

**LORD MAKE US ONE**

**I CORINTHIANS 12:12-26**

**OCTOBER 6, 2024**

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1 Corinthians 12:12-20

Unity and Diversity in the Body

12 Just as a body, though one, has many parts, but all its many parts form one body,<sup>t</sup> so it is with Christ.<sup>u</sup>  
13 For we were all baptized<sup>v</sup> by<sup>c</sup> one Spirit<sup>w</sup> so as to form one body—whether Jews or Gentiles, slave or free<sup>x</sup>—and we were all given the one Spirit to drink.<sup>y</sup> 14 Even so the body is not made up of one part but of many.<sup>z</sup>

15 Now if the foot should say, “Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body,” it would not for that reason stop being part of the body. 16 And if the ear should say, “Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body,” it would not for that reason stop being part of the body. 17 If the whole body were an eye, where would the sense of hearing be? If the whole body were an ear, where would the sense of smell be? 18 But in fact God has placed<sup>a</sup> the parts in the body, every one of them, just as he wanted them to be.<sup>b</sup> 19 If they were all one part, where would the body be? 20 As it is, there are many parts, but one body.<sup>c</sup>

There is nothing new about what we do here this morning. We have been doing this since the days of the early church. The Lord’s Supper is something we share within the Christian community of God’s people to remind us of the crucifixion and resurrection of our Lord.

What is not so new is what we call World Communion Sunday. For nearly 80 years, churches of different faith groups have joined together to share the Lord’s Supper but also to direct our attention to what Karen read for us from John’s gospel which was the Lord’s Prayer that we may be one. We have for years prayed what we call the *Lord’s Prayer*. But what we pray when we pray that prayer is the one Jesus *taught us to pray*. In the gospel of John, John shares with us the real Lord’s Prayer. It is the Lord’s Prayer for Us.

Currently, this day is commemorated by 38 different Christian traditions. These various groups each celebrate the day in their own ways and through their own traditions; but even though they’re in different settings, everyone gathers together, at least figuratively, around the Lord’s Table. Christian unity, specifically symbolized by the act of Communion, is the focal point of World Communion Sunday. This provides us with a powerful reminder that we’re one in Christ despite our differences.

According to the Presbyterian Mission Agency, the idea for World Communion Sunday was originally conceived by Dr. Hugh Thompson Kerr, pastor of Shadyside Presbyterian in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. Kerr wanted to bring various churches in the area together for a service focused on unity, and he felt that one thing that unites us all in the Christian faith is the celebration of Holy Communion. Kerr wanted the service to be a celebration of Christian unity with Communion as the primary exhibition of this united nature.

The first observance of this day took place in 1933, and three years later it was adopted as a general denominational practice by the Presbyterian Church (USA). The concept spread very slowly at the start. . . . It was during the Second World War that the spirit caught hold, because we were trying

to hold the world together. [The day] symbolized the effort to hold things together, in a spiritual sense. It emphasized that we are one in the Spirit.

Unfortunately, the need for such a day is as urgent today as it was when the idea was first conceived. We are still in the need of showing our unity with each other.

The Reverend Stephen Bauman of Christ Church in New York City says World Communion Sunday *“celebrates the astonishing diversity that exists among the Christian family surrounding the world.”* In his own community, he says over 50 different nationalities or ethnicities are represented, embodying the *“astonishing diversity”* he speaks about. The mere idea of people from so many nations coming to the Lord’s Table together at one time in one place is remarkable. It also brings to mind visions of Pentecost, where people from many nations throughout the Mediterranean gathered in Jerusalem. Together, these people heard the gospel proclaimed in their own language. As we celebrate World Communion Sunday, we are, in some small way, reenacting the power of God’s Spirit on that first Pentecost Sunday.

