Pastor Alissa Bender

Hamilton Mennonite Church

September 24, 2017

**Communion & Covenant**

Exodus 12; Matthew 26:17-30; 1 Corinthians 11:23-29

Last Sunday, Alan Candy dearly hoped to come from the hospice to worship with us. When Sunday morning came, he did not have the strength for the trip. His son texted to tell me and asked whether church could come to him. Of course the church had been coming to him already through visits of familiar faces over the previous weeks, but that was the moment when I asked whether he would like us to come with communion.

And so we did, Erica Warkentin and I. We brought church to Alan in the form of a bit of bread, and a bit of grape juice. And there is so much about Christ’s church that is contained in this ritual that we share as followers of Christ across denominations. We share it in different ways, with different emphases, with different understandings. But there is something in this meal of remembrance that causes the Church universal to agree that it is essential to who we are.

Arnold Snyder has said that we cannot separate our understanding and celebration of the eucharist from who we think we are as a church. In our practice of the Lord’s Supper is our identity. This single ritual communicates so much. So it feels appropriate to spend some time thinking and talking about it beyond just our regular practice of it.

Especially because the reality is that there have been changes in various churches – I mean in congregations and denominations – in how communion is practiced. Many here, including myself, will have had different experiences of communion depending on what churches we have been part of – differences in who participates, what is said, what is consumed, and how often.

I hope these 3 weeks in worship and 2 in adult Sunday school can be the opening of a conversation about communion, about our convictions and our practice, a chance to share stories and beliefs and to examine why we do what we do, perhaps whether we have strong affirmations or new insights around our practice.

I will do my best to pull from the overwhelming array of what has been written and said about the Lord’s Supper by people who have studied it longer and deeper than me and offer some food for thought (if you will). Today I will focus on a more traditional Anabaptist Mennonite understanding of communion, since that’s our starting perspective. And our celebration of the supper today will reflect that. On our 2 next Sundays I will explore other perspectives, and our practice of communion will also reflect that. Some Mennonite theologians have suggested the idea of multiple tables, where our communion is celebrated in different ways. So I think this will be an experiment of that, where we will hear the wideness of Christ’s invitation in different ways over 3 weeks.

So, where do I even start? Perhaps by affirming that, eating was central to Jesus’ ministry. He attended a wedding banquet, told parables about eating, was hosted by friends in Bethany, feasted with characters of ill repute and was called a drunk and a glutton, he was so concerned about empty stomachs that he is remembered to have fed more than 5000 people with one lunch basket. Shared meals were at the centre of many of Jesus’ encounters with people, during his life and even after his resurrection. Jesus ate with all kinds of people, all the time.

And then there was this one time, this one meal, that was so memorable to his disciples, that all 4 of the gospel writers re-tell the story… although John, as he tends to do, does tell the story rather differently from the 3 we call the Synoptic gospels. This meal had already been remembered and re-practiced for 40-50 years before the earliest gospel, Mark, was written down, and before Mark, the apostle Paul was writing about it happening.

The rabbi Jesus and his Jewish disciples came together to eat the Passover meal. We heard the story from Exodus of what is remembered in the Passover – God’s act of deliverance of the Israelites from slavery in Egypt. And this particular meal, just before his death, Jesus chose to eat with his 12 close disciples, those whom he had often pulled aside and asked: “Do you understand what I am teaching?”

In that intimate setting, Jesus confronted the seriousness of the disciples’ resolve. “Truly I tell you, one of you will betray me”. And they said one after the other “not I, Lord,” “not I”… until Judas was called out.

And then, still as they were eating, Jesus did this thing that we hear nearly every time we celebrate the supper here. Jesus took bread, blessed and broke it and said – eat this, this is my body. And he took a cup of wine and said – drink this, this is my blood of the covenant, which is for forgiveness. And according to Paul, which only Luke’s gospel repeats, Jesus said: Do this in remembrance of me.

So, what are we doing and what are we remembering? Maybe it’s helpful right now to see what is written in our Confession of Faith from a Mennonite Perspective about the Lord’s Supper. It begins:

“*We believe that the Lord's Supper is a sign by which the church thankfully remembers the new covenant which Jesus established by his death. In this communion meal, the members of the church renew our covenant with God and with each other. As one body, we participate in the life of Jesus Christ given for the redemption of humankind. Thus we proclaim the Lord's death until he comes.”*

The article begins with covenantal language, and I named this first Sunday theme “Communion & Covenant” because that emphasis is so strong in Anabaptist theology. In a presentation that Arnold Snyder gave on Communion in 16th century Anabaptism, he said that members of that church were those who had experienced a spiritual rebirth, sealed that divine transformation by water baptism, and therefore visibly become part of the visible body of Christ, which also included a pledge to be corrected and admonished. Snyder said there was unanimous consent among early Anabaptists that these baptized and disciplined members were the only ones invited to the table.

