

Some of you know that the majority of my time in ministry as a vocation has been spent with people from all over the world. Even before I took upon the mantle of ordained ministry, way back to childhood, even, I intentionally sought out those who were different from me, learning from them and developing a deep respect for varying cultures. If I were to offer you my theological glasses – the lenses through which I see scripture and encounter God and put those experiences and thoughts into preaching and teaching – you would see lenses resembling a kaleidoscope. With each turn of the lenses toward the light, a new dimension appears, refracting according to an experience or encounter I have had with a culture vastly different from my own. So when you see me, I look a lot like you. You might expect that I look at the Bible the same way you do. And to a certain extent, that's true. I'm a fourth-generation Presbyterian on my mom's side of the family, so the Reformed tradition is steeped deeply into my ministerial approach. I am firmly Presbyterian in my interpretation of scripture, in my support of our polity, and in my modern approach to the theologians of our tradition.

But you will find as we get to know one another that my approach to scripture might seem a little odd to you. You see, I spent a year in Ghana as a PC(USA) Young Adult Volunteer, back in 2006 and 2007, when the country was far less modern than it is now – and I'm sure it's still very, very different from what we know here. That year deeply transformed the way I looked at scripture and life in

general. When you live and work in a place that looks a lot more like the environment in which many of our scriptures were written than what see here, rarely encountering people of your own culture, your perspective changes. You understand how those in many places in the world come to a more literal interpretation of scripture. And things start to look very, very different. Your lenses are no longer clear. They are vibrantly colored, always looking for ways to connect the church in your own culture with the church universal.

One particular experience I've had with worship in other places is communion. I have joined the Christian family at the Lord's table in France, where I am excluded from Catholic tables and where Protestantism is rare, and in Ghana, where diluted palm wine is used in the cup because grape juice is not a thing and wine from grapes is expensive – because grapes don't grow in Ghana. I have co-presided at the table in Kenya, where economic insecurity is not as widespread as in many places, and in Haiti, where people are materially poor and yet have access to the elements you and I are used to because of the Episcopal Diocese of Haiti being a province of the U.S. Episcopal Church. I have preached during communion services in Lebanon, where grape juice and wine flow freely in the actual land of milk and honey, and in Brazil, where bread is a pretty big deal. I have also borne witness to our Presbyterian siblings in Cuba celebrating communion by putting uncooked rice and water on the sanctuary table so as not to waste the

bread they need to eat and in order to replace the grape juice to which they do not have access.

I hope you can now see, at least a bit, how my lenses on this passage from 1 Corinthians might be a little different, how my lenses on the nature and purpose of World Communion Sunday might be a little different than the lenses of most of our PC(USA) churches and pastors. You see, faith gets a lot more complicated when we look beyond what's right in front of us, but I would say it also gets a lot richer.

When I look back on my communion experiences all over the world, in so many different agricultural environments and in so many different cultures, imagining the world in Corinth doesn't seem too unfamiliar to me. Different cultures coming to the same communion table isn't a long leap for me to imagine.

Ancient Corinth was a port city, a place where people of many different cultures co-mingled and sometimes collided. Take this new faith movement of Jesus-followers, which includes those who were not Jewish before, as well as those who were Jewish converts, and add that to the mix of Judaism and paganism, and then add all the various people and non-religious cultural traditions from all over the region and you get a whole lot of questions.

In the face of all that confusion, Christians must have been asking the questions that 1 Corinthians addresses: If a non-believer offers me food that they

sacrificed to a pagan god, do I accept it? Should I buy meat in the market that has been sacrificed to idols? Should I follow the dietary laws of Judaism if I wasn't Jewish before, and should I still follow them if I am a Jewish Christian? Indeed, food is a very important part of life for obvious reasons both nonreligious and religious. So naturally, in the face of so many different approaches to mealtime and religious rites, early Christians took questions about food very seriously. The most serious questions for Christians in Corinth came with the Lord's Table, a sacrament, an act of worship necessary for salvation.

