

[\[No Time Branches video\]](#)

How many of you have ever been nervous to join something new because you just aren't sure who else is going to be there? There's the obvious new people anxiety we all feel to some degree, but there's a deeper fear too - a fear of being with people who are different from us. It's tough to be around people who don't share our views on life, and when you join a new circle, a new group, you just don't know who you're going to get.

[Us vs Them Canyon] Our culture doesn't help - we live in a world of increasing differences. A culture of polarization. Left and right. Democrat and Republican. Fox News vs. CNN. Batman vs. Superman. When a divisive, complicate issue arises - like the recent conflict between Israel and Gaza or Michael Brown's shooting in Ferguson, the news is increasingly polarized. If you collect 20 news stories, you can sort them into two piles, two opinions, two viewpoints. And if the issue is divisive enough, you'd almost think you're looking at two completely separate events.

We're still about a year away from the next presidential election, but that means any time now, primaries and commercials and all that's going to kick back into high gear. And we all know it's stupid. We're all tired of the constant arguing and mud-slinging and the ever-deepening feeling that no one is actually listening to anyone else.

But we're not sure what to do about it. How do we convince them that we're right?

Because that's the goal at the bottom of our longing, right? That if only they could see the world like *we* do, if only we could somehow effectively communicate *our* perspective, then they'd agree with us. We'd be done with these pesky divisions.

So what do we do? We talk louder. We reemphasize our points.

And yet it still doesn't work. The differences persist. Both sides get louder, angrier, tenser.

This morning, I'd like to call a Time Out and suggest we're going about this all wrong. That rather than build defenses and hone weapons and entrench positions, we'd do better to use our energies to build bridges, to create conversations and to listen.

Because here's a secret neither side wants to acknowledge: we need the differences. We need each other. The differences actually make us better, stronger and smarter. The very *worst* thing we can do for ourselves, for our *souls*, is to wall ourselves off with people who only think like us. Good, strong, healthy spirituality, vibrant personhood, is found mostly in joining with people not like us and allowing the relationship that flourishes between us to change and shape us both.

[Us vs. Them Circles] That's not how we approach those who're different from us, is it? Mostly, our groups, the circles in which we run, reinforce the positions we hold, the culture we value, the behaviors we endorse. This is "birds of a feather" thinking - it's not breaking news to say we surround ourselves with people who think like us and who reinforce the assumption that I'm smart/right/beautiful/intelligent/moral/good/whatever.

And affirmation is good - who would argue with that? But we can also recognize that when our circles are full only of people who already agree with us, those circles only reinforce our judgments of other

people. When everyone only agrees with us, we end up in an echo chamber, where the same idea just gets bounced back and forth until it's so loud it drowns out everything else.

When our circles are all the same, they subtly reinforce the idea that *we* have nothing to learn from *them*. That they're not just wrong, but stupid, unworthy of our attention.

[Side by Side Us/Them Circle] If we want to grow, to find the true power of our circles, these relationships that foster our growth spiritually and personally, our circles must include those who're different from us. People who make us uncomfortable, who look different from us.

If we don't, our lives become toxic. Our spirituality becomes poisoned.

That's a bold claim, but it should establish the stakes for us pretty clearly: if our circles don't include people who aren't like us, they're bad.

Obviously since we're in the midst of launching a new Small Group experience called Branches,

[Scripture Slide] We see this in 1 Corinthians, a letter written to one of the first churches founded in the wake of Jesus' resurrection. If you have a Bible, turn with me to 1 Corinthians 11. If you grabbed one of our bibles off the rack on the way in, or out of the pew in front of you, you can find 1 Corinthians 11 on page XXX. And if you don't own a bible, keep that as a gift from us.

Now, as you're turning to 1 Corinthians 11, remember what we learned last week: what we call the Corinthian church wasn't one big gathering like this here, but several small house churches. Last week we spent some time exploring *why* circles are so important to our spiritual lives, why we need to be in circles really to thrive.

But even last week we got hints of what we're investigating today: that circles tend toward isolation and exclusion. The Corinthians had become divided among their churches. Their circles had started choosing sides - some sided with Paul, the author of the letter and founder of the church in Corinth. Some were siding with Apollos, one of Paul's team, who worked there after Paul left. Others were siding with Peter, one of Jesus' original 12 followers, and still others were acting all spiritual and claiming they only followed Jesus himself.

[Let's illustrate with the Circles graphic how they all ended up with different 'mascots'] You can imagine how the divisions worked, right? With each group gradually coming to prefer one leader's habits, teachings and idiosyncrasies. Before too long, you've got your Team Pauls and Team Apolloses and Team Peters and Team Jesus camps.

And some of us might say, Well so what? Let the people who like Paul better go over there and the Apollos people over there and the Peter people over there and so on. Who cares if birds of a feather flock together? Let 'em flock!

But there's a problem: if you're a person who divides, you're *always* going to divide. Once your group has separated, you're going to create a smaller group inside that group. And that's exactly what was happening in these small groups, these house churches, these Corinthian circles. What we see in 1 Corinthians 11 is that the divisions among the Corinthians weren't limited to lines being drawn between the groups - they were also being drawn within the groups.

