



# Sermon Growth Guide

**February 6, 2022**

**Missing Pieces - At the Table**



# Sermon Growth Guide

February 6, 2022

## Missing Pieces - At the Table

### 1 Corinthians 11:17-26

**Key Verse:** 1 Corinthians 11:23 “For I received from the Lord what I also passed on to you: the Lord Jesus, on the night he was betrayed, took bread,”

**Big Idea:** When we come to the Table of the Lord, our divisions are overcome, and we realize that all of us are members of the one Body of Christ.

---

## Foundations

In his sermon, Pastor Tim described the Lord's Supper as one of the two sacraments we celebrate. He defined a sacrament as something Jesus Himself did, initiated, and participated in, and specifically ordered us to do. St. Augustine also wrote that a sacrament is a *visible word* that displays the meaning of the Word of God that is preached.

To our shame and pain, the church is woefully divided along theological, national and ethnic lines. The Apostle Paul tells us in Ephesians that the work of Jesus Christ has destroyed the walls of hostility that divide us (Ephesians. 2:14).

In the sacrament of baptism, which reminds us that Jesus' work on the Cross cleanses us from sin, we see that we become part of a community in which all the members are joined to Christ. And, if we are joined to Christ, we are joined to each other. Each of us and all of us together constitute the Body of Christ. We have been created and redeemed to be *together*.

An early liturgy of the church says:

*As grain once scattered on the hillsides,  
Was in this broken bread made one,  
So from all lands thy Church be gathered  
Into thy kingdom by thy Son.*

This passage helps us to more fully understand what it means to live in Christian community.

## Understanding God's Word

The leadership at a large church was asked why they did not use the Words of Institution in their weekly practice of communion. The response: “We don't believe in using rote, human words.” They were quite surprised when the questioner said, “But they are the words of Jesus recorded in Scripture by the Apostle Paul.”

Sometimes we get so used to hearing things in one context that we forget their origins. In today's passage, Paul is highly critical of the status-driven practice of the Lord's Supper. In fact, he tells them that it is no supper of the Lord at all!

Verse 26 tells us that when we properly celebrate the Lord's Supper, we proclaim the death of Jesus until He comes again. Clearly, Paul thinks that the death of Jesus is critical to understanding the Lord's Supper. New Testament scholar Beverly Gaventa has written: “... the 'death of the Lord' refers to Jesus' death in all its significance as the scandalous event in which all human values and expectations are overturned.”

## Applying God's Word

Pastor Tim says that in this sacrament, God is present in a supernatural way and is “up to something.” What do you think God is up to?

## Witnessing God's Word

In what ways do you think the proper celebration of the sacrament demonstrates the good news of Jesus?

Who is at your table? We step away from Acts for the next few weeks in this series to look at three aspects of church life and what we believe about them. Today we talk about communion, the Lord's Supper, the Table. Who is **At the Table**? One of the great things about church, a **Missing Piece** when we neglect it or misuse it, is the sacrament of the Lord's Supper. Communion. Because of Christ, we all have a place at the table, if we will come.

At the table, divisions dissolve. I am honored this year to be invited by a friend to participate with the Black Prayer Network 28 days of prayer during Black History Month. They even allowed me to make one of the prayer videos. I'm also part of a group of city leaders building a network of relationships across racial lines, called Productive Dialogue. One of our elders, Stephannie Fortune, got me involved with that. I always learn things in these discussions. One of the questions that comes up—and this came up during our session Race Task Force last year—is this: When is the last time you hosted someone of another race at your dinner table? Who is at your table? I'm convicted by that question. Even though I have lots of great friendships, if I answer that question honestly, I don't know when. Now, the truth is, we have a hard time just getting our own kids around the table most days! We hardly ever host anyone that way, but still. Have you ever asked that question? Do you feel that conviction. In your inner circles, are you willing to find a way to break down division and get close to someone different from you? Who is **At the Table** with you?

