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Hamilton Mennonite Church

October 1 – World Communion, 2017

**Communion & Calling**

Mark 6:32-44; Luke 24:13-35; Isaiah 25:6-10a

Five years ago in May, I celebrated communion in Bethlehem, in an Orthodox church with my Palestinian host family for the Yella learning trip. Although I didn’t understand all of the rituals that were happening or any of the Arabic being spoken, during communion I understood that God’s grace overflows in abundance. The bread of life just kept coming.

Our host gave us bread. Then the woman sitting beside us gave us bread. A woman walked over to us from another pew and gave us some of her share of bread. And after that there were the bowls of bread that were passed around and around the huge sanctuary. Every time we held up our bread as if to say – “Thanks, I already got some”, it seemed that this didn’t matter. People just kept sharing the grace of God with us until we couldn’t possibly be hungry anymore. They didn’t know anything about me, but they made sure I was fed at Jesus’ table.

This June, at Silver Lake, it was Pentecost Sunday, one of our traditional days on which to celebrate Communion as a congregation. As a Pastoral Care Team, we have had numerous conversations about communion in the past couple of years and we had already decided to expand the conversation, as we’re doing in these 3 weeks, and so they encouraged me to be creative with our communion celebration at camp.

Knowing that worship that day is usually planned with particular attention to the large number of kids present, the deacons told me to go ahead and plan something inclusive and inter-generational. And so I did.

I talked about how communion is one of the things we do as a church to remember all that Jesus is to us and all that Jesus has done for us, and that on Pentecost we are thankful that Jesus sent us the Spirit to be with us always.

I talked about symbols, and that in communion, we usually share some bread and grape juice as symbols of bigger things, symbols of Jesus being with his disciples, and Jesus giving up his whole life for the whole world, and his life reaching out to everybody.

I explained that at church, communion mostly happens one particular way, with a little variation, but that since we were at camp, we were going to do something a little different, but that it would still be a symbol of Jesus being with us, and giving his life for us, and reaching his life out to the whole world.

And then I spread out the picnic blanket, and opened my basket, to show what Jesus was serving at this picnic. I brought out crackers, grapes, raisins, marshmallows, and refreshing water. If you want to read the liturgy, you can ask me later.

The best moment of our meal together was after we had prayed, and it seemed like I was about to tell everyone to come help themselves, but I still had a couple of words to say, and the kids, who were sitting right around me in the front row of chairs around the fireplace, were literally off their seats in anticipation. They were just leaning in for this meal that was about remembering Jesus. And about marshmallows, and I get that. But when I finally released them and they dove onto the picnic blanket, I thought – oh, this is how hungry we should all be to participate in Jesus’ life, and even in his death.

These are some of my experiences with the Lord’s Supper that have been causing me to… well, maybe not to entirely change what I believe but certainly to believe various different things at the same time.

Last Sunday I pulled a lot from the Anabaptist history and theology playbook, and I find it compelling for communion to be a ritual in which Jesus calls us back to the covenant we make in baptism. Somehow this rich practice can demand much of us even as it offers us so much grace. In one conversation, Jesus says to 2 disciples: “Are you able to drink the cup that I drink?” and in another moment, he says to them all, “Drink this, this covenant is for forgiveness of sins”.

While focusing on youth and young adult ministry, and thinking of teens who weren’t yet allowed to come to the table, it seemed all right to find oneself hungry in anticipation of making a faith commitment. There is much in church that we all participate in, so is there not value in some mystery that one must consider seriously and wait before being part of. We are in a culture of instant gratification, after all, what is our counter-culture practice in the face of that?

Some who fear the disappearance of the younger demographic in the church might think that the church needs to make participation as easy as possible. But young adults, and certainly the millennial generation, are seeking meaning, and to be part of something that matters. It’s not right to assume that less demanding is always more appealing. Many young adults are saying – even with the wordless action of leaving the church – tell me that you need what I have to give. Demand of me: “You give them something to eat”, and see what I could accomplish.

So all of this I believe, and I believed it when my congregation in Calgary decided to move to having an open table, where all could partake, and parents could talk with their children and decide in their families about how they would participate. I wasn’t sure about this at first. I followed the lead of my colleague but I wasn’t sure I was entirely comfortable.

This change is pretty common in our national church, though. In a survey of Mennonite Churches in Canada that is now over 20 years old, 52% of the respondents said that in their church, the invitation to communion was extended to unbaptized adult believers, and 23% said it was extended to unbaptized youth and children. In 21 years, surely even more change has happened, like Calgary First Mennonite, but I don’t have the numbers.

So we made the change and I wasn’t sure but then when I came to Hamilton and it was made clear to me that communion here is just for baptized believers, I was surprised to discover that in my reluctant but repeated practice of inviting people to an open table, I had become uncomfortable with a closed table.

So you’re all getting to hear my confession that I have struggled with communion for 7 years. I’ve struggled because I know that this is not my table. This is the table of Christ. It is the Lord’s Supper to which I am also invited. It is Jesus’ invitation that I speak before you all. And so I have struggled to understand whether my words – or our tradition – are closing a door that Jesus wants to have open.

