

Better Together: The Jesus Jersey

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I Corinthians 11:17-29

Now in the following instructions I do not commend you, because when you come together it is not for the better but for the worse. For, to begin with, when you come together as a church, I hear that there are divisions among you; and to some extent I believe it. Indeed, there have to be factions among you, for only so will it become clear who among you are genuine. 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? Should I commend you? In this matter I do not commend you!

For I received from the Lord what I also handed on to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took a loaf of bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, "This is my body that is for you. Do this in remembrance of me." In the same way he took the cup also, after supper, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me." For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes.

Whoever, therefore, eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be answerable for the body and blood of the Lord. Examine yourselves, and only then eat of the bread and drink of the cup. For all who eat and drink without discerning the body, eat and drink judgment against themselves. 1 Corinthians 11:17-29 (NRSV)

Let's pray together. *Gracious God open us up today. Open our eyes that we might see and our ears that we might hear. Open our hearts, God, that we might feel and then O Lord, open our hands that we might serve. Amen.*

A while ago I received this email: "Dear Dr. Pace. My husband and I moved away recently but I was back in Houston recently for doctors' visits. To be honest I was relieved to be away from my husband which I know is terrible. But we had a strong difference of opinion and priorities in our politics. We are both moderates so I could not understand or even bring myself to respect his choice. I began wondering and worrying about his priorities in life. I even began to have dark doubts about our future together when he did not seem to be the man I married. My heart felt as if it were breaking in tiny spreading fractures."

This is just one of many emails I've received and conversations I've had with people about difficulties with family or friends or colleagues in which the differences of opinion have been difficult to negotiate. Folks on either side of whatever the issue is are struggling with questions. "How do I deal with this because I feel strongly about what I believe and it's just interfering with the relationships I have?"

It's become commonplace now to say that we are more polarized than we've ever been. I suspect that's a bit exaggerated, I think probably 1860 would dwarf what we're talking about today. But nonetheless, many feel that way.

And what the research seems to show is it's not so much that people are more divided, it's just that the opinions they feel are stronger than they've felt before. Here are some statistics from before our last election, and I don't know what it would be now. Before our last election 40% of Americans said the opposing party was a threat to the very well-being of our country. So the feeling was so strong they felt the opposing party was leading us to actual destruction.

There are three political scientists who have done a great deal of research about this and let me read one little sentence from their report. It says, "Democrats and Republicans have long disagreed over policies but in recent years the disagreement has turned personal. In the PRRI poll more people were displeased by the thought that their child would marry someone of a different political party than of a different religion."

So clearly there are struggles within the culture. Now the church is not immune from such divisions. The church has gone through many struggles, contentions, and schisms over the years. There are now 34,000 Christian denominations or organized Christian groups. 34,000. We divide

over all sorts of things. We divide over theology, over worship style, over sacraments, over social issues – where people stand on social issues. We divide over who the pastor is, we divide over who decides who the pastor is, we divide over power, over money, over scandals, over what color the carpet is going to be. We divide over all sorts of different things over the last centuries.

Here's what I would tell you. It's not all these things, but many of these things are really important to people. These are matters of conscience, not of personal preferences where you say, "I prefer this, and you prefer that." Some of them are, in the case of worship style or color of the carpet and that sort of thing. But for many of them we feel that this is at the core, it's just hard for this so we find ourselves separated.

In the United Methodist Church we similarly are not immune. There are many Methodist denominations which were splinters off what we think of as the Methodist church. In 1844 the Methodist Episcopal Church North divided from the Methodist Episcopal Church South because one of the bishops in the Methodist Episcopal Church in the southern part of our country owned slaves. The Methodist Episcopal Church North said that they couldn't accept that. So they left, and the church was divided for almost 100 years from 1844 to 1939 when they finally came back together. Over the years since then there have been many different issues that have come up that divide the church.

Let me read to you from the 1914 Discipline – that's our list of rules in the Methodist Church. This was the ME Church South. It read, "Women may not be members of the Distinct Conference. They are not eligible to the Office of Steward..." That's what the Administrative Board was called at that time– the Board of Stewards. "...They may be superintendent of the Sunday School but not a member of the Quarterly Conference. The Discipline of our church does not recognize the employment of women as preachers with the authority to occupy the pulpit, reading the Holy Scriptures, and preaching the same as ministers of the Lord Jesus Christ. Services so rendered offend against Holy Scripture and the order of our church."

It wasn't until the mid-1950s that that changed, and women were allowed to be ordained.

In that same Book of Discipline were these words: "The ministers of our church shall be prohibited from solemnizing the rites of matrimony for divorced persons except in the case of innocent parties who have been divorced for one Scriptural cause." That didn't change until the 1960s.

And each time these issues were dealt with, they led to great tension and division and some schism – some folks left. We are in debate and have been for the last 30 years or so about same sex marriage and ordination of gay men and women. There is great tension in the Methodist Church about that issue.