This table, stretched out before us, this table is the Lord's Table. A table where divisions dissolve. It isn't my table to invite you to, or your table to allow me to sit. It isn't a table that belongs in that ultimate sense to First Pres. This table belongs to Jesus. It is His table. He decides who comes, and He has

won a place for you. One of the goals of this series is to talk about what we believe as a church about things like Scripture, Baptism and Communion. We want to root out these aching gaps we feel in our lives after two years of this global pandemic, these **Missing Pieces** God intends to fill. He intends to fill them with the gifts of his church. The table is one of the key elements there. Remember the theme verse of this series? "They devoted themselves to the **apostles' teaching** and to **fellowship**, to the **breaking of bread** and to **prayer**" (Acts 2:42). Be devoted to the breaking of bread. We hold to two sacraments in our church: Baptism and the Lord's Supper. For us, a sacrament has to be something that Jesus Himself did, initiated and participated in, and that He specifically ordered us to do. That boils down to Baptism and the Lord's Supper. Today we talk about Communion.

When we turn to 1 Corinthians, we see the young church there having a few issues. First, they were struggling to learn how to have a common meal at all. What a strange thing to learn. In the ancient world, the idea of sharing a meal with strangers was a little outlandish. People ate together according to class distinction, cultural rank, wealth and privilege and status. The idea of sharing a table with a foreigner, with a slave, with a woman... in Corinth, it wasn't so much that this was radical or strange, it was beyond comprehension. Does not compute. So when the church started to gather for meals, and for the Lord's Supper, the natural patterns set in without any active planning or intention. That's just the way it happens. We don't eat with them. They don't eat with us. Some brought lots of food and fine wine, gorging themselves, while others came with little and left empty.

So, what do we learn as Paul corrects them in these opening verses? "In the following directives I have no praise for you, for your meetings do more harm than good" (1 Corinthians 11:17).

That's hard to hear. More harm than good. That is something no church leader wants to hear. But we learn that it is possible for church to do harm. Some of you have been in church settings that left you hurt, confused, and wounded. More harm than good they did. The people were falling into the old patterns of division. Now, do you see what Paul writes here? He says you can do that at home. "Don't you have homes to eat and drink in? Or do you despise the church of God by humiliating those who have nothing? What shall I say to you? Shall I praise you? Certainly not in this matter!" (1 Corinthians 11:22). You can stay divided from others at home. Staying home is a great way to stay divided, to practice division. But if you come into the house of God, there are no partiality potlucks in here. There are no executive buffets, no platinum club platters! No privilege parfaits in this house! We all come together to one table, as equals, **At the Table**. Otherwise, and this is equally chilling, "when you come together, it is not the Lord's Supper you eat" (1 Corinthians 11:20). It is possible to do this wrong, and it is not the Lord's Supper.

How do we do it right? In our church tradition we put an emphasis on the sacraments "rightly administered." How do we do it right? "For I received from the Lord what I also passed on to you: The Lord Jesus, on the night he was betrayed, took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, 'This is my body, which is for you; do this in remembrance of me'" (1 Corinthians 11:23-24). Jesus, on the night He was betrayed, in betrayal Jesus took bread. Notice this. We don't have to be perfect to keep this feast. Our world doesn't have to be in perfect order to come to this table. Jesus gathered at the table with His betrayer, Judas, in betrayal. He took bread in the middle of the mess. And what did He do? He took bread and gave thanks. Jesus gave thanks to God. We are all around this table indebted to God for this bread

of life, equally. "Eucharist" means give thanks. We all sit under God's grace at the table. "In the same way, after supper he took the cup, saying, 'This cup is the new covenant in my blood; do this, whenever you drink it, in remembrance of me'" (1 Corinthians 11:25). Now, that is a lot to say. The cup is a new covenant with God, a new agreement for reconciliation and right relationship with God, a new promise that you can be in God's grip, under God's care, a member of God's family, within God's embrace, even when you have sinfulness in your heart and wrongdoing in your life and betrayal at your table. New Covenant. The agreement is sealed by the blood of Jesus. Jesus meant His death on the cross.

