**10/23/22 Sermon – 1 Corinthians 10:14-22**

INTRODUCTION – LITERARY CONTEXT

When we read Paul’s first letter to the Corinthians, we’re literally reading someone else’s mail. This letter was originally addressed to a fledgling mission church, a small band of people in the ancient Mediterranean city of Corinth. No doubt, the Corinthians would have preferred that this correspondence not be broadcast to the ages, it’s pretty unflattering and divulges a number of things that they might well, with the wisdom of hindsight, wish to have kept private. Fortunately for us, however, the letter was preserved, widely circulated, and ultimately canonized as part of our New Testament. So, we are given a privileged glimpse of one particular tension-filled moment into the interior life of the Christian movement in the first-century. This morning, we’re jumping into a section of this letter where Paul is getting to the heart of the contested matter and responding to the issue of whether it is permissible to eat meat sold in the market if the meat came from an animal sacrificed to a pagan god.

Not an issue that we, here in Louisville have had much cause to think or worry about. The problems and debates of our time and culture are different. But, I still think that we have something to learn from here. You see, some of the Corinthians are attending these meals and festivities in the temples of pagan gods just as they had done before becoming Christians. It was a normal aspect of social life in their culture. But for Paul, these events, these meals are problematic not just because they are occasions for idolatry and worship of a false god, but because meals create a relation of *koinonia*, a “fellowship,” a “community,” a “partnership,” a “bond” *among* the participants and *between* the participants, and with the deity honored at the meal.

Meals, now as in ancient times and in far off places, deepen relationships. Create space for conversation, for listening, for questions and discussion. They’re a metaphor for unity, peace, love, and hospitality. And it is this message that I think God has for us today.

Let’s pray:

Lord God, you have called us into community with one another, a thinking community, a learning community, and a community seeking to practice *your* way in the world. May this time in the scripture help us to be faithful to that mission. Amen.

STORY – IMPORTANCE OF MEALS

About 5 years ago, I was able to take a small group of about a dozen teenagers to Ireland with me. It was a trip that was made possible by a large Lilly grant and one that was designed as a pilgrimage. A journey with sacred significance, not only to expose these young people to a different country and culture, but to challenge them to reflect on how things like culture, conflict, and church life shape and are shaped by worshipping communities throughout the ages. That was what I spent 18 months crafting and designing. However, some of the most memorable and impactful experiences in those 2 weeks, were not the visits to ancient, pre-Christian sites, or the peace and reconciliation workshops we participated in with former-IRA and UDA fighters turned peace-brokers, or even surfing in the North Sea with a ministry that bring Catholic and Protestant kids, socialized to see one another as different, together to have fun and learn something new. Instead, the moments that were recounted again and again as the teens returned to the States and shared their experiences with the church and with family, were the meals we shared.

Our first jetlagged meal in Dublin, bleary-eyed, with music in the background and American teens training their ears to understand the Irish accents around them. Our sandwiches on the road in the bus as we swerved around the country roads. Those same bagged lunches on a picnic bench at Glenalough Monastery, or the pizza on the tide-breaker wall on the northcoast, or the spaghetti dinner we cooked for ourselves in the small facilities of the Presbyterian seminary dorm kitchen in Belfast. It was the gathering at my parent’s house, as people perched on the garden wall and church ladies were refilling empty glasses and sneaking ‘just one more little something onto plates.’ It was the church that we were invited into after the Sunday service was finished, to share in a standing, cup of hot tea at the back of the sanctuary, as the members told us of the ancient foundations of the building visible through plexiglass on the floor. It was the 18th birthday celebrated in my grandparents 1830’s small, cramped farmhouse around a folding-leaf table, with oilcloth and the hot, solid-fuel range on a chilly Irish summer’s night, with stuffed mussels for starters and pavlova for dessert. It was Holy Communion in the ‘good room’ around the blazing fire, with odd glasses of sparkling grape juice and giant, uneven chunks of sweet, sugar glazed bread.