And worst of all, it was happening in the context of worship. These house churches met for worship that included prayer, singing, teaching and stuff like we do, but it also included a meal. In Greek culture, you never had a bunch of people over without feeding them, so their house church worship included a meal, and during the meal, they'd all celebrate communion.

But apparently, according to Paul's words to them, the way they were worshipping together was toxic. It wasn't celebrating unity, but reinforcing divisions. Let's read together, beginning in verse 17 of chapter 11:

In the following instructions, I cannot praise you. For it sounds as if more harm than good is done when you meet together. First, I hear that there are divisions among you when you meet as a church, and to some extent I believe it. (Not just between the groups, but when they meet in their circles) But, of course, there must be divisions among you so that you who have God's approval will be recognized! (Here Paul is dripping sarcasm: the divisions are in some way based in who has God's approval and who doesn't. Isn't that the way all our divisions work? Obviously MY side is right, and therefore God likes us more. Paul is not-so-subtly chastising that kind of thinking.

So what is the specific problem in Corinth? What kinds of lines are they drawing? Well it has to do with how they practice communion:

When you meet together, you are not really interested in the Lord's Supper. For some of you hurry to eat your own meal without sharing with others. As a result, some go hungry while others get drunk. What? Don't you have your own homes for eating and drinking? Or do you really want to disgrace God's church and shame the poor? What am I supposed to say? Do you want me to praise you? Well, I certainly will not praise you for this!

For I pass on to you what I received from the Lord himself. On the night when he was betrayed, the Lord Jesus took some bread and gave thanks to God for it. Then he broke it in pieces and said, "This is my body, which is given for you. Do this to remember me." In the same way, he took the cup of wine after supper, saying, "This cup is the new covenant between God and his people—an agreement confirmed with my blood. Do this to remember me as often as you drink it." For every time you eat this bread and drink this cup, you are announcing the Lord's death until he comes again.

So anyone who eats this bread or drinks this cup of the Lord unworthily is guilty of sinning against the body and blood of the Lord. That is why you should examine yourself before eating the bread and drinking the cup. For if you eat the bread or drink the cup without honoring the body of Christ, you are eating and drinking God's judgment upon yourself. That is why many of you are weak and sick and some have even died. -- 1 Corinthians 11:17-30

Obviously the central conflict here has to do with how they're celebrating communion, which Paul calls the Lord's Supper.

Look again at how Paul describes them:

When you meet together, you are not really interested in the Lord's Supper. For some of you hurry to eat your own meal without sharing with others. As a result, some go hungry while others get drunk. What? Don't you have your own homes for eating and drinking? Or do you really want to disgrace God's

church and shame the poor? What am I supposed to say? Do you want me to praise you? Well, I certainly will not praise you for this!

In the house churches, some of the members are showing up before the rest can get there. And they're beginning the feast without them. So that by the time they do show up, some of the early-feasters are already drunk.

Paul even gives us a hint that the division in this particular case is primarily economic. He specifically chastises them for "shaming the poor", which makes sense: in an economy like ancient Corinth had, the wealthy would have the privilege of arriving early and feasting longer. The poor - many probably slaves - would have to show up as they could, which would obviously be late. The poor would also contribute far less to the meals, and would be used to going hungry while their richer brothers and sisters feasted.

A poor person in Corinth never got to feast. That was a privilege of the rich. So what was happening in their house church worship wasn't particularly surprising - that's just how the world worked.

And for Paul, that was exactly the problem: the Corinthian churches weren't supposed to look like the world. They're supposed to look like God's kingdom. That's why for Paul, what the Corinthians were doing wasn't actually worship. Their Supper isn't the Lord's Supper, it's just another Corinthian feast.

That's a huge observation: how the Corinthians were feasting was actually *failing* to practice Communion. Paul is telling them that the way they're taking the bread and wine is actually negating the ritual. That whatever they're doing, it's not really communion. It's just bread and wine.

Why? It's inherent in the word: *communion* is all about *community*. It's about binding us together. The communion table represents Jesus' death and resurrection. The Christian worship space is meant to be a place that erases all the divisions between humanity. In here, we're not male or female. Rich or poor. Gay or straight. Black or white or Asian or Indian or anything else. Native or immigrant.

No matter what our earthly kingdoms, our cultural identities, we have a new king, a new culture, and it's found in Jesus, not in anyone or anything else.

[Bring back Us vs. Them Circles] And yet the way the Corinthians were practicing their Communion reinforced the divisions of the world around them. And if we're not careful, that's what our circles can do too. We naturally gravitate toward people who think like us, who make the same assumptions about the world, who won't challenge us.

Of course we do. That's obviously much easier, much less intimidating, than choosing to be in a circle with people who are different. Who will challenge how we see the world.

Those persons are vital to our spiritual growth (and if you've ever had one of those friends, you know what I mean). I went to college at a small, private Christian school. All of my friends were Christians, which pretty much mirrored my time in high school as a church kid.

But I attended the University of Missouri for graduate school. I was still studying religion and Christianity, but this time I was studying alongside fellow students who weren't Christian. Many were atheists or agnostic, some were pursuing Eastern religions like Hinduism or Buddhism.

