

The Dangerous Memory That Is Our Hope

Sermon by [Cynthia A. Jarvis](#)

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Isaiah 65:17-25

I Corinthians 11:17-26

“Do this in remembrance of me.”

In order to understand why Paul is so irritated with the church in Corinth, we have to do a little sleuthing this morning. Obviously these verses are not about a religious ritual taking place in a sanctuary. Rather, the Corinthians are in a home, probably the home of one of their more affluent members. There the bread is broken and blessed; wine is poured out and consumed; but in between, it seems there is an actual meal, a meal at which some are stuffing themselves full of good things while others look on with empty stomachs. How could that be? Imagine, say social historians, a Greco-Roman potluck supper. Each family arrives at the door of the Eucharistic dinner party with a basket of food sufficient to feed the members of their own household. The host's closest friends are first to arrive and take the ten or twelve places available in the dining room. There they recline, bless the bread and begin to eat. Members who likely had no time to prepare a meal (and only meager resources because they were laborers or slaves), these finally arrive to find the food gone and the company a bit tipsy from too much wine. With no place left in the dining room, they crowd into the atrium where they are offered a morsel of bread and a sip from the common cup. The custom, according to scholars, mirrored a pagan ritual common in the social life of Gentiles, a ritual that had been modified to fit the Corinthian's new found faith.

When Paul is apprised of the situation, he barely knows where to begin! The fact that he five times uses a verb which can mean “to assemble” or “to be united,” suggests that the nub of the problem involves the sort of community they were becoming as they ate without regard for the other. “To begin with,” Paul writes, “when you come together as a church, I hear that there are divisions among you; and to some extent I believe it.” We know this from the beginning of the letter [some said they belonged to Chloe, some to Cephas, some to Paul], but the divisions in the eleventh chapter come down to class. Still the divisions within the Christian community at the eleventh hour on Sunday morning come down to class!

Yet Paul goes on to claim that the community's divisions are not by chance but by design. By way of our present divisions, says Paul, it will become clear [perhaps to God on the Day of Judgment?] who is a disciple of Jesus Christ and who is no more than a social member of a club co-opting Jesus' name. “By placing the fact of the community's divisions in an apocalyptic context” notes New Testament scholar Richard Hayes, “he emphasizes the gravity of the situation.” In other words, eternal things are at stake around the dining room table.

Paul then goes for the jugular: When you come together, it is not really to eat the Lord's Supper. Rather he implies that the church is an assembly indistinguishable from any other social gathering in Corinth. In every case, the first are first and the last are last. You may say the right words over the bread and cup, but what you do and how you behave toward one another has nothing to do with Jesus! Likewise Pliny the Young writes of the elegant economy of his ancient host:

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....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 our freedmen.

“Apparently this was the sort of hospitality that was being provided to the church by the wealthier Corinthian Christians,” says Hayes. Paul is outraged. In sum, they are assembling when they come together, but they are not coming together *in unity*.

With this judgment as his preface, Paul sets forth his understanding of the Supper, an understanding that became the words we still say to institute our every celebration. “For Paul, the ethical implications of the Eucharist were far more vital,” writes New Testament professor Peter Lampe, “than the later intricate theological discussion of how Christ might be present in the Lord’s Supper.” Jesus instituted this supper that we might remember him who, on the night when God handed him over to death for our sake, on the night when God’s self-giving knew no bounds, he took bread. And when he had given thanks he broke it and said, “Take. Eat. This is my body broken for you. Do this in remembrance of me.” “The most striking feature of Paul’s renarration of the tradition,” says Hayes, “is the emphasis that he places upon *memory*.”

But what of him do we remember? On a Sunday when the Lord’s Table is set in a church and a world that is Corinth writ large, what has our remembrance of him to do with our ethics. In the first place, when we come together there is a sense in which you could say of the Corinthians and say of the church today that we remember him the way we remember a dead relative. We are able to tell some stories about his life, recall a few things he said, commemorate those special anniversaries—his birth, his death—as we come together. Like e.e. cummings’ Cambridge ladies, “who live in furnished souls/are unbeautiful and have comfortable minds/(also, with the church’s protestant blessings/daughters, unscented, shapeless, spirited)/they believe in Christ and Longfellow, both dead....” If asked, we can only speak well of him: the difficult times and encounters have faded over time and only happy memories remain. He has become an idealized person, held in our heads, preserved in our imaginations but inconsequential as regards our politics. As this is the way we remember him when we come together, he might as well be dead and buried.