Jesus said, "This is my body. This is my blood." Did he mean it? Sure he did. But what did he mean by it? Different Christians believe different things about communion. Some call it Eucharist, or the Mass, or the Lord's Supper. Since Catholics and Orthodox make up more than half of the Christian population in the world, most of the world's Christians believe there is something supernatural happening here. Catholics believe, for example, that even though the outer characteristics of the bread remain, the inner substance of it literally mutates into the flesh of the body of Jesus. This is my body. Most Protestants believe the opposite. Jesus said, "do this in remembrance of me." It's the doing and the remembering that matter, and there is nothing supernatural in the meal. What does First Pres believe? Neither of these! We believe something different. We believe in a real spiritual presence.

We come from a tradition that says there is something more than remembrance happening here. There is more than education. God is up to something in this moment. Jesus promises to join with us in this moment. This is a sacrament. For us, we rest on the promises of Jesus to

be present with His children all down the line. “For where two or three gather in my name, there am I with them” (Matthew 18:20). That doesn’t mean He isn’t with you at other times. It doesn’t mean you can’t feel Jesus’ presence when you are alone. But Jesus promises we will know and experience His presence in a special way when we gather. Jesus is with us at the table. For us, we say the bread is still bread, but Jesus is here. The presence of Jesus is not the product of a supernatural transmutation of substances, but by a supernatural spiritual presence of Jesus, by the power of His promises kept and His Spirit at work.

Where is Jesus? Where is Jesus’ body? Not here. But is Jesus present to us? Are we present to Jesus? Yes, by the power of the Holy Spirit. Spiritual presence. A sacrament. A holy mystery. But is Jesus here? You bet. You bet He is. C. S. Lewis wrote to his friend Malcolm about the mystery of the Lord’s Supper. All the explanations, he said, leave him still lost in the mystery. He couldn’t make sense of a supernatural transmutation of substances, nor did it make sense to him that it was only a memorial exercise. There are lots of things other than bread and wine to help remember what Jesus did on the cross. But this is something to eat, to take in, to allow to enter your body and become part of you. And there is something mysteriously divine about it all. It is a place, Lewis said, where “the veil between the worlds... is nowhere else so thin and permeable to divine operation. Here a hand from the hidden country touches not only my soul but my body.” There must be something more powerful here than a psychological or educational exercise. There must be some mystery. There must be some movement of God involved in this meal. It is not a snack and a story. It is a sacrament. I resonate with C. S. Lewis; I can feel the “hand from the hidden country” reaching into my heart when I sit with

fellow believers at the table.

I said earlier in this series, “at home communion is an oxymoron.” It doesn’t make sense. That’s not exactly right. I mean, when there is sickness or imprisonment or other hardship, or a global pandemic, the church is always ready to extend the bounds, to stretch the boundaries a little and emphasize our spiritual connection. Some of you are at home right now, and I have heard from you. You so wish you could be here. It pains you to be away. But the risk is too great in your case. I got a note from a dear member who said she and her husband watch and worship with us every week. She said, “We get our Bibles open on our laps, we turn up the volume and try to sing along, we pray and we worship with you and the church every Sunday morning, in our Sunday best, and when the time comes we share a little cracker for communion. Thank you for keeping us in touch with the church through online services.” Absolutely! Nonetheless, this is a compromise. This is an accommodation for a pandemic. Communion means being together.

Communion alone is not communion. As much as you can, connect spiritually with us when we can’t be together physically. It won’t last forever. This crisis will end. At the table, we remember that. The meal we eat is an eschatological meal. It promises a healing, a coming Kingdom, a future with hope. “For whenever you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord’s death until he comes” (1 Corinthians 11:26). It is good to be together At the Table. We celebrate the destruction of division, the removal of all that separates us, the communion of being together, equal, of one accord, at the table. But even more than being together with one another at the table, even better than that you are at the table and I am at the table, even better than that is that Jesus is here. Jesus is **At the Table**.