

## **The Heart of Communion**

Ps. 51:1-12/1Tim1:12-17 by Patty Friesen (Sept 11/16)

Apostle Paul in our 1 Timothy text is grateful to Christ Jesus who strengthened him and judged him faithful and called him to service even though he was formerly a blasphemer, a persecutor and a man of violence. But he received mercy because he had acted ignorantly in unbelief and the grace of God overflowed for him with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus. Psalm 51 also speaks of grace and grace will lead us through these fall weeks in worship. We are looking at our life in Jesus – what Jesus has done for us and how Jesus invites us to life in him and to his symbol of that life in the communion table.

At Mennonite Church Canada Assembly at TCU Place this summer, George Janzen and I attended Elsie Rempel's workshop on the movement in Mennonite congregations to an open table communion, meaning a communion that welcomes all people, young and old, baptized and unbaptized. I found this to be an eye-opening and exciting conversation. While others were struggling with scripture texts around homosexuality, I was thinking open communion is our next theological issue at Osler Mennonite and hopefully one that doesn't divide us but draws us into deeper thought about who Jesus is and deeper commitment to him. There will be copies of Elsie Rempel's book *Come Lord Jesus Be Our Host* on the back table every week so please help yourselves for study during the week ☺ Elsie's premise is that the church has set the communion table and who is invited and then prayed *Come Lord Jesus Be Our Guest* to the communion table we have established. She proposes that we envision *Come Lord Jesus Be Our Host* where Jesus sets the table and Jesus decides who can come partake.

Her hope is that her study guide will help us articulate what we believe about communion and help us celebrate communion faithfully in ways that respect our tradition, honour Jesus as host and help form fall for all ages. She says communion should invite all, including unbaptized children and adults to commit or recommit their lives to Jesus and his church.

Like our other discussions and discernments around gay marriage and the meaning of church membership, we look to: 1- the Bible – what does it say about gay marriage, church membership and open communion – sometimes it doesn't say much so then we have to look to 2 - our Mennonite Confession of Faith and our historical perspectives and traditions and sometimes those are rooted in a certain time and place so then we have to look to 3 – our current situation: what are our current needs in our personal, family and congregational life and how is Jesus, the Bible and the Confession of Faith speaking into those current needs. It is a three-way conversation as we try to be listening to the Spirit of God and faithful to what would Jesus do. I hope to delve into this more intentionally during the Sunday School hour.

Communion is an ancient faith practice begun, of course, on the night that Jesus was crucified and was taking his last supper with the disciples. The last supper is recorded in all four gospels and Apostle Paul encourages the early church to continue practicing the re-enactment of the last supper to remind them of who Jesus is and what the church is all about. Communion in the early house churches was an equalizer between men and women who would never eat together and between slaves and masters who would never eat together and Jews and Gentiles who would definitely never eat together. So when Paul says, there is no longer slave or free, male or female, Jew or

Gentile, for all are one in Christ Jesus, he is introducing a radical social equalizer in the communion table.

Communion has been very important to Christians throughout the centuries and has not varied much in its practice. When the baptism of infants began under Emperor Constantine, it was an effort at inclusion in the Christian church – that all members of the church and eventually all members of the state were recorded through baptism. It was this wedding of church and state that the early Anabaptists protested and re-baptized adults on their confession of faith in the 1500's. Our practice from then on has been a communion table for baptized adults only. And in the 1500's re-baptism and communion of the re-baptized only was a radical political departure from the Catholic Church – one that got early Anabaptists killed. It was essential to our ancestors that they knew what they believed and why because their lives depended on it. It has been a proud heritage but perhaps a burdensome one as well. I grew up wondering if I could ever measure up to the example and determination of the martyrs. I knew if anyone got a tongue screw near me, I'd recant my faith in a second!

As Mennonites, we've held a very high view of communion – a reverence for the mystery of God's grace, the solemnity of Christ's sacrifice on the cross and the seriousness of our unworthiness. An example of our high view of communion is in our communion hymn #2 HWB, In thy holy place we bow – let's sing that and keep your hymnals open to sing #1 as well.

This was written by S.F. Coffman in 1901 and verse 1 about perfumes rising to heaven and golden censers and saints bending at the knee in worship sounds awfully Catholic. But what a reverential hymn of holy light and holy bread and renewal found in

communion. This reflects the mystery and union we have desired in communion and sought by our traditional practices. Communion was so serious that we have traditionally only held communion twice a year, held during an evening service of baptized adults only. We took Paul's words in 1 Corinthians seriously to examine our souls and confess our sins and make things right with God and our fellow church members before we could take communion. When my mom was growing up, church members had to make confession before the bishop before taking communion which sounds quite Catholic.

No wonder we could only handle communion twice a year. It was hard work doing all that confessing and soul searching. And that's maybe where we have lost the focus from Jesus' grace to our work and our worthiness to receive communion. We don't have to cleanse ourselves to be worthy for communion. Jesus is the only one who can do that for us. As the psalmist says, Cleanse me, O God and I shall be clean, wash me and I shall be made new. Communion is about forgiveness and renewal of our souls that we cannot do for ourselves but once we experience it – we can go forward in a new understanding and empowered to act differently.

Mennonite Church Canada President Willard Metzger preached proudly about our Mennonite emphasis on discipleship and following Jesus but he said it has led to an emphasis on us and our works and our obedience and our worthiness. We have forgotten about grace, Willard said and have forgotten how to extend grace to others. It was a powerful sermon that I will never forget.

Turning back to Hymn #1, What is this Place, our first and some would say most important hymn in the hymnal is also a communion hymn written in 1970 by a Dutch Mennonite and it is very different than Hymn #2. We will sing it after the sermon. This

hymn says it doesn't matter about church buildings, walls, windows, - church are the people who are gathered and we are each other's bread and wine in verse 3. This is the place where we can receive what we need to increase; God's justice and God's peace. Again, this is a little more modern, a little more focused on us and our discipleship, our role in increasing God's justice and God's peace through our work with refugees, Mennonite Central Committee and other volunteerism. My guess is this song may be more theologically reflective of where our congregation is at than Hymn #2. This hymn may allow us to open up the table to unbaptized but my guess is some of us still long for the otherness, the holiness of Hymn #2. Are both desires exclusive of each other?

At the 11:15 forum, we will talk about the communions we grew up with and how they shaped our current view of communion. Next Sunday I will hold up the two current Mennonite theologies on this topic in Rempel versus Rempel. Elsie Rempel, a proponent of the open table communion to include children vs. John Rempel, Mennonite theologian and historian who calls us to hold the table up for baptized adults only. So exciting!

Let us pray...