

The following sermon was delivered to members of Allison Creek and Liberty Hill AMEZ, New Home AMEZ, and Union Baptist Churches. These four churches came together this Maundy Thursday due to a common history contained in a slave graveyard on Allison Creek's property.

We are going to be reading I Corinthians 11:17-34. This text is familiar to folks in Allison Creek Church because every time we serve communion we quote a portion of these words. These words are written by Paul because he is disgusted with the way that the Christians in the town of Corinth were observing the Lord's Supper.

It was the practice in the society for the dinner host to invite his most honored guests to sit next to him in a raised table. The favored guests would be served the best food and the best wine. Those that were poor would stand or sit around the edges. Getting your guests drunk was a way to show off your great wine cellar.

Let us listen to what Paul says to the Corinthians about the way they are acting and should be acting.

Read I Corinthians 11: 17-34

I came to know Jesus Christ as my Lord and Savior through the Southern Presbyterian Church in the United States, otherwise known as the PCUS. My parents took me to the Trinity Presbyterian Church in Columbia, SC when that church was in its infancy. We would sit on cold, hard, red chairs in a room with no carpet and listen to the minister tell us about the good news of God's love to us through Christ. It was there I learned the stories of the faith in Sunday School and later in youth group. Yes, the Southern Presbyterian Church or the PCUS is where I became a Christian.

Let me tell you how the Southern Presbyterian Church or PCUS began. It began in December, 1861. A group of Southern Presbyterian pastors gathered at the First Presbyterian Church of Augusta, GA to split off from the Northern Presbyterian Church and form the Presbyterian Church of the Confederate States of America.

This group was led by a prominent Southern pastor named James Henry Thornwell. There is a Home for Children in Clinton, SC that bears his name whom our church supports through our presbytery givings.

Thornwell wrote the document which became the basis for the beginning of the Presbyterian Church (US). Thornwell wrote these words:

“We stand exactly where the Church of God has always stood from Abraham to Moses, from Moses to Christ, from Christ to the reformers, and from the reformers to ourselves. We stand upon the foundation of the prophets and apostles. Jesus Christ himself being the chief cornerstone.

...We utterly refuse to break our communion with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, with Moses, David and Isaiah, with apostles, prophets, and martyrs, with all who have gone to glory from slaveholding countries and from a slaveholding church.

...We are profoundly persuaded that the African race in the midst of us can never be elevated in the scale of being. As long as that race, in its comparative degradation, coexists, side by side with the white, bondage is its normal condition.

Indeed, the first organization of the church as a visible society, separate and distinct from the unbelieving world, was inaugurated in the family of a slaveholder. Among the very first persons to whom the seal of circumcision was affixed were the slaves of the father of the faithful, some born in his house and others bought with his money.

God sanctions slavery in the first table of the Decalogue, and Moses treats slavery as an institution to be regulated, not abolished; legitimated and not condemned.”

Thornwell also says in this organizing document that anyone who thinks that slavery is a sin is trying to make the Scriptures fit their belief rather than properly interpreting Scripture.

My church, the place where I became a Christian, was founded on the defense of slavery.

Almost 100 years later, in 1954, the Southern Presbyterians gathered in Montreat, NC for their annual conference or General Assembly. Back there on the wall you will see a picture of the delegates to that General Assembly including a member of this congregation. That General Assembly passed a resolution stating that the Southern Presbyterian Church (US) was no longer a segregated church. The national body passed a resolution stating that white people and black people could worship together in Southern Presbyterian Churches.

When the governing body or Session of Allison Creek Presbyterian received word of this resolution, the Session called a meeting. Here is what the minutes say occurred at the Session meeting on September 19, 1954.

“After a short discussion, the Session voted unanimously in favor of, and declared Allison Creek Presbyterian Church a segregated Church. The Session also unanimously declared that it was opposed to the proposed reunion of the Southern and Northern Presbyterian Church. It was decided that the resolution be read from the pulpit. The meeting was closed with prayer.”

Like I said, I am a Southern boy. I grew up in the fields of Richland County near Columbia on a dairy farm. I milked the cows on the farm that my great-grandfather started and my grandfather ran and then my dad. My grandparents were not members of Allison Creek but I knew them well enough to know that they would have supported the decision to be a segregated congregation. Intermingling of races was something that my ancestors thought dangerous.

I am product of the south and am a product of slaveholding ancestors. Our history is what it is.

But our future can be something quite different. One of the preschoolers in our church asked her mom this past Sunday after church, “Why do we not have any black people in our church?” Wisdom from the mouth of a 5 year old.

If we read Paul’s letters to the Corinthian Christians and we read the history of the Presbyterian Church we know that the communion table has been used to welcome some people and push others away. But that does not have to be our future. For if listen to the words of Christ that Paul quotes, this is a table where we are all affirmed as being a part of one body, one faith, with one baptism.

Tonight is a demonstration of something much different than our history. Tonight is a demonstration of something which looks quite different than our congregations on Sunday morning.

Why are we here? Why are we here in worship tonight? I think we are here because we are yearning for a different world than the world we see around us. We see a world where people see a stranger as a threat rather than a potential friend. We see a world where young black youths beat up a young man because he looks gay.

We see a world where the white teenagers all sit together in one area of the school cafeteria and the black students sit at another place and the Latino students sit at another. We see a world where there are good neighborhoods where you want to live and poor neighborhoods that you want to avoid.

But tonight we all give witness to a different world. A world which is based on Christ’s witness.

A world where all are welcome and where all are blessed.

A world where there is one body, one faith, one baptism.

Tonight this is a table where everyone is welcome. AMEN.

-“A Southern Christian View of America,” from the *Annals of America 1858 – 1865: The Crisis of the Union* and found at
<http://teachingamericanhistory.org/library/index.asp?document=112>

-Text: I Corinthians 11:17-34

-Given: April 21, 2011 at Maundy Thursday service with Union Baptist, Liberty Hill AMEZ, New Home AMEZ, and Allison Creek Presbyterian