

“The Body of Christ for Us”
1 Corinthians 11:23-24

Boone UMC – Jason Byassee
June 7, 2015

I’ve started to accumulate “lasts.” Today is the last Sunday I’ll celebrate communion with y’all. This week is my last staff meeting. With my being gone some in June, and y’all being gone some, I’ve already realized I’ve been with you a last time in this sanctuary. Last week we had a reunion of the old visioning committee, and a gathering of task force heads with our new minister, David Hockett, and as I left the conversation with David was still rollicking. As I walked down the hall I could hear it less and less and then not at all. It’s not my role to lead that conversation now. It’ll continue, livelier than ever, and the dreams God has given this congregation will come to better fruition with David than they could have under me...but for me, another last.

We Christians mean something different by the word “last” than other people. The way to be first in the kingdom is not to rush to the front of the line, and elbow others out of the way, but to be first is to seek to be last. When God chooses a people in the world he doesn’t choose the powerful—the Greeks or the Romans or the Persians or the Babylonians, all great empires who conquered Israel. He chooses the last, least, most pitiful little people and says *you*—I need you to be my bride, to show the world what God is like. And when God gets born in the world God chooses not a leader in Israel, not a priest or king or prophet or wealthy person, but an unmarried Jewish teenager from the sticks. You’ll say I’m confusing two meanings of the word last—last in status versus last in a procession of time, and you’ll be right. When Jesus has his last supper with his disciples he says what he’s come to be—a sacrifice for many. He’s betrayed at that table. And he promises to be present at this same table whenever we break the bread and drink the cup. Heaven is a banquet that goes on forever with Christ as host and Christ as the feast itself. That last supper becomes an unending meal. There are no lasts in God’s economy. Not ultimately. That murmuring conversation among our leaders wasn’t my last even. It’s an appetizer. It’s the chatter before a banquet when the hors d’oeuvres are being served and the glasses are starting to clink. The future is better than we can imagine.

Hear this word, and know this. The church in Corinth was not a good church. People were sleeping with people they hadn’t made lifelong promises to. They were stealing from one another; worshiping pagan idols, the works. If you ever feel frustrated with our church at Boone, or the United Methodist Church, or the church worldwide, just take an hour and read 1st Corinthians. And you’ll come away saying “Wow, Jesus is always so patient with all of us.” Let’s stand and sing and turn and listen.

23 I received from the Lord what I also passed on to you: The Lord Jesus, on the night he was betrayed, took bread, 24 and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, "This is my body, which 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.

This is the word of God, it belongs to you, the people of God, **thanks be to God.**

Today is also a first. I've never preached on a Last Supper passage before. With these stories in the gospels and in Paul we reenact them every time we celebrate the Lord's Supper. But we rarely stop to ask what they mean. This is partly because communion is so contentious, different churches mean different things by it. Jesus gives us a meal of unity and we sinners turn it into a sign of division and pain. Better to avoid it we figure. But this preaching series is on the body of Christ. And the Lord's Supper is the body of Christ. So are we, the church. So is Jesus, born of Mary and died on a cross. To talk about the body of Christ we have to talk communion.

And here's the thing. The Lord's Supper has always been a sign of contention. It is in Corinth. That's why Paul is writing to say hey, now, back to basics, what were you commanded to do when you gather for worship? Take this bread, drink this cup, together. Why aren't you doing that?! Good thing the Corinthians were misbehaving so we could read Paul correcting them!ⁱ Pliny the Younger was a contemporary of Paul's. He describes a Roman dinner party where he was an honored guest this way.¹

The best dishes were set in front of himself and a select few, and cheap scraps of food before the rest of the company. He had even put the wine into tiny little flasks, divided into three categories, not with the idea of giving his guests the opportunity of choosing, but to make it impossible for them to refuse what they were given. One lot was intended for himself and for us, another for his lesser friends (all his friends are graded), and the third for his and for our freedman [that is, freed slaves].

All his friends are graded. Ouch. Ours are too, we're just not so open about it. The church is supposed to be different, and in Corinth it's different sure enough—it's worse. There the people with time and leisure to come to dinner early were coming and eating all the food and leaving. The poor who'd get off work later came to the Lord's Supper and there was nothing left. Paul is

outraged. This reverses the priorities of Jesus, which are that the poor are served first, the rich later if at all. Jesus eats differently than the world. We sinners keep putting things back in the order we prefer. As if to say whew, Jesus is gone, now, can we treat the rich the best? Thank God in the Lord's Supper Jesus keeps coming back and saying no, no, no, I died for each of you, the only worth you have is the worth I give you, now don't rank yourselves again, not in my body. Sometimes when you come forward for communion I say "the body of Christ broken just for you." He'd have gone to his cross if you were the only person on earth. That's true of your worst enemy too. Charles Stanley's Sunday School class has been talking about the poor. 24% of Watauga County is under the poverty line. I don't see it - because I don't hang out with them. One of our measures as a church is this, ²"Have I walked with someone not like me this week?" And when you walk with someone you share food, life. Them becomes us, and us becomes them.

