongues evidently a lot. Paul loves their enthusiasm and he loves that his brothers and sisters are gathering in Christ. But. Paul does not love their disregard, their disconnect, their lack of attention to Christ and to one another.

I can't commend you when you come together, for it's not the Lord's Supper that you're sharing, Paul rebukes them. ^{you a shamy, next shamy} Your early arriviers are eating most of the food and getting drunk to the shame of everyone. The problem is, when you meet you are not discerning the body. There are at least two things Paul means when he implores the Corinthians to discern the body of Christ.

First, he means when you gather together, be mindful of, pay attention to, remember the presence of Jesus Christ. It's the Lord's Supper, not our supper, for Christ is the host. So Paul wrote here words of Jesus that the early churches may or may not have been quoting before this, but from Corinthians forward Christians have quoted these words whenever we share the sacrament. Remember me, says Jesus. He broke the bread and said this is my body, remember

me. After the meal he took the cup and said, as often as you drink this, do this in remembrance of me." This is not a weight to bear, ^{is a gift} not a heavy chain around our necks. Remembering Christ is utterly a gift, a blessing, an inflow of hope and power and love. Remember Jesus Christ, who hosts us and leads us and saves us. There is an old preaching illustration from a poem by Matthew Arnold that stays with me. The poem is "East London." The narrator says that on a hot August day in the Spitalfield slums 'I met a preacher there I knew, and I said, 'Ill and o'erworked, how fare you in this scene?' "Bravely!" said he, 'for I have been Much cheered with thoughts of Christ, the Living Bread.' Yes. Whether we are overworked or underworked or by grace have it just right, both in joy or sorrow, be cheered by thoughts of Christ, the living bread. Do this in remembrance of me, says the Lord.

The second focus of what Paul means by discerning the body of Christ is be mindful of your brothers and sisters in Christ. I want to commend St Benedict's here. You have found a physical form of sharing the eucharist which points our attention to one another. Some churches share communion seated in the pews, some kneel at a chancel rail, some go forward one by one. Here you form a circle. Here a dozen or so of you stand in a circle facing the elements and facing each other, while others look on and know that their time is now to pray for those in the circle and coming soon is their time to receive in a circle themselves, while others may pray for you. Hallelujah. You've found a physical form that helps us discern the body, you and I and many more together, ^{members of} belonging to Christ and to each other.

Now I need to speak briefly of one more gift that helps us discern the body. Choir directors. Choir directors, and teachers of small children, have to be skilled at many things. But particularly, I think, choir directors are exemplars at discerning the body. You know that Trinity United Methodist Church last week suffered the sudden passing of Barbara, for 54 years our organist and pianist and choir director and friend and so much more. It got me to thinking of the wonder of choir directors. They have to know so much. They have to know musical history and theory and instruments and technique and teaching and sound systems and much more. But I think the most wonderful talent and gift of choir directors is discerning the body. They have to know some of the needs and talents of everyone present, and they get to discern the body, see and hear how it all sounds and works together.

Something came to me at Barbara's last choir rehearsal at Trinity. There is a Barbaraism, something she frequently said, that often brought a smile. When we had struggled with a piece of music for long enough, whether we nailed the music or whether the music stomped on us, Barbara would say, "Perfect." That meant, time to move on. For she knew it wasn't perfect, and we knew it wasn't perfect. But it came to me not knowing that was her last rehearsal with us that she meant ^{we do feel good when we do it} much more than that when she said "perfect."

Barbara's perfect meant "we have blended our voices together with the strengths and weaknesses we each bring. We have tried to listen to one another. We are a choir, differently gifted people paying attention to one another, and giving it our best effort to praise God together. And that is perfect. Thank you, Christ who we remember in our midst. Thank you, all choir directors and all who help us to discern the body. With all its differences and commonalities, with all its sorrows and joys, behold, the body of Christ. If its not perfect, still, it's wonderful. Amen.