In the second place, you could say of the Corinthians and say of the church today that when we come together we remember him as we would remember an idea: he disembodied, we dispassionate and both studied from a distance. So we think about him, analyze what he said, argue about his “real presence” on or around the table. Students of religion, we are, whose remembrance of him is purely academic. We remember him the way we remember a good idea or a correct theological concept and as this is the way we remember him when we come together, he might as well never have given his life for us.

Czech theologian Jan Lochman suggests a third way of remembering him. At this supper which rehearses the story of God’s purposes from the exodus to the exile of God’s people, from the crucifixion to the resurrection of God’s Son, God’s only Son, God’s beloved, the memory enacted in the lives of his disciples is a dangerous memory. It is a memory likely to get us into trouble, to unsettle our days, to disturb our nights and to turn the world as we know it upside down. Because, you see, it is a memory that triggers a particular hope—a hope glimpsed in his life, death and resurrection--that makes us restless in this world of broken people and nations, in this religious community of divisions and distrust. It is a hope for a world where the

sound of weeping will no more be heard or the cry of distress...a world where no more shall there be infants who live but a few days, or an old person who does not live out a lifetime...a world where people shall build houses and inhabit them...plant vineyards and eat their fruit...where they shall not build and another inhabit...plant and another eat...a world where people shall not labor in vain nor bear children for calamity...a world where wolf and lamb feed together...where none will hurt or destroy on all God's holy mountain. We glimpse this world in him as the kingdom of God, the reign of God, the self-giving that is God literally invading time and, like a light flashed in the darkness, revealing the world God intends. How can we possibly return to this world as it is indifferent and unchanged?

To be a bit more specific, if the memory enacted in our lives is a dangerous memory of him who was handed over to death for our sakes, we will refuse a world ordered by the present power arrangements and be outraged by a city of so-called brotherly love where some neighborhoods can pull up the moat and pretend it is 1952 while just down the street children are shot and the elderly poor are starving. We will not rest easy until the racism which still cuts the nerve of the nation in two is rooted out and until the hatred born of fear is ended. This dangerous memory makes of us strangers and aliens who will not abide this country's use other countries for cheap labor or as dumping grounds for faulty products or as markets for weapons that will one day be aimed our way or as guinea pigs for gonorrhea and syphilis no mere spoken sorry can redeem. It is a memory set in the marrow of the bones of any who would remember that Jesus Christ is alive and is a present threat to those who have settled into the comfort of injustice and indifference and inordinate self-concern. Our remembrance of his passion means that we can never again inhabit human history, says Lockman, as though it were the saga of the successful, the victorious, the survivors. For we are the community who remembers the cross and who lives waiting for and hastening the coming of the day of God, when righteousness is at home. To eat this bread and drink this cup is "to live as a community that gives itself away to others," says Hayes, "in remembrance of the one who gave himself for us."

On World Communion Sunday in the year of our Lord 2010, it would be very difficult to argue that we are not to be counted with the affluent Corinthian host and his friends. In this dining hall we have come together as those who are sated before we say the words and lift a cup to our Lord. But this day imagine the words of Paul being said throughout the world in huts and in hovels, in barrios and Bantustans, on battlefields and behind closed doors for fear of being found out, and with them remember him who, on the night when he was handed over to death by God for our sakes, took bread.

Remembering him with Christians throughout the world today, we must remember more: remember him in those who receive the small morsel, the crumb fallen from the table, the scraps of food offered to the least of the Corinthians. What a miracle it would be if, in taking and eating the morsel of bread, we would be changed into a community united, a church "come together" with those who hunger and are homeless, with them that know the rejection of the world and the vulnerability that is the lot of the other before jumping off a bridge and so in them meet him who said that when we feed the hungry, house the homeless, welcome the alien, clothe the naked, heal the sick, visit the prisoner, we remember him.

Let us therefore dare to receive the gift of his undeserved grace toward us in the supper he instituted, remembering him as those who wait for new heavens and a new earth where righteousness is at home. Thanks be to God.

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