We have just started our Wednesday evening Bible Study entitled Acts. The subtitle is Catching Up With the Holy Spirit. When asked what we normally think about when we think of the book of Acts, most respond Pentecost. What we often forget is that Pentecost was originally, and still is, a Jewish festival. We are told in scripture that it was a celebration of the wheat festival, which is important in any society. Wheat provides the basic staple of bread, the staff of life. So, it is not surprising that the religious leaders would provide a festival and make it one of three pilgrimage festivals and so Jews traveled from all around to Jerusalem for the festival.

It was while they were there that the work of the Holy Spirit event happens. At Pentecost, the Holy Spirit directs Jesus’ followers to speak first to a representative sample of all Judaism, with its own wide variety of differences. From that diverse group the new community that will be call *“the church”* attracted a large number of people all at once.

Peter will address this group of people but the broad assortment of people and languages makes an important statement before Peter even begins to speak. Peter affirmed the good news (the Gospel) will not ultimately belong to one kind of people or one ethnicity. That sense of community composed of multiple identities will continue to grow as you read the rest of the book of Acts and the Gentiles unitewith the Church. The Spirit speaks in all languages; no one gives up who they are in to be integrated into the homogeneous church culture. Instead, the church of Jesus Christ consists of a unity that gathers differences and distinctions into a common home.

Reverend Bauman goes on to state that World Communion Sunday is *“an absolutely wonderful way to articulate a theology of grace for the world.”* God’s grace, through the church, is extended *“to people of all ages, nations and races.”* The worldwide nature of the celebration reminds us of the fact that God’s work in Jesus Christ extends beyond national boundaries and denominational lines.

However, we must confess that unity seems elusive not only across national borders but also within those boundaries. Not only in many different denominations of churches but of members within each of those groups.

The original intention of World Communion Sunday was to cross the divisions separating various Christian faith groups; but even within this and other denominations that unity is an unrealized dream.

If we return to the roots of this special day, however, we can find some measure of comfort. Back in 1933, when the day was first conceived in one lone Presbyterian church, the world was as

fractured as it had ever been. That year saw Adolf Hitler's rise and consolidation of power in Nazi Germany, and a second great war in Europe was becoming more and more inevitable. It was also the worst year of the Great Depression, with Americans and people around the world in financial despair. By 1940, when the day was approved by the National Council of Churches, the war had begun in Europe. World Wide Communion Sunday attempted to bring churches together in a service of Christian unity during an extremely turbulent time.

Today, celebrating the Lord's Supper together reminds us of this ideal of unity, despite our differences between denominations and within our own denomination. The richness of the diversity may be evident in some places but harder to spot in others. Nevertheless, it is present everywhere. Around the table on this day will be folks who disagree with one another about many things, including theological, cultural, and personal issues; but on this day, around this table, and collectively with Christians in churches throughout the world, they will be united as one. We may seem so deeply fractured, but this ideal of unity, however elusive, is still present and God is still moving in our world to make us one in Christ. In the words of Ephesians 4:4-6, this day reminds us that *"you are one body and one spirit, just as God also called you in one hope. There is one Lord, one faith, one baptism, and one God and Father of all, who is over all, through all, and in all."* This has been true during hard times in the past, is true today, and will be true tomorrow — no matter what.

We are growing near to Thanksgiving. Since I did not grow up in a large house in the physical sense, we often had what was called the *"kid's table"* and a table for the older people. Some of you, I am sure, had a similar experience where one group was separated from another. And so, in the end, even though we had gathered as family, the meal was never quite fully shared as family.

Such is the case with the Corinthian church as Paul writes to them. Though the church is considered the Body of Christ, a family united with Christ as our head, the Corinthians had instituted some practices surrounding their observance of the Lord's Supper that were more divisive than unifying. It was not unlike the family that gathers for a meal, but then does not actually share the meal together.