In the Corinthian church, the Lord's Supper often preceded a large meal. In and of itself, that meal would have been a time of Christian fellowship, of carrying out the unity of the Body of Christ that was found at the table of worship and Holy Communion moments before. But the Corinthians had turned that feast into a raucous, barely Christian party in which some ate too much, leaving others with no food at all, and in which too much wine was poured out and too much fantastical, ecstatic speeches came tumbling out of over-indulged mouths. Instead of remembering Jesus by sharing food with the hungry and fellowship with the lonely, they had made a mockery of the holy meal.

They had forgotten the purpose of the Lord's Supper: communion with the entire Christian family; re-remembering Jesus Christ, gathering the members of

his Body together as one, with one bread, one cup of blessing.

What the letter to the Corinthians attempts to do in this chapter is temper some of the chaos and bring the believers' attention back to the main thing, the whole reason for gathering at the table in the first place: to remember the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. The letter does bring some clarity to all the confusion, but perhaps it's not the sort of clarity that we would like. Paul doesn't advise Christians in Corinth by saying specifically, "Eat this but don't eat that." Instead, he tells the believers to drink from the spiritual rock that follows them, the same rock that followed their ancestors in the faith after they escaped slavery in Egypt, eating the same spiritual food that their ancestors in the faith ate when they celebrated their liberation.

And if we look back at how the liberated Hebrew people behaved during their wanderings in the wilderness, complaining that they didn't like the manna God provided them for food, worshiping idols because they were mad at God for delaying their entry into the Promised Land, we don't see too much difference between them and the early church in Corinth. God parted the waters so they could cross the sea, put a pillar of fire between them and the Egyptians pursuing them as they escaped, put blocks in the spokes of the chariots barreling toward them, and closed up the sea to drown the Egyptians, finally separating them from their oppressors.

Although they at first celebrated, they later complained. They yearned to go back to Egypt rather than die in the wilderness. God provided them manna, enough bread for each day, and double the bread on the day before the Sabbath so they didn't have to work to distribute it on their day of rest. God provided them water; even when Moses struck a rock in anger, water came out to quench their thirst. And yet they complained. If they tried to store up excess manna, if they tried to hoard it and lose reliance on God to provide just what they needed each day, it got worms and spoiled. God desired each person to have what they needed and no more. The needs of the community superseded the desires of the individual. What God offered in the simple gifts of daily bread and water was not enough for them. They needed something flashier, something fashioned in their own image. They got so mad that they built a golden calf and worshiped it instead of God. They fell to the sin of idolatry, prioritizing another tangible thing over God. But idolatry doesn't have to mean worshiping a physical golden calf. The whole community fell to idolatry, yes, making idols of new, shiny objects, but also idolizing the old days in Egypt – better to suffer in slavery than die in the wilderness.

Similarly, Christians in Corinth idolized the ritual communion meal itself rather than the meaning of the meal. Those newly exposed to diversity idolized the new and exotic – pagan gods and associated meal rituals. Those who were former pagans idolized their old traditions, despite their new beliefs,

paying little to no attention to the spirit with which their food was prepared, served, and consumed. In the end, Paul reminds the church in Corinth that the particularities of what we eat and drink don't matter as much as how we eat and drink, in whose spirit we eat and drink. Eating food sacrificed to idols is not the main issue for Paul. The main issue is how the Corinthian Christians had turned the focus of the Lord's Supper from a simple yet profound act of worship into the same kind of manna-hoarding, drunken party the ancient Hebrews came up with out of anger and neglect of their God.

When the ways in which Christians go about worship – either pining for the good old days, holding tightly to a particular tradition or song or non-sacramental ritual, or constantly pursuing the new and exotic – become more important than creating an inviting, inclusive, intentional, faithful time of corporate worship, we idolize the ritual over God, obscuring the purpose and meaning and transformation that can happen when we return to the whole reason we engage with worship and sacraments to begin with.

So Paul reminds us of how simple it all really is:

One bread. One body. Re-membering Jesus. Putting the scattered and broken Body of Christ back together.

With the simple act of coming together at the table, we acknowledge that the Body of Christ is much bigger than the group of people sitting in this room and

that the table of our Lord is much bigger than the one we have in front of us today. People in places around the world come to the Lord's table and consume the bread that is available to them and make wine from the fruit that grows in their region.