Over my time at Mizzou, I became friends with many people who didn't see the world like I did. People who believed very differently about God. I have a good friend who's atheist, who teaches religion in Ireland now. Another who's finishing his PhD in Hinduism at the University of Texas. Another who's a Catholic priest. These are friends with whom I can and do have frank, open conversations about anything - politics, religion, culture. We laugh and joke together, see movies together (on the rare occasions we're together these days), but also explore those delicate topics.

And because we have a foundation of friendship, I learn from them and they learn from me. Each of those friends has made me a better follower of Jesus. If you had told me when I was in high school that a Catholic priest would teach me a lot about what it means to follow Jesus, I would've told you, But I'm not Catholic!

Or that an atheist could help me better understand what religion is, how it works in the brain, and what that does or doesn't tell us about God, I would've laughed and said, How can an atheist teach me anything about God?

And yet the truth of my life has indicated otherwise. These friends, who are so different from me, who don't see the world the same way I do, have taught me much about God, about myself, about what it means for me to follow God.

This is the importance of having diverse circles. Circles that aren't just people who agree with you. We need those Others to grow, to become more whole.

[Us/Them Mixed Circle again] Our circles should reinforce the radical unity we have in Jesus. Our worship should break down barriers we bring in with us from the world, barriers of economic status, race, orientation, political positions, even barriers of nationality, language, gender - anything we use to divide ourselves in the world, Jesus says, You all have the same need of my cross. When you come together, you celebrate your common need. Your common rescue. There's no black or white at the foot of the cross. No male or female at the foot of the cross. No republican or democrat. No gay or straight. No native-born or immigrant. No rich or poor.

Everyone is a sinner in need of a savior. You're all dying, in need of a doctor. And *that's* what your worship should celebrate. When you gather at the Lord's Supper, at the communion meal, it should be to remember your common need, your common mission.

Look at how Paul closes this bit of advice to the Corinthians:

But if we would examine ourselves, we would not be judged by God in this way. The word translated "examine" there is actually the same word he uses for "judged by God"... it's a Greek word that literally means 'to divide' - which is what judging is, right? Dividing one thing from another? Paul is essentially saying, Quit making divisions *out there*, when you worship. Examine yourself. Judge yourself. Because God certainly will. Paul goes on:

Yet when we are judged by the Lord, we are being disciplined so that we will not be condemned along with the world. So, my dear brothers and sisters, when you gather for the Lord's Supper, wait for each other. If you are really hungry, eat at home so you won't bring judgment upon yourselves when you meet together. -- 1 Corinthians 11:31-34

Judge yourself. Investigate what your worship looks like. How are you approaching God's Table? What do your circles look like? Is this about unity or division?

And Paul's advice is "wait for each other". That's what the Corinthians needed. Don't rush to feast. Wait for the poor.

Waiting isn't our problem - we're not starting the worship so one group can sing and pray together before another group gets here. If Paul were writing 1 Beavercreek, what would his advice be to us? When he sees our tendency toward sameness, our inclination to circle up with people who're the same as us, what would he say?

Maybe he would say, Trust each other. Maybe he would say, Take a risk.

[Us/Them Mixed Circle Again] Choose to make a circle with people you don't know as well. Choose to cross political lines. Religious or denominational lines. Choose to circle up with people who don't look like you. Take a risk on people who aren't in the same socio-economic class as you. Take a risk on people who aren't in the same life station as you - older, younger, retired, college, kids, no kids, whatever. Take a risk.

Take a risk and find out what God wants to teach you through people who are different from you. Find out how much bigger your picture of God can become when you allow your circles to expand a bit.

Don't let your circles divide and reinforce divisions. Don't let your social circles become echo chambers. We need each other. We need our differences.

So when you sign up for Branches, expect to be in groups with people who are different from you. Expect to be challenged, and to challenge. It's good. It's necessary. It's what God intended.

Communion Set-Up

[Communion Slide] Paul saw the communion table as the place where the Corinthians struggled to live out the truth of their worship. Rather than be a symbol of their shared humanity, it was a symbol of their divisions. And for Paul, that meant it wasn't Communion at all.

So today, we approach the Communion Table. We have the opportunity to imitate the Corinthians, or to heed Paul's advice. Will this table be a symbol of our unity, our commitment to be unified in Jesus no matter what else divides us, or will it represent our broken humanity?

This Table is meant to be a picture of the first communion, the last meal Jesus shared with his followers before he died. During that meal, he broke a loaf of bread and gave it to them. He told them the bread represented his body, broken for their sin. So we take a wafer here that represents our brokenness. Our sinfulness. Our divided, divisive natures.

Later in the meal, Jesus passed around a cup of wine that he said represented his blood, poured out to initiate a new relationship between God and his people. So we dip our wafers in grape juice to symbolize our new relationship with God and with each other, a new unity made possible through Jesus' death and resurrection.

You don't have to be a member of Beavercreek Nazarene to receive this communion meal. If you're willing to take a risk, to connect to people who aren't like you, then you're welcome to come forward and receive Jesus' meal.

I'm going to pray, and then as you are ready, please come forward.