

“Let’s Eat”

The Rev. S. Shane Nanney – January 22, 2023

1 Corinthians 1:10-18

Liberal and conservative congregations. Rich and poor. Traditional and contemporary. Black, white, and brown. Native-born and immigrant. Gay and straight.

Clearly, there are divisions in the church.

Not that this is new. Churches have been splitting since before the Great Schism of 1054, which led to the break in communion between the Roman Catholic Church and the Eastern Orthodox Church. Think of the Judaizers, Modalists, Arius and Alexander, Gnostics, Apollinarians, Augustine and Pelagius — want more?

A few centuries after the Schism of 1054, the Protestant Reformation led to further splintering. Today, the fracturing of the church continues.

The apostle Paul writes to the church at Corinth: “WE ARE NOT AMUSED!”

In his first letter to the Corinthians, Paul challenges Christians to maintain the unity of the church. *“NOW I APPEAL TO YOU, BROTHERS AND SISTERS, BY THE NAME OF OUR LORD JESUS CHRIST, THAT ALL OF YOU BE IN AGREEMENT AND THAT THERE BE NO DIVISIONS AMONG YOU, BUT THAT YOU BE UNITED IN THE SAME MIND AND THE SAME PURPOSE.”* (v. 10)

“BE IN AGREEMENT,” says Paul. No divisions. United in the same mind and the same purpose.

Easier said than done, don’t you think?

Paul is not naïve about the challenge of maintaining unity. For starters, he knows that there is gossip in the church, which is usually a destructive force — in the first century and today. *“FOR IT HAS BEEN REPORTED TO ME BY CHLOE’S PEOPLE THAT THERE ARE QUARRELS AMONG YOU, MY BROTHERS AND SISTERS,”* WRITES PAUL. *“WHAT I MEAN IS THAT EACH OF YOU SAYS, ‘I BELONG TO PAUL,’ OR ‘I*

“BELONG TO APOLLOS,’ OR ‘I BELONG TO CEPHAS,’ OR ‘I BELONG TO CHRIST.’” (vv. 11-12)

Although the names have changed, Christians still proclaim their loyalties to particular church leaders. They say, “I follow Rick Warren” or “I follow Pope Francis” or “I follow Shane Nanne,” and by doing so announce that they are Evangelical or Catholic or Progressive in their practice of the Christian faith.

Is this a terrible thing?

Not really. The church needs inspirational leaders, and it is natural that leaders will have followers. But at the end of the day, we should all proclaim, “*I BELONG TO CHRIST.*” Our challenge is to live a cross-shaped life, not an Evangelical- or Catholic- or Progressive-shaped life.

So how do we work to achieve unity within the Christian community? No one can wave a magic wand and make divisions between liberals, conservatives, blacks, whites, browns, gays, and straights disappear.

But we can share a meal.

In a book called *We Will Feast: Rethinking Dinner, Worship, and the Community of God*, Kendall Vanderslice suggests that divisions in Christian churches can be healed around a dinner table. To write the book, she spent a year travelling around the country visiting “dinner churches” — churches that have a shared meal at the center of their lives.

Vanderslice worked as a baker and labored in the restaurant industry, and she also studied food at Boston University and theology at Duke University. As a result, she brought expertise to her visits. At **Potluck Church** in Kentucky, she found that everybody brings something to the table. In Seattle, **Community Dinners** include meals in which feasting with friends is combined with feeding the hungry. When **Church in a Pub** offers worship in Lansing, Michigan, restaurant servers walk around taking orders while the pastor offers Communion.

She discovered that in all these congregations, relationships deepen as people eat, pray and talk together. Dinner churches are satisfying two basic human

needs: To be nourished by food and to find companionship with one another. And the result is that these churches are experiencing new forms of unity.

At the heart of our worship is a table

The unifying power of a dinner really should not surprise us. After all, Jesus established his church around a table, and asked his followers to eat together in remembrance of him. In his first letter to the Corinthians, Paul warns about divisions at the Lord's Supper, and says to members of the church, "*BECAUSE THERE IS ONE BREAD, WE WHO ARE MANY ARE ONE BODY, FOR WE ALL PARTAKE OF THE ONE BREAD.*" (10:17)

According to Paul, the one body partakes of the one bread. The body of Christ should always be united by the act of eating bread together.

Vanderslice has found this to be true in many dinner churches. While visiting these congregations over a 12-month period, she found that "each had slightly different ideas about how to read Scripture, what they believed Communion to be or how they understood God's engagement with the world." These churches were as diverse as the range of congregations across our country. But she found that "the same Holy Spirit is present and active in every single dinner-church community," helping her to see that "God is at work bringing us back to the table."

At the table, Christians bond despite their differences. "At the table," says Vanderslice, "we grasp and share the most basic need of all humanity: the need to eat and drink. We bond when we sit down at the table, claiming first and foremost that we eat and drink together in remembrance of Christ's death and resurrection." At the table, we live a cross-shaped life.

An enormous amount of good can come out of shared meals in churches, where seniors sit at tables with teenagers, blacks with whites, gays with straights, homeowners with the homeless, and immigrants with native-born Americans. Peace, unity, and reconciliation can happen around tables. Paul says in his second letter to the Corinthians, "*ALL THIS IS FROM GOD, WHO RECONCILED US TO HIMSELF THROUGH CHRIST, AND HAS GIVEN US THE MINISTRY OF RECONCILIATION.*" (5:18)

I believe that relationships are the glue that holds a church together. Such relationships often begin when a congregation eats together. Divisions appear when we talk about politics or race or sexuality, and it is hard to be united in the same mind and the same purpose. But we can be one body at the table, living a cross-shaped life.

So, let's eat together, whenever we can. Amen.