

October 3, 2010

One Loaf, One Body

a sermon on 1 Corinthians 10.14-22

for World Communion Sunday

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Today is World Communion Sunday, an occasion to celebrate our unity in Christ with believers around the world. October is a good month for the church. It begins with World Communion Sunday and ends with Reformation Sunday. October is also a good month for football. Obviously we have a lot of football fans in the congregation. You may not know, however, that we have two former college football players among us. Interestingly, both played on the offensive line.

One of them is Jimmy Carroll, who played for Alabama from 1964 to 66, under Paul “Bear” Bryant. Jimmy played center and guard. His teams won two national championships. Alabama fans will tell you they should have won a third. I don’t think they lost a game.

The other former player is ... yours truly. That’s right. In the fall of 1991, I was the starting left tackle for the Milligan College Buffaloes. Six feet tall. One hundred fifty pounds. I wasn’t big. I wasn’t quick. My technique was nothing special. But before you feel sorry for our quarterback, let me say in my own defense that I did not allow a sack all season. Of course, I was greatly aided in this accomplishment by the fact that we didn’t play any games. We couldn’t. We didn’t have a field. We also didn’t have coaches, equipment, or uniforms. I am embarrassed to admit this, but we didn’t even have a football. All we had was a school that gave up football back in the 1930s and a bunch of guys sitting around watching games on TV one day who decided we ought to form a team, and “What position do you want to play?” We all chose positions; then we discussed what sort of offense we would run and what sort of defense. That sort of thing. Just talk.

You may think that a player like me is no player at all. That if you are only a player in your own imagination—if it’s all just talk—then you are not a player. Jimmy actually played. I did not. He is a *real* former player. I am not. If you think that ... well, I agree. To be a college football player you have to actually play, not just pretend. It is easy to see that, isn’t it? ... So why do Christians believe that our unity in Christ is real if it is only in our minds—if it’s all just talk?

Jesus taught that all his followers are one. We are united to one another by our common allegiance to him. In fact, it goes deeper than that. Your faith and baptism unite you with Jesus Christ. You are one with him. It makes sense, then, that all who belong to him belong together. Paul gave us a helpful way to think about this when he called the church *the body of Christ*. We are as distinct from one another as a hand and an eye, but no hand or eye lives except as part of a body. The body is one.

Jesus taught this. Paul taught this. Scripture teaches it. Christian theology has always and everywhere affirmed it. And yet a huge gap separates our words from our actions. Our words say, we are all one in Christ. Our actions prove, we are divided forty ways from Sunday. No one knows how many Christian denominations exist. Estimates range from twenty to thirty-five *thousand*. And denominations are not the only way we are divided. Sunday morning worship is the most racially segregated hour in America. At times the separation is innocent; for example, we know that Christians live in places like Iran and India, but we don't know any of them. How can we be one with them? I'll tell you in a moment. Prayer is a beginning, but there is something more.

Meanwhile, we struggle sometimes to realize the unity of our own congregation. We know one another, don't we? Some of us do. You come here on Sunday. Some people you know well. Some you know by sight, but you don't really know them. Some you don't know at all. Are we really united ... or are we just enough alike to worship together? Remember, unity has to be lived, or it isn't real. It has to be expressed in concrete ways you can point to and say, "See how we are a family together!" If we don't live our unity, then it's just words, like the silly prattle of college guys arguing about what kind of offense they won't be running.

One way families live their unity is sharing meals together. The church family is no different. The Lord's Supper is *the* most important expression of our unity. Not just because the family that eats together stays together. Not just because the Lord's Supper symbolizes our unity or reminds us of our unity, but because the Lord's Supper makes our unity real. We become one when we sit together at our Lord's Table to receive his grace. His Supper makes us one.

This is why our practice of inviting *everyone* who has faith in Jesus Christ and has been baptized to partake is so important. This is the Lord's Table. He extends the invitation. If you belong to him, you belong at this Table. If we said, "Only Presbyterians can join us in the Lord's Supper," then (1) we would be saying only Presbyterians are real Christians. And (2) we would not be celebrating the Lord's Supper anymore. We would be celebrating our Supper. It would be the same if we said, "Only Protestants."

Granted, some denominations do not reciprocate the invitation. If you as a Presbyterian worship with them, you will not be invited to the Table. And, they tell their members not to partake here. That is their problem, not ours. We do not control what happens in

their services. So we do the best we can: We extend a gracious invitation to them in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.

