***Cannibalism and Communion***

A Sermon Preached at Lawrence Park Community Church

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1 Corinthians 11:17-34

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I am a science-book junkie, so when, a few weeks ago I read a *New York Times* review of Bill Schutt’s new book, *Cannibalism: A Perfectly Natural History*, I had to have it. And, as unappetizing as the subject was—I devoured *Cannibalism*. Fascinating stuff.

I learned, for example, that cannibalism is not uncommon in the animal kingdom. From tiny daphnia—a type of crustacean—to female praying mantises that sometimes eat the head of males during copulation; or from some species of ancient giant dinosaur to modern-day polar bears and lions—I learned that animals engage in cannibalism more often than we might think. There is even a species of shark that gives birth to live pups that survive by eating their brothers and sisters in the womb before they are born. Fascinating stuff.

Cannibalism is a subject that obviously has a dark side, too. When Columbus sailed the seven seas, he divided all the aboriginal people he met in the Caribbean Islands into two groups. The Caribs, who were said, falsely, to be cannibals; and the Arawaks, who were not. The Queen of Spain and pope gave the Spanish permission to slaughter and enslave the Cannibalistic Caribs. However, when they were all erased, many Arawak tribes were reclassified as cannibalistic just so they could be enslaved and slaughtered too. In this way the Caribbean was basically cleansed of nearly all of its aboriginal population in an orgy of greed and violence in the service of finding gold and slavery.

Perhaps the best-known case of modern day cannibalism—if you put aside the movie *Silence of the Lambs—was* the crash of a plane in 1972 that was flying a soccer team from Montevideo, Uruguay, to Santiago, Chile.

The long and short of that story is that the survivors managed to do so by eating the flesh of passengers who died in the crash. Eventually, two survivors walked out of the mountains and made it back to civilization.

What I find fascinating about this story connects it to this morning’s communion service. You see, when the Uruguayans learned from the papers what the survivors ate, a backlash of public opinion threatened to condemn the survivors. People were horrified that they ate other humans to survive.

At this point, one of the survivors, a young man studying to be a lawyer, told reporters that Jesus’ Last Supper had inspired him and the other survivors. He explained, that since Jesus had shared his body with his disciples, it was okay that they had done the same with their deceased comrades. After hearing this the public—much of it devoutly Roman Catholic—was won over. The Archbishop of Montevideo even made it official by absolving the survivors of their cannibalism.

Is that what the Lord’s Supper is? A form of cannibalism?

In fact, in his book on cannibalism, Bill Schutt actually has a whole chapter on Jesus’ Last Supper. Jesus, after all, says things like this, in John 6. “Very truly, I tell you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you.” In today’s text, from 1 Corinthians 11, Jesus says, at his last meal with his disciples, “This is my body that is foryou. Do this—that is, eat this—in remembrance of me.”

It does sound a bit like Cannibalism, doesn’t it? So, to this day, Roman Catholics have a doctrine—it is called the Doctrine of Transubstantiation—that argues that when the priest declares it so, during communion, the bread and the wine actually do, miraculously, become the very real body and blood of Jesus. In fact, this doctrine, was exactly the one that the plane crash survivors said inspired them to eat the flesh of their comrades.

Martin Luther, the Reformer who gave us the Lutheran church and Protestantism, thought this was absurd. He argued that the body and blood of Jesus were merely in and around and through and through the bread and wine, but not the same as the bread and wine—the doctrine of consubstantiation.

John Calvin, one of the spiritual fathers of the United Church, came along just after Luther, and he said “no!” Calvin believed that the Lord’s Supper reminds us that Jesus is always with us, spiritually. That’s called the doctrine of Jesus’ ubiquity. Other reformers, such as Zwingli, said even that was going too far. They argued that the Lord’s Supper was just a metaphor that reminded us of Jesus’ sacrifice.

Personally, I like Zwingli’s approach best. I think it is safe to say that Jesus was speaking metaphorically, hoping that when we celebrate the Lord’s Supper, we would think of the suffering and death he expected to endure, and leave it at that. Besides saying that the bread is his body, and the wine his blood, Jesus also says that he is the gate, the light, the way, the good shepherd—all self-evidently metaphors. Why should the wine and bread be thought of differently?

But here is the thing. There is an even deeper, and lovelier and absolutely non-cannibalistic interpretation of the Lord’s Supper that was found in today’s scripture, from 1 Corinthians. It goes like this.

Paul starts by saying, “I hear there are divisions among you.” What happened is that the rich in Corinth celebrated the Lord’s Supper early in the evening, on their own, before the poor people came to celebrate it. As Paul described it, "each of you goes ahead without waiting for anybody else." By the time the latecomers arrived at church, the early birds had finished off the wine. But it gets worse. At the Lord’s Supper in Corinth, says Paul, “One remains hungry, another gets drunk."

Imagine that here, at an All-In luncheon. The people with money get to leave the service after the sermon before the long prayer. They have a catered meal of bacon and eggs, with fried potatoes, tomato juice, and vodka—all of which was on order for breakfast the last time I went on an all-inclusive. And everyone there gets tipsy, and all the food gets eaten, and just then, after Mark’s postlude, then the rest of the church arrives, and all they get is cold toast and over-heated coffee.

What a mess! No wonder Paul says, “I hear there are divisions among you,” and “Don’t you have homes to eat and drink in?” and “you humiliate those who have nothing.” No kidding. Sometimes we romanticize the earliest church—but our church is actually a lot more civil than the Corinthian church was.

So, Paul says, “Whoever eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner,” such as he just described, “will be answerable for the body and blood of the Lord.” That is to say, you will be sinning.

And he then adds, “Examine yourselves . . . for all who eat and drink without discerning the body . . .”

Discerning what body? The flesh and blood body of Jesus? Figuring out whether we believe in transubstantiation’s real actual body and blood, or consubstantiation or ubiquity? Actually, no.

The body that Paul wants Christians to discern, to see and experience at the Lord’s Supper is not the body in bread, but the body of the church. Paul’s concern here is the divided, fractious, rich and poor, drunk and/or hungry body of people known as the church. The Lord’s Supper is supposed to be an occasion for all of us not to argue about what the bread and wine are, exactly; but the Lord’s Supper is supposed to be a time for us to experience our oneness, our unity, our care for each other over a shared meal.

People who eat together listen to each other’s stories, share a good joke or a good word. They nurture one another. People who eat together remember stories about loved ones who have passed away and grandchildren coming into their own. We bond. We listen. We share. That is why we have so many luncheons here at LPCC. And that is just the sort of *body life* Paul wants to see, and wants us to discern as a body of believers, when we eat the bread and drink the wine.

After all, at his very last supper, the day before he died on a cross, which today’s Lord’s Supper commemorates, Jesus said to his friends, at supper: “Little children, I am with you only a little longer. You will look for me;” . . . but “Where I am going, you cannot come. I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.”

Discerning the body means looking for that kind of love here, creating that love as an ongoing joy for each other here. And the point of the Lord’s Supper, today, is not what the bread and wine are, exactly, but that we examine ourselves to see if we’re still with LPCC’s one-body program.