Jesus often offended the establishment with the way he ate, usually because of who he ate with, all the riff-raff. He shook things up at other meals, too. Like the feeding of the 5000, another meal that Jesus hosted, when he blessed and broke bread and gave it to everyone. Gil Bailie writes that he believes that in this unplanned meal, Jesus was driving home the points he had been preaching by inviting his listeners to share a meal with those around them. He writes:

“The point of the feeding, in my opinion, was not food; it was the breaking down of religious and social barriers that Jesus had been challenging as spiritually inconsequential in his preaching. It was hands-on learning. It was practice for living in the kingdom” (*Violence Unveiled*, p214).

Nora Gallagher has written a book about communion in a series on ancient practices. And she says too that this is “…why Communion is called a ‘practice’. We are all practicing together to become more and more the makers of the kingdom that is both under our feet and right around the corner.” “The regular practice of Communion is meant to help move us from being the citizens of the empire to the citizens of heaven.”

I said last Sunday that Arnold Snyder suggests that we can’t separate our practice of communion from who we say we are as a church. Our practice communicates what we believe about church, about discipleship, about grace, about mission. Our practice should be taking us to where we believe Jesus is calling us to go.

And perhaps this is to call us back to commitments we have already made, to call us back to our baptism, call us back to dying to sin and rising to walk in new life, call us back to the demands of discipleship.

Though perhaps… well, no, certainly… Jesus calls us from many points on our journeys. Calls us to follow, calls us to wake up to what the prophets have declared, calls us to break bread with our neighbours who are different from us.

Jesus told a parable once about a wedding banquet, and those who had already been invited didn’t come. They had the invitations in hand, but when they chose not to come, the king said they weren’t worthy after all. So the slaves went out into the streets and gathered all whom they found, both good and bad (the gospel says); so the wedding hall was filled with guests (Mt 22:10, cf Lk 14). And that’s what the kingdom of God is like. Many are called, few are chosen. Don’t applaud yourself for having the ticket in hand – baptism or whatever – if you don’t accept the invitation.

Jesus calls, not us. And I’m interested in wondering about the Lord’s Supper as a practice through which Jesus calls us, and maybe calls us *from* very different places and *to* very different places. When Jesus invited people to the table, they were transformed. Remember Zacchaeus. The woman of Bethany. Simon Peter on the beach.

When Jesus ate with people, he often had challenging words for them. The Son of Man is Lord of the Sabbath. You always have the poor with you. All who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted. When you give a banquet, invite those who cannot repay you.

Jesus calls us *to* the supper, Jesus calls us *through* this supper, over and over again, to all that he taught and all that he lived and died to show us. Nora Gallagher also wrote that “A practice is something that connects us to a world much older than ourselves, something that is re-created and made new by our participation.” (*The Sacred Meal*).

Many of our practices are handed down to us, from that world much older than ourselves, and we embody them today, here, with the people near us, with the questions of this age. And an old practice is made new by our participation, just the way that the old practice of the Passover was made new by Jesus in the upper room as he spoke to his disciples about his body, his blood, his covenant. Jesus re-contextualized the Passover. He didn’t get rid of it – he made it new.

And I think about the new era we find ourselves in today, different from the era that some here remember, of separate and closed communion services, with handkerchiefs to hold the bread with reverence. Communities that grew mainly by procreation and teenagers that chose baptism with their peers.

Today, thanks be to God, our faith communities grow in many ways, drawing people from various traditions including those who have not grown up in the church. There are even those who have been hurt by the church and barred from its rituals, maybe because of their sexual orientation or gender identity, or some other reason the church has used to bar the way to Christ’s table.

Young adults today are asking deep questions before they’re willing to join a church that they’ve seen hurt their neighbours and friends. A number of years ago already, a CMU professor told me that when she asked her first year classes who was already baptized, the numbers had been going down and down. Young people aren’t interested in baptism just because that’s what you and your peers do when you turn 15. In our tradition, baptism is tied to church membership. And there are still a lot of young people who love Jesus but who don’t trust his church.

So what does this all have to do with the Lord’s Supper? Well it contributes to the questions I have and the uncertainty I have about how our practice of communion is connected to who we say we are as a church. Is it possible that Jesus calls us to his table, from wherever we are, to find what we need there, rather than accomplishing what we need before we get there?

In the village of Emmaus, 2 disciples sat down to supper with Jesus, who they didn’t recognize. He took bread, blessed, and broke it, and gave it to them. And Jesus was made known to them in the breaking of the bread.

Jesus was made known to them in the breaking of the bread. And only then did they say – “Weren’t our hearts burning within us while he was teaching, while we came to understand the Scriptures? Didn’t we feel it within ourselves? And now we’ve come to know it.”

Jesus calls us to this table, where in the broken bread and the cup, his love for the world, his demands on our discipleship, his victory over death and over all the fears that seek to keep us trapped, all of this can be made known to us. Because God is already at work in all of us, no matter our age, no matter how much we think we know, no matter how long we’ve been hanging out in church. God has already been at work, so that, at many points in our lives we might say – “Were not our hearts already burning within us? And now we understand why.”

Today we are celebrating World Communion, the supper to which our Lord Jesus invites people all around the globe. And in churches around the globe, there are different traditions. Today we celebrate with all of our global neighbours in mind. This is the Lord’s Supper, and it is open to all, of any age or experience, who love Jesus and who wish to answer his call to the table, where we wait for him to be made known to us in the breaking of the bread. Let’s sing together as we prepare to come to the Lord’s Supper…

SJ86 Taste and See