**1 Cor 11:17-34**

**In order to Witness with Love as a community, we need to ground ourselves in the Eucharist. It is the essence of our Christianity, the fulfillment of our Baptism, a saying yes to Jesus' life, death and resurrection. It is the act that incorporates us into community to build the kingdom of God.**

**A person once asked, "When Jesus said, 'Do this in memory of me,' what was the THIS he had in mind?" I would imagine that each of us has a different answer to that question.**

* **Is the "this" an individualistic Jesus or**
* **Is it Christ's action in us as a community of believers?**

**St. Augustine said, "We eat the body of Christ to become the body of Christ." What does that mean today?**

**Eucharist means gratitude, thanksgiving. Jesus' last meeting with his disciples was a meal of thanksgiving and blessing that commemorated the Passover of the Israelites from slavery. However, Jesus changed the blessing before he broke the bread, saying, "This is my body." In effect he was saying, "This bread is not only a reminder of the Passover bread our ancestors ate, this bread is me." Likewise, "this wine was his blood, the blood of the new covenant." The participants in the new covenant became blood relatives, not only of Jesus but of one another; that means taking responsibility for each other as one does in a family. The new covenant has demanding terms. We have reflected on some of those in the previous sessions. Today we will continue to try and grasp an understanding of those terms from the perspective of Paul in his letter to the Corinthians.**

**I am using Paul's Letter to the Corinthians to focus on the Eucharist because it is the main text in the New Testament that deals with the celebration of Eucharist.**

**In this passage, Paul is calling the Corinthians to task because of the way they act when they come together for the Eucharist. Within that context he teaches what the Church community is to be.**

**Let us first paint a picture of the context of the Church of Corinth.**

**Corinth is part of Greece. It is on a narrow strip of land and in the time of Paul was one of the greatest trading and commercial centers of the world. Their athletic games were second only to the Olympics.**

**Their culture was decadent. "To live like a Corinthian" meant to live a drunken and immoral life. Corinth was a synonym for wealth, luxury, drunkenness and immorality.**

**Within the Church of Corinth there were four groups.**

* **First, there was the group who followed Paul. These were the poor, working class; they were intelligent, but not intellectuals. They were probably Gentiles. They included laborers, the unemployed, slaves, prostitutes – the underclass of Corinth.**
* **The second group followed Apollo, a Jew from Alexandria. Alexandria was the center of intellectual activity. Apollo looked on the emerging Christianity as a philosophy, not a religion. His followers were wealthy people, who had leisure time to study philosophy. They intellectualized Christianity and did not relate it to action or the way they lived.**
* **The third group, the Jews, followed Peter. They still observed the Jewish law and were legalist. These were the shopkeepers and merchants for whom following the rules was important – they made Christianity about following the rules.**
* **The fourth group were the Gnostics, from "gnosis," meaning spiritual knowledge. These were the spiritualists who believed that Christianity was about praying individually to God for special spiritual knowledge for enlightenment.**

**In Paul's day, most "churches," communities meet in houses. No big buildings. The early Christians had been kicked out of the synagogues. In Acts 2:46, we read, "They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts. Corinth would have been no different. They probably gathered at the largest house in order to accommodate everyone.**

**However, if you have visited archaeological ruins in Greece, you know that most dining rooms were not big enough to accommodate large groups. Probably no more than 9-12 people could have reclined around the standard dining room table. The rest of the church would have eaten in the larger adjoining atrium or courtyard--probably maxing out at 30-50 people.**

**The centerpiece of most Christian worship was the context of the Passover meal--the Lord's Supper. Thus the early church probably carried on the tradition of celebrating the Lord's Supper in the context of a meal called an "agape" or love feast.**

**You would assume that gathering in homes, having close table fellowship would have guaranteed tight relationships. Right? WRONG!**

**Let us listen again to verses 17-22.**

**"In giving this instruction, I do not praise the fact that your meetings are doing more harm than good. First of all, I hear that when you meet as a church, there are divisions among you, and to a degree I believe it; there have to be factions among you in order that those who are approved among you may become known. When you meet in one place, then, it is not to eat the Lord's supper, for in eating, each one goes ahead with his own supper, and one goes hungry while another gets drunk. Do you not have houses in which you can eat and drink? Or do you show contempt for the church of God and make those who have nothing feel ashamed? What can I say to you? Shall I praise you? In this matter I do not praise you."**