And yet we are one Body. We take of one bread. We drink from one cup of blessing.

No, that doesn't mean that we come here with whatever food and drink items we want and declare it to be the Bread of Life and the Cup of Salvation. That kind of carelessness is part of what Paul is warning against, after all. But it does mean that when the people of God have come together to decide, intentionally and faithfully, what in their region of the world is appropriate for the sacrament, they are eating of the same bread and drinking from the same cup as their Christian family everywhere. They are re-membering the Body of Christ in their act of communion.

One bread. One Body. One cup of blessing.

With a small Presbyterian congregation in Brazil, I had the privilege to bear witness to and participate in the kind of intentional, faithful creativity that engages all generations and walks of life in worship. Just after the sermon, the children returned to the sanctuary from their own Bible lesson time. They joined the rest of the congregation to take communion as one Body. After communion, before the final prayers and songs, and yet still during worship, the

congregation left the communion table at the front of the sanctuary to a smaller table at the back of the sanctuary, where the elders offered a small meal for everyone present. Over mango juice, small sandwiches and fruit, we shared the peace with one another and engaged in fellowship. After the meal, we returned to the pews and concluded worship with prayers, songs, and a benediction.

The congregation brought everyone together for communion and shared a meal together, simply, faithfully, and intentionally, sure to distribute food and drink as all needed, sure to include everyone, sure that no one left wondering the purpose or nature of the moment. We partook in the Bread of Life and Cup of Salvation at the Lord's table, and then we turned right around and walked over to our table of fellowship to actually re-member – put back together – the broken and scattered Body of Christ.

Later that evening, our group from Atlanta gathered with that congregation and our other partner church at a restaurant, all squeezed together at a long table filled with shareable plates, laughing, singing, sharing stories, and learning from one another in a more casual, celebratory fellowship. The bonds among our three congregations as covenanted churches in missional partnership grew even deeper.

As an outsider who did not know a word of Portuguese and who had never before set foot in South America, I felt welcome both in worship and in fellowship,

precisely because the one bread, the one cup of blessing, actually brought us together as one Body.

Those simple acts of worship and fellowship between congregations and church denominations and countries and cultures kept the same focus Paul exhorted the Corinthian church to keep: One bread. One Body. One cup of blessing.

The church with which I took communion in Brazil did not idolize old traditions, nor did it constantly pursue the new and shiny worship trappings so common in their own culture, nor did they cling too tightly to what they had in the moment. They simply gathered at the Lord's Table, integrated fellowship into worship, and went out into the world as the re-membered Body of Christ, fed from one bread, nourished from one cup of blessing.

If we are constantly pursuing the new and shiny as the liberated Hebrew people did, just to look cool and draw in the chaotic masses, we are creating an idol. If we are pining for old traditions just for the sake of nostalgia as the former pagan Christians did, we are making an idol. If we find ourselves clinging tightly to what we have right now just to feel comfortable as the Corinthians engaging in reckless behavior did, we are creating an idol.

If we are crafting worship that is faithful, intentional, invitational, and inclusive, the details don't really matter. We are preparing for communion in our worship. This one Body, this re-

membering of the Body of Christ happens when we come together intentionally and faithfully at the Lord's Table and go directly from that table to the table of fellowship and friendship. At the Lord's Table and at the fellowship table, we ensure that everyone is invited, everyone is included, no one goes hungry, and no one eats too much. If the fellowship meal shows that we are trying to re-member – to put back together – the broken and scattered Body of Christ, we are indeed proclaiming the dead and risen Lord until he comes again. At the Lord's Table and at the fellowship table, varied languages, cultures, and colors of the world gather from north, south, east, and west to feast together in the Kingdom of God. We have interpreters so we understand each other's different languages and cultures. We have open hearts to learn from one another, allowing God's mission to flow within us as individuals, among us as a Body, and through us as the hands and feet of Jesus. What a witness and blessing to each other and to the world.

One bread. One body. One cup of blessing.

We, the many, throughout the earth, we are one Body in this one Lord.

Amen.