Communion was a renewal of baptismal covenant. It’s also expressed in this confession from the Brothers at Trieste: “*Concerning the memorial and Supper of the Lord Jesus Christ which he has ordered us to observe, we heartily confess and believe that all who desire to break the Lord’s bread as the memorial of Christ’s broken body, and all who desire to drink of this cup for the remembrance of the shed blood of Christ, must first be united by baptism to the one body of Christ of which Christ is the head*”.

This was, of course, a time when choosing re-baptism meant choosing likely death by any of a number of forms of torture and execution. Choosing to be part of the body of Christ through re-baptism meant being willing to lay down one’s life, as Christ did immediately after his last supper with his disciples.

This is our historical legacy as believers in a Mennonite Church, that choosing baptism was releasing one’s life to God in a way that we can hardly parallel here today (although maybe we need to). And that in breaking bread, a transformation happens – not of the elements, as the state church claimed, but of the people who are present – who are, who become, who are recreated as the body of Christ.

In Anabaptist Mennonite theology, the supper not only re-tells the story of Jesus’ death, our Confession of Faith goes on:

“*The supper re-presents the presence of the risen Christ in the church. As we partake of the communion of the bread and cup, the gathered body of believers shares in the body and blood of Christ and recognizes again that its life is sustained by Christ, the bread of life.*”

The risen Christ is present in a gathering of believers who break bread in faith and love in the power of the Holy Spirit, and we are assured of having union with Christ (comes from Pilgram Marpeck).

This return to our covenant with God and union with Christ has been part of our remembering in Mennonite theology. But this may cause us wonder about the part of 1 Corinthians 11 that isn’t often read with the words of institution. Verses 27-29:

“Whoever, therefore, eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be answerable for the body and blood of the Lord. 28 Examine yourselves, and only then eat of the bread and drink of the cup. 29 For all who eat and drink without discerning the body, eat and drink judgment against themselves”.

This question of eating and drinking worthily has influenced a Mennonite theology of the Lord’s Supper in meaningful and in some negative ways. Menno Simons also wrote:

“*Since then it is a communion, as has been said, we should fraternally exhort all of you earnestly to examine yourselves whether you have been made partakers of Christ: whether indeed you are flesh of His flesh and bone of His bone; whether you are in Christ and Christ is in you*”. – Menno Simons, “Foundation of Christian Doctrine”

The question of communing worthily is how we receive in Mennonite history the preparation services that would happen a week before communion, the bishop who would travel and make sure that congregants were reconciled with each other, and also the fact that communion used to be separate from the Sunday service.

I don’t really want to go down a rabbit trail about church discipline and the ban and anecdotes about when this has not been life-giving to communities. I have heard beautiful stories of reconciliation that have arisen through the serious of covenantal renewal at communion, and I know too of stories of church discipline that did not appear to have a character of grace within them.

When it comes to the notion of “worthiness” I do wonder how the Church can give clear calls to faithful discipleship and transformed lives, without being delivery systems of shame. How do we call people to look honestly into the eyes of Christ as he invites us, without doing his judgment on his behalf?

We must, at least, consider what Paul meant by discerning the body in this part of his letter. In Corinth, Jesus-followers were falling back on idols. And those idols were privilege, status, class. In that society, like ate with like. People ate with those they felt most comfortable with, whose lives were like theirs, men were above women, nobody waited for the slaves before digging in to supper. This was not a body, certainly not the body of Christ.

Tom Yoder Neufeld has said that what we think about as purity or exclusivity in 1 Corinthians is Paul trying to protect the revolution in social relationships that has been brought about by Christ. Paul wrote: “When you come together as a church, I hear that there are divisions among you”, and later: “Do you show contempt for the church of God and humiliate those who have nothing?”

As Paul wrote to the Galatians and similarly to the Colossians, “There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.” And eating is exactly the primary human act where that revolution needs to be lived out.

The community has been made into the body of Christ, and eating and drinking in memory of Christ is a moment of recommitment to participation in the death and resurrection of Christ (TYN). Death to pride of place, death to self-absorption, death to entitlement, and resurrected life that revolutionizes human relationships.

And so, as Paul said, “examine yourselves”, and as Jesus’ disciples said, “Is it I? Is it I? Is it I?”, so our Anabaptist forebears heard in the invitation to the table the seriousness of a covenantal testing. Take this bread and cup were akin to Jesus saying: “Take up the cross and follow me. Love God. Love your neighbour. Love one another as I have loved you. No one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends”.

To come to the table worthily is not only to imagine looking Christ in the eye, but to literally look our fellow believers in the eyes and to say – you are part of Christ’s body with me. By your side, I receive God’s forgiveness. With you I will live as Christ calls me.

So if you have made a baptismal covenant to die to sin and to walk in newness of life with Christ, or if you have made a confirmation of that covenant which was made for you by your parents, I invite you to recall that commitment, and as we move toward our communion celebration, to recommit yourselves to your re-creation within the body of Christ, as the risen Christ is present with us now.

 Prepare with Sing the Journey 77 Here is the bread