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Sermon
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Park Congregational Church
Worcester, Massachusetts

“Remembering Our Lord’s Table Manners”

Text: 1 Corinthians 11:23-26

Dear people of God, don’t put your elbows on the table while you’re eating. Wait until everyone is served before you begin. Make sure you have a napkin in your lap. Do I sound like your mother? What were some of the rules at your dinner table growing up? Were you allowed to come to the table wearing an undershirt or a bathrobe? Were you expected to set the table every night? Were you allowed to leave the table without finishing your plate? That was a big one in my family. It was considered a sin not to eat everything served to us. “Remember the starving Armenians” was not just a saying in my family. It was a real experience. My grandparents were starving during the death marches of the Armenian Genocide.

You probably have a hard time believing that I was a skinny kid growing up. My mother always worried about my not gaining weight. You see, I was a very fussy eater. And I was stubborn. I refused to finish my plate. And so, I wasn’t allowed to leave the table. My mother would be

finished washing the dishes. And I was still sitting at the table, with my arms folded. My father would go to the living room to watch the Evening News. When it was over, he would come to the kitchen for his nightly cup of coffee. And I was still sitting at the table, playing with the salt and pepper shakers. My mother would take a shower and come through the kitchen to go out the back door to bring in the clothes from the clothesline as it would be getting dark. And I was still sitting at the table, playing with my food.

Ironically, my grandparents were more lenient with me when I didn't finish my plate at their home. But they had their own set of rules when eating dinner. We would eat at my grandparents every Sunday afternoon. Unless it was during the summer when we would enjoy an outdoor shish-kebob barbecue in their back yard, or at least in their enclosed porch, we would always eat in the dining room, never the kitchen. That was one rule. Both my sister and I had friends on the street where our grandparents lived and we would always play with them on Sundays. But they were never allowed to stay for dinner. That was another rule. And the radio would not be allowed to play during dinner, unlike at home when it was frequently on while we ate. That was yet

another rule. My grandparents didn't want anything to distract us from quality family time during dinner.

Table manners make a big difference in our dining experience. They're among the things you remember even after you grow up. They were put in place so that everyone could enjoy the meal and each other's company. And everyone was expected to adhere to them. Even stubborn 6-year-olds.

Like any concerned mom or grandma trying to teach her offspring good table manners, the apostle Paul has a few things to say to the church in Corinth about the abuses he has heard about when his fledgling church comes together at the Lord's Table. The Corinthian believers have taken this holy meal, meant to be an important remembrance of Christ's last supper, and royally screwed it up. This disturbs Paul so much that he wastes no time in reprimanding the Corinthians for their shameful behavior at the feast. He remarks, "When you come together, it is not really to eat the Lord's Supper. For when the time comes to eat, each of you goes ahead with your own supper, and one goes hungry and another becomes drunk. What! Do you not have homes to eat and drink in? Or do you show contempt for the church of God and humiliate those who have nothing? What should I say to you? Shall I commend you? In this matter I

do not commend you!” (1 Corinthians 11:20-22).

We should understand that Holy Communion was practiced very differently in the 1st-century from the way we observe it today. The early Christians met in people’s homes for worship, not in huge sanctuaries or spacious chapels. They would, however, need to meet in a home large enough to accommodate a sizable gathering. And so, the homes probably belonged to the wealthiest among the church’s members. The ritual observance of the Lord’s Supper was probably a full meal, not just a piece of bread and a small cup of grape juice. The breaking of the bread would be the symbolic beginning of the supper, remembering the way Christ broke bread with the disciples after thanking God in prayer for the food. And then the main course would be served. After the main course, everyone at the table would share in the ritual of the cup, drinking from it as Christ’s disciples did. And so it would not be mistaken to say that we modern Christians have left out the main course in the way that the early Christians commemorated Holy Communion. Eating together was a very significant means of forming a community in the early church, especially in bringing together Jewish and Gentile believers.

This ritual of bread, meal, and cup was intended in a wonderful way to observe and remember the last supper that Christ shared with his

beloved followers. But the Corinthians messed things up. Some were coming early to the meal, perhaps the wealthier members of the church who had more leisure time to come and go as they pleased. Some were coming later, probably the slaves who did not have control over their schedule. When the latecomers got there, there was no food left. The early birds by that time were already stuffed and drunk. Not exactly what a meal in the kingdom of God should look like, is it? Dining together was a very important symbol in ancient Israel of God's presence in gathering the faithful together in celebration. Jesus carried on this important symbolism. Several of the images he uses of the future kingdom involve banquets, people coming together in fellowship to enjoy a meal. He taught and showed in his dining with others that all should have a place at the table. He even made sure to reserve a special place at the table for those who were not ordinarily invited: the social outcasts, the poor, and the Gentiles. They would be given a place of honor at the feast. Jesus gave priority seating to those that we would identify today as the homeless, the disabled, and those on government assistance.

But the Corinthians were forgetful, like we are today. Though they had the greatest teacher, the apostle Paul, who helped them to understand Christ's teachings and how to apply them to their lives, as

soon as he left town, they messed up everything.

The Lord's Table manners are not just to show everyone that we have etiquette. They're not just to please our folks or grandparents. Christ's table manners are meant to honor Christ himself, God's most precious gift to us.

Gathering at the Lord's Table is one of the most important ways that we visibly demonstrate that we are the family of God. The table is the place where we symbolically show that we are the body of Christ. Except for special holy days, we leave Holy Communion for the end of the worship service, because the Lord's Supper is the climax of the service. After hearing the Word of God preached to us, we apply it first at the Lord's Table. And then we can apply it in the world for the coming week, or in our case, the coming month.

A very important part of the meaning of the Lord's Table is remembering. When we gather with Christ at the table, like his followers did in the upper room, we become a part of the story of his life. We remember that Christ gave us his body and blood.

Remembering is not just thinking about an event in the past. It's much more than that. An easy way to think about the word is to break it down into two parts: "re" and "member." The word re-member literally

means to “put together again.” When we intentionally remember, we are acting like a surgeon, who literally re-members the body back together again. We’re doing this not only among those who are physically present here in this chapel, but we are re-membering all our brothers and sisters in Christ throughout the world who are also commemorating this sacrament on this World Communion Sunday. And not only that. We are also re-membering those who have passed in the Lord. Remember the film clip from *Places in the Heart* that I showed last month. That Communion scene included those who had died. Have you ever been aware that when you partake of Holy Communion, you are communing with loved ones now passed on?

When we gather to share the Lord’s Supper, we’re putting back together the body of Christ. We are fashioning that body in our sharing of the meal. When we realize that we’re morphing into Christ’s body as we partake of the feast together, we can understand why Paul is so upset with the Corinthians. They were not re-membering when some were stuffing themselves and others were going hungry, when some were getting drunk and others were causing division.

Paul reminds the Corinthians that when they share the Lord’s Supper, they’re sharing the same meal that Jesus shared with the

disciples, and in sharing with one another, they're renewing their covenant with God and with each other. They're also proclaiming Christ's coming in the future, which will involve inaugurating the heavenly banquet when we will dine with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob--and we can add, Sarah, Rebekah, and Rachel.

On this day, Christians all over the world are participating in this sacred meal. Many will be participating in this meal for the first time and eagerly embracing its wondrous mystery. Many will be participating in this meal in a part of the world where it's dangerous to be a Christian. I guarantee that they're not just going through the motions. How about us? How are our Lord's Table manners? How will we re-member the body of Christ?

When we partake of Holy Communion in a few minutes, let's not just go through the motions. Let's not partake of it in an unworthy manner. Let's open ourselves to the meal's transforming power. Amen.