Now here is ... I don't know if it's good or bad news but here's the news: It's been going on for 2000 years. This is not new, that the church has for over 2000 years been dealing with all sorts of conflicts. We're going to look at these three chapters – eleven, twelve and thirteen – and see what Paul teaches us about how to deal with those conflicts and divisions.

He begins with this statement: "To begin with, when you come together as a church, I hear that there are divisions among you; and to some extent I believe it." I would tell you that in this case, in this particular Scripture that we're looking at today, deals with division over rich and poor. We'll talk about the specifics of that in a moment.

There are all sorts of divisions described in 1 Corinthians. It begins with these words in 1 Cor. 1:11: "For it has been reported to me by Chloe's people that there are quarrels among you. My brothers and sisters, what I mean is that each of you say, 'I belong to Paul' or 'I belong to Apollos' or 'I belong to Cephas'" That's the Apostle Peter. "... or 'I belong to Christ.' Has Christ been divided? Was Paul crucified for you?" Throughout 1 Corinthians there are divisions about whether you can eat food sacrificed to idols, divisions about whether Gentiles have to become Jews in order to be Christians. There are so many divisions that rise up.

So here's what Paul says: "Indeed, there have to be factions among you, for only so will it become clear who among you is genuine." He's saying that the test of whether your faith is genuine or not is how you deal with people who disagree, how you deal with people in another faction.

You know what a litmus test is. It's where you take a little strip of litmus paper, dip it in a solution and you can tell by whether it turns pink or bluish purple whether it's acidic or alkaline. So the litmus test of whether our faith is genuine is not whether we can assent to the right set of doctrines, but rather how we deal with people with whom we disagree, with another faction.

Jesus says it in Matthew 5: "But I say to you love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you so that you may be children of your father in heaven for he makes the sun rise on the evil and the good, sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous." In other words God

doesn't treat the righteous or the unrighteous any differently. It goes on: "For if you love those who love you what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do that?"

Anybody can get along with the people they agree with. Anybody can get along with the people who cheer you on and say, "You're right! Yes, you're right!" That's easy. The world functions that way. "I'm going to love the people that I agree with. I'm going to be on their team, I'm going to be with them. I'm going to celebrate them, we're all going to be together. And the people on the other team? I'm going to put them down in every possible way I can!"

What he's saying is that the mark of whether or not our faith is genuine is how we deal with the people with whom we disagree.

So what Paul does is he uses the Lord's Supper- really their whole worship service. I'll explain that in just a moment. But he uses the Lord's Supper as a teaching tool on how to deal with these different divisions. It's sort of one example of all the divisions that have been there before and how we're to deal with that.

I want to look to see what we might learn from this supper that they have together. There are really four lessons I want us to get very quickly as we go through – four lessons from this supper.

First, he says, "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."

So there are two things that you need to understand to have that make sense to you. The first is that the way worship happened was it wasn't in buildings like this. It happened in peoples' homes. The way that the worship experience happened was they would have a meal. They'd come together and have a meal together and after the meal was finished, just like at the Passover supper with Jesus, they would take the cup and the bread and experience the sacrament of Holy Communion. But the Lord's Supper was the time when they all came together and had this meal together.

What was happening in Corinth was that the rich people were invited in to sit at the fancy tables; the triclinium was a three-sided table – and they were invited to sit there. But the poor folks would stay out in the outer room until the supper was over and then they'd come in and partake of the Sacrament. And Paul's saying, "That's horrible! You can't do that. Everybody has to eat together."

In the time of Jesus, eating together was a sign of being in close intimate relationship. You didn't eat with people you didn't love. It's not like today where I go to a restaurant and I sit down at a long table with people I don't really know next to me. It gives me the heebie-jeebies! "I don't even know you and we're eating here together." They would never have done that because that would be a sign of intimacy, of being connected.

I've told this before, but the closest analogy in our day was to get into bed with someone. You'd get in bed with someone you loved. It might be a husband, a wife, brother or sister, parent, child, good friend. You might invite them to come spend the night at your house. But that's a sign of relationship. You'd never do that with a stranger. You'd certainly not do that with an enemy. The point being that he's saying, "Look, you've got to keep eating together. You have to stay in relationship." His point is we have to prioritize our relationship. That relationships are the most important thing that drives us forward. The essence of the Christian faith is relationship. It's not right doctrine though that's important – I'm not saying it isn't. But it grows out of a relationship with Jesus.

Ethics – the way we live – is important. But it is secondary, in other words it's an outgrowth of a relationship with Jesus. When we have a relationship with Jesus then we begin to act in that ethical way, out of that relationship that we have.

The core of the faith is a relationship with God in Christ, and then Jesus himself extends it. He says, "Love the Lord with all your heart, with all your might, and with all your soul and with all your strength..." That is part of what's known as the Shema. It's from Deuteronomy and every young Jew would have known that phrase. But then Jesus adds to it this obscure phrase from Leviticus that nobody else grabbed when they would have said it. He added, "...and your neighbor as yourself." The essence of the faith is how we stay in relationship with God and how we're in relationship with one another.