I mentioned earlier about Christians in Iran or India or wherever, whom we do not know, so how can we be one with them? Besides prayer, the answer is: the Lord's Table. Around the world today Christians celebrate the Lord's Supper, conscious that in Christ we are one. This is valid, but it does feel a bit mystical to me. More concrete is the standing invitation we offer them. If Christians we did not know showed up from some far corner of the earth, they would be welcome to eat the Lord's Supper with us. They may not speak English, but they know what the Supper means. In the eating and drinking, we are one. Likewise, if you or I were traveling in some far off land – say we were visiting the Morgans in Bangladesh – and we went to worship with the Christians there, and they celebrated the Lord's Supper, we would gladly join in. We would be separated from these fellow believers by race, language, nationality, culture, lifestyle – the list is long. But we would eat the Lord's body and drink his blood together, and none of those differences would matter. The Lord's Supper trumps them all. We are one. And our unity finds expression in – it becomes real – at the Lord's Table.

Our scripture reading sheds so much light on our understanding of the Lord's Supper. You do need just a little background information to really make sense of it, however. Paul has a problem. He started a church in the Greek city of Corinth, a place notorious in the ancient world for immorality. Given the state of morals in the ancient world, that's no small accomplishment. Anyway, in this church there were two kinds of Christians. Those who wanted nothing to do with pagan temples, and those who thought a banquet down at the ol' pagan temple was a pleasant way to spend an evening. Pagan gods aren't real, they reasoned. The idols are just lifeless statues. Meanwhile, banquets at the temples were not just fun, with drinking and entertainment, socially they were critical. You couldn't belong among the elites, or even the better class of citizens, if you didn't participate.

Paul writes to set them straight. Frankly, he's horrified. They are right that pagan gods are no gods at all. But that doesn't mean activities at pagan temples are harmless. Pagan worship is really demon worship, Paul says. Food sacrificed to pagan idols is really sacrificed to demons. Then he comes to the part that interests us today.

“The bread we break” – he's talking about the Lord's Supper – “is it not a participation [or communion] in the body of Christ?” The Greek word here is *koinonia*. It is sometimes translated “fellowship.” It means to share something in common with someone. It is a relationship word. It describes what binds two or more people together. Sometimes we call the Lord's Supper “Communion” or “holy Communion.” This word, *koinonia*, is where that term comes from. The bread we break and eat is a fellowship, a participation, a communion with our Lord Jesus Christ. It unites us to him and to one another. The cup we drink is a *koinonia* in his blood.

Paul is going to go on to argue that the food at pagan banquets is kind of like this; it is a participation with demons. Our payoff comes sooner than that, in verse 17, "Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread." One bread, one body (meaning the church). Just as the grains of wheat are many, but together they become one loaf; so we who are many become one in Christ Jesus.

Paul could not be clearer: One loaf, one body. The Lord's Supper is *the* most important expression of our unity as Christians. At this Table our unity becomes real. It is real here, or it is nothing but words. ...

I can already hear some of you wondering, "So what? Yes, we who believe in Jesus are one in him. Yes, we have to live that truth, or it's not true. Yes, the Lord's Supper is a powerful expression of our unity. I'm willing to go along with you, preacher, that it is *the* most important expression of it. And I think it is wonderful that our church welcomes all Christians to the Table. But ... how does that affect me? What difference does it make to me Monday through Saturday?"

I could give a long list of answers to that question, but I am going to focus on what I see as the most important one today. It is about how you relate to other members of this congregation and our need to live our unity in Christ.

We who belong to Westminster need to love one another. And I'm not talking just about helping when someone is in need. I am talking about getting to know one another, doing things together – real relationships, real community. We have to be a real community, not just members of a club. Members of a club enjoy one another's company at the club, but their lives are not connected. They do not live and die together. They do not share one another's joys and burdens. Those in community do. When you are part of a community, you belong to the other people and they belong to you. You have a common way of looking at life. You have a common set of values.

The church has to be a community, not a club. Here's why: A church of individuals always sells out to the culture.

God created the church to be an alternative to the world, a place where people can experience his kingdom. But we cannot be that if we are not united, if we don't have genuine community. Following Jesus is hard, and the world is always stronger than any individual Christian. I don't care who you are: Mother Theresa, the apostle Paul, Billy Graham, or you. No matter how strong your faith and commitment to Jesus Christ, the world will chew you up and spit you out if you are on your own. It's only a matter of time and attrition. You get steeped in the world's values and way of thinking. Compromises start small. In the end, you've sold out.

Your only hope is the support of a community, your church. You are not strong enough to stand up to the pressures the world subjects you to. I am not. But together, with all of us together, we are. But only if we are a community, with a distinct set of values and beliefs. As a church, we have the Bible, which tells us who we are. We have the teachings of Jesus and the witness of the faithful through the ages. We have the sacraments. We have a living Lord, who is the head of the body.

United, we are strong. Divided, as individuals, we are weak. That's why our unity as a congregation is so important. It starts with baptism. It is most real at this Table. But we have to live our unity every day, Sunday through Saturday. It can't be just words. We have to make it real. Let's do that now, at the Lord's Table. One loaf, one body. Amen.

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