

Ekklesia

By Pastor Greg
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1 Corinthians 11:17-22

Bunkertown COB

Sujata longs to be touched; longs to be held. But she is forced to sleep in a room apart from the rest. Oh sure, she has long black hair like the other girls. Like the others, she awakes with a thirst and a hunger, yet she is forced to wait for whatever scraps might be left once the rest have their fill. Even then, she cannot eat with them, drink with them, or set with them. And just what is wrong with Sujata? Her crime is that she was born to the wrong parents. She is the orphan of an "Untouchable"

In the Hindu Caste system, there are over 160 million people living in India just like Sujata. They have been born into the lowest class; the "Dalits". Unlike America, where a person might work themselves out of a lower class, these Dalits bear that label the rest of their lives. For the rest of their life they may not eat with people of a higher caste, they may not drink from the same well, they may not attend the same temple, and they may not wear their shoes in the presence of an Upper Caste individual. But most of all, they may not be touched. Touch a Dalit and you become defiled. This is why in India today a Dalit fears for their life. They run the risk of being publically humiliated, beaten, raped, and paraded naked through the streets. Even the local police simply watch and laugh. These are your outcasts; your dregs of society in the Hindu culture.

Can you image living like this? Where might this person find joy? Where might they find a place that they belong? Tossed away or caste away by their society, will this person ever find hope or love? Probably not, unless, of course, a local Christian assembly, who is truly obedient to the teachings of Jesus, reaches out to them and makes them a part of the *Ekklesia*; the Body of Christ.

I wonder if it was a person like this Jesus had in mind when he told the parable about the Great Banquet feast. *"The servant returned and told his master what they had said. His master was furious and said, 'Go quickly into the streets and alleys of the town and invite the poor, the crippled, the blind, and the lame.'*"¹ (Luke 14:21)

¹Tyndale House Publishers. (2004). *Holy Bible : New Living Translation*. Wheaton, Ill.: Tyndale House Publishers.

Picture, if you can, young Sujata as she is brought into this family of believers. She is loved, not abused. She is welcomed with open arms, not thrust aside. She is treated with honor and dignity, not despised and rejected. Picture, if you can, her first meal with the Body of Christ; this *Ekklesia*. Bread is shared, cups are passed. She sets at a table with the rest of these Christians who passionately follow the teachings of Jesus. She is embraced. At this Agape meal, this “Love Feast”, she sets in her seat while these people, who are unlike any she has ever encountered, kneel before her, remove her shoes, and touch her feet; this girl who society has called untouchable. To her, this “Love Feast” is unlike anything she has ever imagined.

For those people who have been cast aside by our society, the Body of Christ is unlike anything they have ever imagined. What society would throw away, the *Ekklesia* treat as valuable. What society finds repulsive, the local assembly of Christians embrace with loving arms. And nothing demonstrates this so completely as the Agape Meal; the Love Feast. It is a time when all of us come together united because of the sacrificial death of Jesus, because His blood paid the penalty of our sin, and because the Holy Spirit shows no bias. It is a time when the barriers of race, gender, social status, Spiritual Gifts, and most of all Spiritual Maturity are laid aside. In God’s kingdom, all are welcome at His table regardless of where they live, what they look like, their social status, their gender, how long they have been a Christian, or even what they do for His kingdom. The *Ekklesia*, this local assembly of Christians, is unlike anything else seen on earth. At least that’s the way it should be.

As we’ve looked deep inside the walls of the Corinthian Church we’ve seen spiritual smugness; an attitude of indifference and superiority. We’ve seen the divisions and schisms that are tearing this church apart. Although they were called a church they did not resemble the *Ecclesia*; a local assembly of Christians who passionately followed the teachings of Jesus. There was no unity. There were no arms opened to those who were different. As a matter of fact, they separated and segregated themselves even during the “Agape Meal”. This news reaches the Apostle Paul, and he is furious (**Read 1 Corinthians 11:17-22**).

In this culturally diverse church there was segregation. Not only were they divided over whose teaching to follow but they were also divided over culture issues

as well. It seems the wealthy could care less about the poor. They would bring their own food to this Agape Meal and hoard it all for themselves, while the poor had nothing. If you read through this portion of 1 Corinthians you'll see them divided over Gender, over Spiritual Maturity, over Marital Status, over Spiritual Gifts. It seemed nothing was safe. Oh, they may have been called a church, but I would not call them Ekklesia. They certainly were not the body of Christ, for in their divisive actions Jesus could not be found.

I believe Paul was sensitive to this because at one time he knew all about separation and segregation. As a Pharisee, he spent his life drawing away from the unrighteous and unrepentant. But once he came to Christ, Paul knew that the barriers man had put in place, God was tearing down through His Son Jesus. This is why he was quite upset with the Corinthian Church. They were supposed to be the assembly where the dregs of society and the elite in society could live united around Jesus; where the words "They" and "Them" have no meaning. Paul eagerly desired that these Christians might be united as the Body of Christ. Read Paul's passionate argument about what it means to be the *Ekklesia* found in **Ephesians 2:11-22**.

It seems the church has found more ways to divide than to unite. The words "them" and "they" are heard far too frequently. These words draw lines of separation and segregation; lines that divide between not only race, but gender, wealth, age, worship preference, and Spiritual gifts. And what has me concerned is that while a church spends time dividing, the outcasts, the people our society throw away (People like Sujata) are left to wonder what it's like to be loved, to be embraced, to be accepted, to be touched.

This is a difficult task; to keep ourselves from falling in to the same trap that ensnared the Corinthian Church. It seems we still tend to follow our natural human tendencies, and associate with those most like ourselves. This is why we need reminders. We need opportunities to take our pulse from time to time and see just what things we have left divide us; the things that keep us from being the Body of Christ; His Ekklesia. What better way than to gather for our own "Agape Meal"; to kneel before someone and demonstrate with our hands that although our society calls you an outcast, in our eyes you are a part of this family; this Body of Christ.