Three parts today, one, what the Lord's Supper has meant historically. Forgive the history nerd in me (this is your chance to say 'he's such a professor'). Two, how to discern the body. And three the Lord's body is always broken and poured out. And of course we'll conclude with the supper itself—it's terrible to talk about food and not be served any. One, what it's meant historically. ³"This is my body," Paul reports Jesus as saying. This is some 20 years before any gospel is written, so Paul is passing on tradition in the church older than Matthew, Mark, Luke, or John. The way Jesus shares himself with his disciples and enemies is in food. And the church has long assumed that when Jesus says "is" he means "is." Not "symbolizes" or "is sort of like" or "helps you think about," but "is." Catholic ways of describing this "is" have included transubstantiation. That it looks like regular old bread and wine but is actually by a miracle that happens when I raise the elements over this table *not* bread or wine anymore but is Jesus' body and blood. There's a story of a communities of retired Catholic priests in New York City. One of the fathers had a little too much to drink one night and accidentally consecrated a bread truck. They called out the troops and ate the whole thing. The "is" is serious. When I took some of you to Mepkin Abby, Trappist monastery, we came into church during adoration, when all the monks are on their knees in front of the consecrated host.⁴ This is another monastery in adoration, same sort of thing. They didn't move, just prayed, all in white robes, y'all hadn't been in a Catholic church before let alone a monastery, and the holiness was thick (I'm so glad Pastor Jeff is going to continue this pilgrimage tradition). But our forebears in the Reformation would say, "Hey wait, bread and wine are for eating." Not looking at, praying in front of, or carrying around town, it's

³ Attributed to 1 Cor 11:24

⁴ <http://maronitemonks.org/wp/wp-content/uploads/2012/11/copy-Benediction-01.jpg>

Jesus, not magic. So, some very strong Protestants react against that “is” by saying essentially “is not.” No, no, no... don’t think that, Jesus didn’t really mean it. I love this, because, say, Baptists, who insist they’re very literal on the bible, essentially paraphrase Jesus as saying “This isn’t really my body, don’t do this in memory of me.” So something Jesus commands we dodge, skip, evade.

We Methodists have tried to say Jesus is really present in the bread and wine but we don’t know how, don’t try to explain it, it’s a mystery. We can’t explain it; we just know Jesus is in that bread, that cup, in that church, the body of Christ, streaming forward to become what it already is. When Jesus says “in remembrance,” he doesn’t mean to have a wake for him, a funeral for a dead guy. Remembrance suggests experiencing anew. Every time we eat this bread and drink this cup we are made part of Jesus all over again. The Old Testament remembers this way. When Moses institutes the Passover he commands,⁵ “This day shall be a day of remembrance for you. You shall celebrate it as a festival of the Lord; throughout your generations you shall observe it as a perpetual ordinance.” Passover makes the Jews who they are. It’s not that some *other people* were slaves in Egypt. *We were*. This meal reminds us of that. Christ transforms that Passover meal to say he’s the lamb slaughtered. The Lord’s Supper is our Passover, our salvation. We can’t understand that. But we can eat it up.

The cliché says “You are what you eat.” By eating the body of Christ we become the body of Christ. Some will say baptism, Eucharist, these things are just symbols. And the answer is sure, and a flag is just a symbol. But people die for it. A ring is just a symbol. But we get buried in our wedding rings, or else treasure them for generations. Arguably every important thing in our lives is “just” a symbol. And somehow miraculously Jesus takes what’s just bread, just a cup, and saves us with it. Now no bread and no cup are just a cup. Nothing is just that thing. They’re signs of a God who made everything and redeems it in Christ. St. Augustine (my guy) says the eucharist works backwards from ordinary food. Regular food we eat it and break it apart and digest it and it becomes part of our body. But with the Lord’s Supper we eat and it digests us, makes us into the body of Christ. Suddenly a bread truck of that sounds sort of wonderful doesn’t it?

Part II, discerning the body. The text from Paul goes on

⁶Whoever, therefore, eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be answerable for the body and blood of the Lord. 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. For this reason many of you are weak and ill, and some have died.