**Paul was angry with the community and clearly communicated that anger.**

**The scene Paul describes is fairly self-explanatory. You can picture it. The church gathers for corporate worship which involved a celebration of "agape," a love feast. The agape was to nourish and strengthen the community. But in Corinth, they were not doing this.**

**Apparently the rich and well-to-do Christians who probably hosted the church meeting invited their closest friends to eat with them in the dining room. They came early and ate, drank, and got drunk. The poorer Christians, who worked and came late, were left to eat in the atrium, the courtyard, had nothing to eat and were humiliated.**

**Why is Paul so angry at the Corinthians? In simple terms, the Corinthians just didn't get it. What didn't they get?**

**The Corinthians did not understand that coming together for Eucharist united them as one body, as one entity. Paul understood Eucharist as the knitting together of individuals into a new reality--that reality being Jesus. Instead, the Corinthians understood Jesus as a private individuated presence who came at no cost meaning then that the Corinthians did have to change and could act as they did. The rich had become exclusive and hurried to finish so that they did not have to share. They had developed cliques, there was favoritism. The meal exaggerated these differences and Paul rebukes them for this.**

**Paul understood that within the Church there were to be no barriers. There was to be no social or class distinctions. Paul created a church that looked like Corinth but was not to act like Corinth: he created a church of rich/poor; free/slave; Jew/Gentile – people who ordinarily did not associate with each other. But in the Church, they were to relate as brothers and sisters. In effect, Paul creates a new understanding of what it means to be human which is rooted in being community. This new community was to convert Corinth; it was to change Corinth. Instead he learns that not only have they not changed Corinth, but Corinth has converted them and they have reverted to act as they used to. For Paul they were not the true Church. In the Church there was to be no Greeks, Jews, Gentiles, no slaves but all one in Christ--all united in Christ. The Lord's supper was where this happened. The Corinthians just didn't get this.**

**Paul understood that the Church was not the Church if the art of sharing was forgotten. If people kept in their own circle, then they were not followers of Christ. Paul says, "When you come together, it is not the Lord's Supper you eat." In other words, yeah, you eat. You break bread. You drink the cup.**

**But because your interpersonal relationships are in shambles, because you are not really sharing life together, because your behavior proves you despise what the church is really all about, you are not eating the Lord's Supper. You are better off eating at home.**

**Paul saw the relationship between Jesus and the community of those who shared in the Eucharist as one. This was central to his belief in Christ and the Church. Therefore, Paul saw the consequences of how they treated each other at the Eucharist as a grave offence.**

**To better understand the depth of Paul's anger, let us recall his conversion.**

**Story of Paul's conversion: Paul was a devout Jew. He persecuted newly converted Christians because he viewed them as heretics. He is riding on a horse to Damascus and is blinded by a light and hears a voice say. "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute ME?" Not why do you persecute Bob, Mary, Anthony, Linda….why do you persecute ME!!**

**After Damascus, for Paul, the person of Jesus was present in the community. Jesus lived, moved, and had his being only if community was drawn into his Christ's mystery.**

**THE COMMUNITY WAS TANGIBLE EVIDENCE THAT CHRIST STILL EXISTED. This point of recognition laid a claim on each person. For Paul, the Eucharistic assembly was individuals fused with a new reality. The celebration was about individuals becoming members of each other and thereby Christ.**

**If this did not happen, then it was only a ritual, not a celebration of who they were as Christ.**

**There was no indication that the act of worship was performed unworthily. Paul was furious because of their blindness to each other and the poverty of their social interaction.**

**In summary, there were two major reasons for Paul's anger.**

**First, Throughout Paul's writings we read that Paul understood the Church to be a New Creation. Because the community was Christ, they were to create a different world, a different Corinth, a new creation. Instead the Corinthians brought the divisions and culture of Corinth into the Church and imitated the Corinth rather than understand that they were to change Corinth.**

**The other reason for his anger was his deep understanding of the Church being the body of Christ. The different parts of the body are interdependent and share a mutuality; there was to be more than a human bonding, but they were to be Christ's body. It was more than many are one; they were Christ himself.**

**The next chapter of First Corinthians, Chapter 12, is about all of us having different gifts and us being described as the Body of Christ.**