

Text: 1 Cor. 11:17-26

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Fences and Bridges

There was a farmer who had 2 sons. The farm was very beautiful and there was a lovely stream that ran right through the middle. On one side of the stream was pasture land for their livestock. On the other side the soil was very fertile and produced abundant crops. The farmer and his sons worked together to make the land productive and they were very happy.

When the father passed away he left the pasture land to one son and the crop land to the other. Though they owned different parts of the farm, the brothers continued to work together to keep both farms running and profitable. Then one day a quarrel broke out between the brothers. The brother with the pasture believed that caring for the animals needed to take precedent over tending the fields as the animals provided meat and milk to feed both families all year around. The other brother believed that working the fields needed the most immediate attention because the planting season was very short and if the crop didn't get sewed in time they could lose an entire year's worth of produce.

The quarrel escalated to an argument and then a feud. Both brothers forbade the other from ever setting foot on their land and the two never spoke again.

Eventually they each found that things were more difficult without the help of their brother. In the winter the brother who inherited the pasture land had to buy grain to feed his animals, an expense he didn't used to have when he had access to the grains produced by the cropland.

In the spring the brother with the cropland had to buy food to eat as the last of his winter stores of produce had run out. Before the split there was always milk and meat from the livestock to provide food all year around.

As the years went by the cropland became less productive because manure from the livestock was no longer spread on the fields and the brother who owned that part of the farm became poorer. The animals in the pasture owned by that brother also grew smaller over time because they ate less grain since it now had to be purchased. The smaller livestock meant less profit for that brother. Yet the brothers refused to ever cross the stream and step on the other's land.

One day an itinerant carpenter approached one of the brothers looking for some work. The brother said he had bought the material to build a fence next to the stream across the entire length of his farm but hadn't had time to build it. He asked the carpenter if he could build the fence. The carpenter answered that he could and would start in the morning. The brother said that he had business in

town the next day that would keep him away until evening, but he would pay the carpenter when he got home.

The next evening when the brother arrived at home he went to see the fence and find the carpenter so that he could pay him for the work. He was quite surprised and angry to find that instead of a fence the carpenter had built a bridge across the stream. He saw that the carpenter was putting a few finishing touches on the far side of the bridge, on his brother's land. He walked toward the bridge to get an explanation and inform the carpenter that he wasn't paying for the bridge.

Just as he was about to the bridge he saw his brother running toward the stream. Then his brother ran across the bridge and embraced him. He said, "My brother, even after all of the terrible things I have done and said these many years you still built a bridge so we can now cross the divide that exists between us. I'm so happy to have you back my brother." The other brother was so surprised and touched by his brother's words that he also expressed his joy that the division was gone.

When the carpenter was completely finished with the bridge both brothers invited him to stay because there were still many things for him to do. The carpenter told them that he needed to move on because there were many more

bridges that needed built. He also told them that he knew that together they could build anything because the bridge that he had built made them each twice as strong as they had been before.

A bridge or a fence. They both have enormous power to change things. A fence can keep dangerous, unwanted things from hurting us. A bridge can overcome a barrier that keeps us from going to new places. Both bridges and fences can help us or hurt us. Sometimes bridges make us vulnerable to situations we can't control. When we're moving forward, fences can stop our progress. There's always a risk when we choose to build a bridge or a fence, so how do we decide what is the best way to use our energy?

Actually, I don't think that's the right question. The better thing to ask is if something is a bridge or a fence. Of course it's obvious that if it's around our yard or a horse farm it's a fence and if it goes over a river it's a bridge. But I'm sure you know that isn't what I'm talking about. I'm not pointing to infrastructure and property, rather about human relationships. What are the bridges that bring people together and the fences that keep us apart and what do they accomplish for good or ill?

In the scripture passage we read today, Paul chastises the Corinthians for the fences they were creating within the church. He explains to them that even

though they come together for worship, their practices were separating the assembly into factions and not in keeping with the ways of God. He challenges them for worshipping together and then choosing to let those with whom they worship be in want when the service is over. Paul is pointing out that it isn't the way you worship that brings you into God's presence, it's the way you interact with God's children that determines if you're in right relationship with the divine.

Then Paul relates how Jesus invited everyone to participate in the sharing of the bread and cup at the last supper. Now we can't know who was at that meal. Paul, writing about 20 years later, probably didn't know either. You see Jesus doesn't mention their names. The gospel versions indicate that the 12 were there, but none of them say it was just the 12, rather it says his disciples, which often in the gospels includes others than just the 12 we think of when we hear the term disciples. Some scholars also point out that if this was truly a Passover Seder it was the custom then, as it is now, to have all family members present. Therefore, some relatives of the disciples would most likely be eating with them.

Other scholars posit, based on John's telling, that this meal may not have been a Seder at all, since John claims it takes place on Wednesday. If that's true it wasn't even a sacred meal, just an ordinary dinner. And Jesus always seemed to

eat common meals with the folks he had come to know or those who invited him into their homes.

What really makes it difficult to know for sure is Jesus' own ambiguity. He extends the invitation to no one by name and therefore, everyone who could hear. In fact, don't we all believe we're invited to sit at that very table, even though we weren't in the room at all? No one is fenced out of the feast. The table at which they sit is used by Christ as a bridge for all to cross over to the place where he resides, the place where he shares himself with all who can hear and will come. In the upper room Jesus taught all who were there that when we share with everyone he is present.

We Disciples pride ourselves on having an open table a table that it is a bridge, but I'm not sure we're always as open as we want to believe. When I was growing up the table in my home congregation was open to all who were baptized and fenced to everyone else and in many of our churches that's the case. As I got older and closer to the time of my own baptism, I remember thinking that I shouldn't be excluded just because someone decided that a person should be baptized when they're 11 years old so I still needed to be another year older before I could take the pastor's class to prepare for baptism.

I didn't like that fence and I have yet to find any scriptural reference or denominational teaching for that rule. It was a human guideline not a divine command. Divine commandments don't separate people.

Now, looking back, I realize that the table itself became the fence that separated me from those who could receive the elements. Because they were welcome and I was not the table symbolized a difference between us. So the very thing Jesus intended as a bridge was used by the church as a fence. I don't believe that Jesus's invitation to those in the room during the last supper was intended to separate the people present.

Yet, today the table is often a fence rather than a bridge between Christians. I've had several friends and colleagues over the years who, while worshipping in non-Disciple churches, went forward during communion to challenge that church's notion of who is welcome at the table. I don't think that's the best way to make a bridge out of a fence. I usually tell them that I wouldn't do that because I don't believe that it is communion unless everyone present is invited to partake, therefore, there's no point to make by challenging it. It may be a worship ritual but one that identifies differences rather than our Christian unity. When our differences prohibit participation and are not celebrated indicates to me there is a lack of community, no communion.

A few weeks ago the Christian world celebrated World Communion Sunday, something most of us advocate. I think it's a great idea. And I look forward to the day when we truly get it right. You see, in my mind it will never truly be World Communion Sunday until everyone in every house of worship is welcome to and gladly sits with every one present at the Lord's Table. As much as we hope for it, Christian unity is still a dream. And if the community of Christ can't partake at the table of our Lord how long will it be until all the people of the world can sit peaceably at the same table? I can't predict when that day will be. I do believe that if we wish for world peace, if that's our goal, the only way we can get there is for all of us to help the carpenter tear down the fences and build bridges. Amen.