This text is why most Catholics won't normally invite us Protestants to communion. They're not trying to be mean, they just think we're not fully Christians, and it'd be dangerous for us to eat communion wrong. Look, Paul says it'll kill you to get it wrong. And some Baptists won't admit you to communion till you're saved right (which is a little weird both to say communion means nothing and that you can't have it). Some people deny themselves communion, fearing they're not good enough. The problem is, who *is* good enough? No one. Only Jesus. And he shares it with us. The sinners he loves; with Judas at that Last Supper. Peter too. And the rest of the 12 who he knew would all betray. This is why Methodists invite all to the table. Not because we don't care about communion (we care passionately). But because we see Jesus inviting all to his table. And if you like it, if you want some more, why, we can work up a baptism and make you part of his body.

Communion is such a source of pain in the memory of the church. It hurts when a church won't include you. This can divide families, friends. But it doesn't mean to. What it means to do is to make us holier. I'll give you an example. A friend knew a Methodist church in North Carolina where the grand wizard of the Ku Klux Klan communed for many years. He asked him, why not turn him away from communion? What? Well, this man thinks blacks and Catholics and other minorities are evil, but Jesus doesn't, why pretend he's part of Jesus' body when he's not? I mean, you're lying to him. And Paul suggests it could kill him. But if you kick out the bad people who's left? Anyone? Another pastor I knew had a family where he suspected the husband was abusing his wife. They both came up for communion, she with another shiner. What do you do? Not serve the man? Humiliate him? This pastor was a former marine, tough guy. He offered the abuser the body of Christ, and said "The body of Christ, broken for you, and if you lay another hand on her I'll kill you." And he winked at him. Is that the right thing to do? Threaten the threatener at the table of peace? I don't know honestly. Do you see how the very thing meant to tie us together can rip us apart?

But it's always been so with Jesus. The people he comes to save crucify him. The friends he spends the most time with abandon. He gives religious people a hard time and what are most of us? Religious people. Here's the thing in Paul. He says you rich people stop excluding the poor from communion. Now you have to realize at this time the Lord's Supper was a full meal. So if you're hungry Paul says pig out at home. Leave enough for those who don't have enough at home. In other words the weaker members, the poorer, deserve more honor. So when Paul says

to discern the body he's not saying 'believe in transubstantiation' or 'only the saved can come to communion.' He's saying honor the faith of the weaker members. So maybe for us Methodists what he's saying is to respect the Christianity of Catholics and Orthodox who prize the sacrament more than we do. Honor the faith of Pentecostals and Baptists precisely when we disagree. Learn to recognize Jesus where you think he's not—in the Christians who make you most crazy. Because he's there! Discern the body in places that make you uncomfortable. Because that's what Jesus does, he keeps us uncomfortable. Or even this—honor those of other faiths, or of none. Christ created them to and longs for relationship with them and one day will have it.

Beware the pastor who brings up a movie from 30 years ago, I have watched movies since then, but *Places in the Heart* is really good. It's set in Depression era Texas, and a young black man accidentally kills a father of a family. He's lynched for his mistake. The rest of the town will commit a ritual murder to get revenge but won't help the widow with her crop. Another black man will though. And a blind man. They form an outpost of Jesus' upside-down kingdom right there on the farm. The final scene of the movie happens in church during communion. And people are in the church who never go to church. Or who are dead. Including enemies. The dead father and the dead young man who accidentally killed him. And as they pass bread and wine to one another they say "peace of God." God's peace is greater than our violence, friends. And God is slowly working to crowbar our hearts open to those to whom our hearts are most closed.

Paul opens this way⁷ "23 I received from the Lord what I also passed on to you: The Lord Jesus, on the night he was betrayed, took bread . . .". Looks can be deceiving. The Greek words "passed on" and "betrayed" are the same. Paul says more literally⁸ "I *handed over* from the Lord what I also passed on to you: The Lord Jesus, on the night he was *handed over*, took bread . . .". And then in a minute you'll all come up and I'll hand over Jesus. God can take the worst betrayal in history and make salvation out of it. What can God do with us do you think? Here's the thing about Christian faith. It's always broken. It's always poured out. If anyone suggests something about Jesus and there's not a cross run right through it, be suspicious. This is what worries me about sisters and brothers who don't invite others to communion. Are they really unable or unwilling to see Jesus in other parts of his body? Where's the cross in that? The brokenness, the poured-outness?

Here's what happens in a minute for communion. I break bread, pour out fruit of the vine, and we all practice seeing Jesus in it. Because he's there. He promises to be there. And that teaches us

to see Jesus in other ordinary things like bread, wine, water, one another, our enemy. Because he's there. Savingly there, to work on us. So don't tell me he's not in this bread and this cup. Don't tell me he's not resplendent throughout his creation. Because he is...savingly. And he wants to make all things new. Starting with us. This is not the last communion. It's just another appetizer for a feast that will never end. All are invited. Amen.

ⁱ Richard Hays' point in his 1 Cor commentary