It was the meals we ate together that were remembered. That drew us together as a group, that established bonds between folks who had just met. It was the food, yes…but the hospitality that stood out. Meals, people gathered around a common spread, are intimate occasions. Never downplay potlucks, snacks after service, the weekly catch-up with a friend at a coffee shop, or annual family get-togethers at Thanksgiving or Christmas…for these are sacred times. We know this more now, than we did before COVID, when such a gathering was fraught with worry and postponed for another year.

LINK TO TEXT AGAIN

So when Paul advises the Corinthians, new to this Christian-thing that they must “flee” from food used in idol worship as if from a burning building, he is telling them to turn down not just a meal that happened to be located in the shrine of some human-made god, he is urging them to reject the bonds established with people and powers that run contrary to the God of Jesus. Meals create a relation of *koinonia*, that Greek word that can be translated a number of ways: as “fellowship,” “community,” or “partnership.” Paul’s argument is that each meal creates a bond *among* the participants and *between* the participants, and the deity honored at the meal. And our God, demands exclusive allegiance, and will not tolerate cultic eating that establishes a bond with any other gods or powers.

THE CHALLENGE IN THE TEXT

The Corinthians would find nothing surprising in Paul’s words. He is articulating a commonly held understanding. And his argument, regarding *konōnia*, holds up for other meals. For The Lord’s Supper in verses 16 and 17, where it says “When we drink the cup of blessing…the loaf of bread we break and eat”, *konōnia* happens at Jewish meals in conjunction with sacrifice in verse 18, and is made very clear in The Message paraphrase: “*That’s basically what happened even in old Israel—those who ate the sacrifices offered on God’s altar entered into God’s action at the altar.” Konōnia* here is understood as “enter[ing] into God’s action. How powerful is that! And so you see, meals at the table of a pagan god, is a statement about where one’s allegiance lies, about *whose action* you want to align yourself with, *whose* values.

For Paul, all the members of the community are brought together into covenant relation with Christ through eating the one bread and drinking the one cup. They become, in effect one body. Aligned in mission and purpose. The eucharistic celebration creates not only *koinōnia* with Christ, but also unity within the community. So. when we eat the bread and drink the cup together, we are bonded together in community with Christ and with one another. And diverse though we are in thought, experience, theology and one hundred other things, as we partake of this holy meal we entered together into God’s action. Drawn together around the table of the Lord in such a way that we become a covenant people, receiving the blessings of fellowship with God and sharing our lives with one another, and doing so in a way that establishes a reciprocal relationship with God and with each other.

APPLICATION – WHERE ARE WE CULTIVATING KOINŌNIA? AND WHAT DOES IT DEMAND OF US?

This is why, I believe, our denomination selected to have us focus on the sacrament of Holy Communion during this Stewardship season. Eucharist or Holy Communion, is a ‘partnership meal.’ It invokes the shared commitment we have to the values and practices, attitudes and actions of the Kingdom of God. And in receiving the elements we renew our partnership, of *konōnia* with Way of Christ. We remember, renew and reach towards a future where the hopes and dreams of the Kingdom are made manifest here and now. And so, participation in this sacred meal ought to enliven the spirit of generosity in us, the spirit of love, of hospitality, or servant-heartedness, of humility and justice. The impulse to commit one’s time, talents and resources in order that, “Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.”

Friends, it doesn’t take much insight to see that many of the struggles in this life are much too difficult to endure on alone. We need the strength of a community, and a community must endure those struggles together. This is a basic human need that often goes unfulfilled. There’s a Jewish mystic, Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel that says, “As a tree torn from the soil, as a river separated from its source, the human soul wanes when *de*tached from what is greater than itself.” Our souls wane when they lack communion. Our souls need communion with others, and with God, but even communion with God can only be fully grasped within communion with others.

CONCLUSION

I hope that you had an opportunity to watch the Weekday Reflections this past Wednesday. We have a series of four videos leading up to Stewardship Sunday. In them you will hear from some of our members talking about the folks in their lives that demonstrated generosity and shaped their understanding of giving. They’ll talk about why they give to the church and how this community seeks to be a *koinonia* community. A place of partnership, of relationship, support and action. Church, as we enter into our time of Holy Communion today, do so will humility and gratitude. Remember Christ, renew your commitments to the kin-dom way of life, and allow your imagination to reach far belong our current setting to where God may be calling you today. Amen.