You see, the Corinth of the ancient world was a bustling crossroads of the major trade routes to both the East and the West. It was known as a prosperous city, and the wealthy of the city certainly flaunted their riches. As was the case all around the ancient world, there was a deep division between the rich and the poor. This problem was magnified by the fact that many rich people in ancient times prided themselves on showing hospitality to the poor, but the rich would do so in such a way to shame the poor and let them know they were inferior. For example, it was not uncommon for a rich person to have a main dining room for themselves and their closest friends, where excellent food and wine would be served, and then another room (or even sequence of rooms) with food and drink of a poorer quality for the poorer guests. And now, it seems, this practice had crept into the sharing of the Lord's Supper among Corinthian Christians.

The thing of it is, though, the Lord's Supper is supposed to be a meal that transcends all divisions and brings all Christians together as one in the Body of Christ. The problem was, the Corinthian Christians were not sharing this meal in such a way. Those with homes large enough to host gatherings of the Christian community were generally the wealthier believers, but they did not serve the meal equally to all gathered as a family should, instead they continued the secular custom of keeping the best for the rich and giving the rest to the poor. And so, this Lord's Supper, which is to serve as one of the central acts of worship uniting the body of believers, was instead a way of

solidifying the deep divisions in the community. And Paul was outraged.

A pastor was telling us about his friend Tom, a Roman Catholic priest. Even though he had an extremely busy schedule, Tom does a fascinating thing each month when he takes time to go down to the homeless shelter in his city and work in their soup kitchen.

After the homeless people have been fed, Tom invites them to join him in a service of Holy Communion and many join him to the little chapel and share the Sacrament of the Lord's Supper. They have shared soup together in the soup kitchen and then they come to share the bread and the cup together at the altar in the chapel.

One day, Tom had an unforgettable experience in the communion service. As he was moving down the altar serving communion, he came to a man kneeling there who looked like he had been out on the streets for quite some time. The man looked up at the priest and said something too soft to be heard.

*"What? Pardon me?"* Tom said.

In a louder whisper, the man said again, *"Skip me."*

*"Why?"* Tom asked.

*"Because"* the man said, *"I'm not worthy."*

Tom said: *"Neither am I."* Then Tom added: *"I'll tell you what. I'm going to serve communion to these other people. Then, I'm going to come back and serve communion to you and then I would like you to serve it to me."*

The man blinked and said to Tom: *"Father, is that legal?"*

*"Yes, it's legal; it's beautiful and that's what we are going to do!"* Tom answered. Tom went on down the altar and served all the other people kneeling there. Then he came back to the reluctant man and said: *"What's your name?"*

And the man said, *"Josh."*

Tom placed the elements of the Lord's Supper before him and said: *"Josh, here is the Body of Christ and here is the Blood of Christ given for you. Eat this and drink this in remembrance that Christ came for you and Christ died for you. Amen."*

Josh blinked back the tears in his eyes as he received Holy Communion. Then, Tom knelt and handed Josh the trays of bread and wine and said: *"Now, you serve me."*

Josh nervously took the trays and again he said: *"Father, are you sure this is legal?"*

*"Yes, it's legal. Just do it."*

Josh's eyes were darting from side to side as he looked over this shoulder and then the other, as if he expected (at any moment) the police, the FBI, the CIA, or the Pope to come rushing in and arrest him. Finally, he held the trays toward Tom and as Tom received the Sacrament Josh muttered: *"Body - Blood - for you, Hang in There!"*

Tom said later: *"Of all the communion rituals I have ever heard, I don't recall the words 'Hang in There' in any of them, but at that moment for me, Holy Communion had never been more 'Holy.'"*

This is a meal for all, even though none of us are worthy. And if, when we break the bread and drink the cup, sharing it in the same way, that declares powerfully that we are all one body. But if you divide the room, and the guests, into different groups, that makes the opposite point. When we share this meal, the *"body"* we are to recognize is both the presence of the Lord in this meal, AND the unity of the church that shares that bread. The two belong together. If we are not sharing this meal as one in Christ, then we are dishonoring Christ himself!