

Eucharist. Scripture can be threatening: anyone who partakes of the Lord's Supper in an unworthy manner brings condemnation upon himself.

People have used this Scripture to deny communion to multitudes of people over the years. To those who have committed notorious sin, to those who are not yet Christian, to those with whom one disagrees – even the Roman Catholic Church uses the Scripture to deny the sacrament to non-catholics.

A few years back, Bishop Akinola – the primate of the Anglican church of Nigeria – refused to take communion alongside our own presiding Bishop, Frank Griswold – because we – the Episcopal Church – had ordained Gene Robinson, an openly gay man living with another man. For the same reason, Bishop Akinola later refused to take communion with our new presiding Bishop, Katherine Jefferts-Schori.

To Bishop Akinola, taking communion with representatives of what he considered to be a reprobate church would have violated this Scripture, damning himself and those with whom he might take communion.

Bishop Akinola missed the point of this Scripture.

Paul, who wrote the verse, was not saying your hands must be clean. Rather, Paul meant something else altogether.

Let me explain. Paul and a few others formed the Corinthian church. Once it was stable, Paul left Corinth to start churches in other towns. That was Paul's work – starting churches.

After Paul left, the Corinthians became angry with one another and divided bitterly. Some members declared themselves to be superior, more important, more spiritual.

Others – the working class people – looked at the so-called more-spiritual with disdain – do they do any real work?

These bickering Christians began to proclaim disparate allegiances:

I am for Apollos.
I am for Cephas.
I am for Paul.

Paul mocked them at the end of this litany, I am for Christ.

Later in this same letter, Paul described the institution of the Lord's Supper, On the night he was handed over to suffering and death, Our Lord Jesus Christ took bread ...

In Paul's description, the singular loaf is divided to become many parts – or as Paul says in the same verses, one of you is a hand, another a foot, one an eye and another an ear
You are many parts, but one body – one loaf.

The act of Eucharist becomes a mystical and metaphysical way of bringing these distinct parts of the body back together into one – just as the loaf is broken and given to many, the existence of the disparate parts of the loaf in each of our bodies actually unites us into the one loaf, the one body.

The Eucharist is foremost an act of Christian unity

Hence, to worship or partake in the Eucharist when bitterly divided, one from another, is the damage Paul writes about – bringing condemnation, not notorious sin or not being Roman Catholic. Dis-unity damages the sacrament.

This is why you are enjoined to go make peace with your brother or sister on your way to the altar.

Make amends ... failure to do so damages the unity.

You see the irony – Bishop Akinola, in my opinion, engaged in the very sin he sought to avoid, partaking of the Body and Blood in an unworthy manner.

In the Gospel according to John, John does not describe the institution of the Eucharist at the last supper like the other evangelists do.

Rather, Jesus arises from the table. He lays aside his garments – as symbol that he lays aside his own desires, his own way of doing things, his own longing that this cup passes from him. In place of his own garments, he dons a simple cloth and washes their feet.

Foot by dirty foot, disciple after disciple, until Jesus comes at last to Peter, who declares, "you cannot wash my feet." And Jesus responds very curtly, "If not yours, then you have no part of me." And he also says, "If I, the master, wash your feet, then you all the more should wash one another's feet."

Do you see?

John replaces the Eucharist with foot-washing to say one simple thing: your unity, your communion, depends upon washing one another's feet – meaning serve one another.

I don't think Jesus means simply do nice things for other people.

Rather, this story of passion is about crucifixion, and losing when you have the right to win, and trusting God when you are self-sufficient. You give yourself over to the brother to your right, and the sister to your left.

Mystically, and metaphysically.

For did you notice? Jesus also washed Judas' feet. With great servitude and extraordinary care, he washed sweat and caked dirt from Judas' feet, using his passion and tears.

If I washed your feet, then you ought to wash one another's.

Meaning – you don't have to win.

Perhaps now you see – the Eucharist is about role reversal, and mystical unity, and literal unity.

You are not who you think you are – the Corinthians were not who they thought they were. Paul told them plainly, you who think you are spiritual are not, you who think you are great, are not. It is the weak among you who is strong, and the more base who is spiritual.

Bishop Akinola should have taken the blessed and sacred bread and turned to Bishops Griswold and Jefforts-Schori, each in due course, bent to his knees, and said simply, "The Body of Christ. The Bread of heaven."

And so should we.