I did my doctoral work with Leonard Sweet, and he's written many books. But this one is called *What Matters Most* and let me read to you what he writes. He begins the book this way, "The way to save the world is not through more rules to live by but through right relationships to live for. The soul of the universe is relationship and when the soul is sick a relationship suffers."

He goes on to tell this story about a husband and wife who came to him for marriage counseling. In that marriage counseling he said that after they bickered for a while, he said to them, “Would you rather be right, or would you rather stay together? Which matters most to you?”

You see, we often have this incessant need to be right. Bob Goth who’s written a lot of books sends out a little devotional and one day he said, “I’ve decided to stop being right and to start being Jesus.” I thought that was an interesting flick of your mind. What is going to be most important to me? And it is to build and love in those relationships.

The first thing I think we learn is to prioritize relationships. Here’s the second thing. He goes on to say this, “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?”

Here’s my question to you. When you deal with people who are wearing the other jersey – who disagree with you – do you seek to humiliate or to build up? Do you seek to build them up or put them down?

The world tells us that it’s our job to put them down, to lift up our opinion, to lift up what we think is right, and to do whatever we can to see if we can push them down as much as we possibly can. That’s what the world says. But Paul says that’s not our job. We don’t humiliate others.

In Ephesians 4 it says, “Let no evil talk come out of your mouths but only what is useful for building up as there is need, so that your words may give grace to those who hear.” We’re going to talk about this more in the weeks to come so I’m not going to spend a lot more time on that continued peace.

Then what Paul does here is just so powerful. He says, “Let me remind you what Jesus did for you. You remember at the Last Supper when they were having their meal how he gave you the bread and said, ‘This is my body.’ And how he gave you the cup and said, ‘This is the blood shed for you.’ Do you remember how we’ve heard that story? I shared it with you. He died for you.” We are united in our need for God’s grace in Jesus Christ.

If you’re going to be divided about something and you want to figure out how to work through that, you have to figure out what you’re united in. And what we’re united in is our need for God’s grace in Jesus Christ. We are united in Christ.

I've been watching the news reports of the Bahamas and how devastated it is. It's so hard to really fathom. When we had Hurricane Harvey, we had people around us who could help. Half of the city was impacted but the other half was able to step up. But with the Bahamas it's the whole island that's wrecked.

In the Bahamas they have a lot of ethnic tension and much of it is built around Haitian refugees who've come to the Bahamas to live. The political parties there are divided about how to deal with the Haitian refugee issue. We have issues here about refugees. Then there are legacy people who've lived in the Bahamas for years and they feel like their island is getting changed and they don't like it.

But when you look at the lines of people waiting for food and water it doesn't matter if they're Haitian or not, it doesn't matter what political party they're in. They're in the same spot together. They're united in their need. And we're united in our need for Christ. That's what unites us and puts us together – we wear the Jesus Jersey! We have to take off our red jersey or our blue jersey.

Between services I ran across a guy in the hallway and he said, "I'm Greek Orthodox and I'm here with my mother-in-law who's Methodist. But like you say I'm pretty much a Christian." In that case we should take off our Greek Orthodox jersey and take off your Methodist jersey, and let's put on our Jesus jersey together.

Sometimes people will say to me, "I was Presbyterian, but I converted." And I think, "You didn't convert. You changed churches but you didn't convert!" It's the same exact Jesus that ties us together. Republicans and Democrats worship the same Jesus. So we have to decide that we're going to unite in Christ and that's what binds us together.

Now there's one last point here that I want you to get. He says in verse 28: "Examine yourselves, and only then eat of the bread and drink of the cup." Examine yourselves, don't examine everybody else.

I heard of a comedian that reminded me of our household, actually reminded me of my wife to tell the truth. He said, "You know when someone's coming to the house to visit, we have to clean the house. My wife is saying, 'Clean! Clean! Some people are coming over and we have to clean. It's got to be right!' So we clean for maybe three days. Then when we go to someone else's house and we go in and the person says, 'I'm sorry, the place is a little messy' my wife

says, ‘Oh, it doesn’t matter.’” So I said, “What’s up with that? It clearly matters – why would you say that?”

Actually she’s right, she’s exactly right. We don’t clean everybody else’s house. Our job’s not to worry about their house. What matters is our house, our lives. So to examine our own lives it is incredibly liberating to give up, to let go of the need to categorize everyone you meet and decide whether they’re right or wrong. To just let that go.

It doesn’t mean you don’t stand up for what you believe, of course we do. We’re passionate about it. The only option is to not care. But our job is not to fix them. Our job is to continue to reach out and value that relationship in every way we can.

So, prioritize relationships, build others up, unite in Christ and examine yourself.

Let’s pray together. *O God, we confess that we’ve been a part of the divisions, the factions, and too often we speak ill or think ill or judge others who are different than we are in our culture. Forgive us, God, and help us to have the power of our convictions to speak about what we believe, and yet at the same time to love, care about and to build up those with whom we disagree. We pray in the name of Christ. Amen.*