

EATING AND BECOMING THE BODY OF CHRIST
For Emmaus Road Mennonite Church, Berne
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Grace be unto us and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen

When I first heard about your congregation I was pleased by the comment that you celebrate Communion every Sunday. Today that is an unusual practice in Free Churches like the Mennonites, but in many parts of the early church and sometimes during the Reformation this was the case. I welcome the invitation to explore the meaning of Jesus' meal for Mennonite congregations today.

In our Minister's Manual the invitation to the Lord's Table describes many layers of meanings for the Supper – the remembrance of Christ's sacrifice, an encounter with the Risen Lord, a feeding on him in faith, a communion with one another, an anticipation of the day when he will come again. Each of these layers deserves at least one sermon! But I have to limit myself to only one of them, "feeding on Christ in faith".

The primal act of the Christian church is its gathering to eat bread and drink wine in memory of Jesus. In condensed and stylized form this meal tells the story of the Gospel. The Word becomes flesh in Jesus, who lives with us and dies for us. As his death nears Jesus, as a faithful Jew, invites his disciples to observe the Passover with him to re-enter the story of God's liberation of the Hebrews from their Egyptian captivity long ago. Instructions for the form of this liturgy are the subject of today's reading from Deuteronomy. When the Passover meal comes to the fourth piece of bread and the fourth

cup Jesus astonishes his friends by changing the ritual so that the elements refer to him. “This is my body!” he announces as he passes the bread. Before the shocked Passover guests can regain their composure their host declares “This cup is the new covenant in my blood!”

What’s happening here? In some sense Jesus is identifying his very person with bread and wine. When we gather around bread and wine and retell the narrative of the Messiah’s life laid down and taken up again he promises to give himself to us. Luke records a second breaking of bread. Three strangers sit at table on Easter evening in Emmaus. This story must have captured your imagination because you have named your congregation for this encounter. When the two travelers realize that the stranger is in fact Jesus they leave the inn and rush back to their friends in Jerusalem. The only words they can find to describe their encounter are that he was made known to them in the breaking of the bread.

When people try to explain how Jesus is – or is not – present in his Supper they often resort to extreme answers: either he physically present or he is totally absent. Mennonites have been so afraid of the first claim that they have taken refuge in the second one, saying that Communion is ‘just’ a symbol to help us remember our Lord but that he isn’t really present.

That’s what my instruction class was told as we were preparing for baptism. I was baptized in the joyful faith that Christ was not only my parents’ savior but also mine. Yet the memorable part of my initiation was not the baptism itself but my participation – for

the first time – in the Communion service that followed. At that point a solemnity descended on the congregation that told me more was happening here than met the eye. When I looked into the cup I knew we were in the presence of a reality greater than what we had words for. I was offered the elements by my fellow-believers yet I received more than they gave me. The best way I can put it is that we both ate and became the body of Christ. Immediately after Communion, the early church father, Augustine, urged his congregation, “Become what you have eaten”.

This extravagant language of ‘feeding on Christ’ is found most explicitly in the Gospel of John. In chapter 6 Jesus declares, ‘My flesh is true food and my blood is true drink’ (v.55). There was a time when I grappled with these words every time I went to Communion. Slowly I became convinced that, in the words of the Communion hymn, we are ‘touching and handling things unseen’. But I was still left with a question concerning the relationship between ‘bread’ and ‘body’? A piece of bread doesn’t physically become flesh. But the bread is not simply a metaphor for mystical experience either. After Jesus makes the link, ‘body’ and ‘bread’ cannot be separated. Perhaps one could say that as we eat the bread we receive the body; we take the gift of bread and with it comes the presence of the Giver.

Listen to Jesus in John. “Unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man, you have no life in you”. To eat his flesh means to accept the incarnation (v. 51). Accepting the incarnation means believing that God came in the flesh to save us. When people describe their coming to faith, they sometimes say that they have ‘received Christ’ and mean it in a mystical way. In John 6 receiving Christ happens in a sacramental way.

This text pushes and pulls us. The skeptics complain, “How can this man give us his flesh to eat?” Jesus refutes the skeptics. However, later in the conversation, when the disciples are tempted to interpret Jesus’ words physically, he cautions them, “It is the Spirit that gives life.” How did our spiritual ancestors deal with the tension between flesh and spirit in John’s Gospel? The Swiss Brethren urge the use of common bread for Communion to make the breaking of bread part of ordinary life. But that does not mean that it is ‘just’ a symbol. This is how they describe it. “For the bread is simply bread, yet by faith the body of Christ, and an incorporation into the body of Christ... .” (*Conrad Grebel’s Programmatic Letters*, p. 21)

The double meaning of ‘body’ in this passage sounds similar to Augustine’s counsel, “Become what you have eaten”. Some Anabaptists taught that the transformation that happens in the sacrament is one of people and not things. When the bread and wine are shared in remembrance of Jesus’ life given up for us the Spirit comes upon the people. In a mysterious but true way they receive the body of Christ. But they also become the body of Christ. This is an intimately personal encounter but not a private one. Communion can’t be celebrated alone because it is communal in nature: in it we are reunited with Christ and one another.

Being made one again with Christ and our sisters and brothers was an awesome reality to our Anabaptist forbears. From the beginning of the movement self-examination preceded the meal. If people were not at one with God or each other they were to seek reconciliation. In some settings self-examination became identified with conformity to church rules. This, in turn, led to a preoccupation with ourselves as the actors in

Communion. This left little room for God to act in grace and forgiveness. In extreme cases, only those who yielded at every point to the discipline of the church could be considered 'holy' and admitted to the Table.

In the second half of the 20th century mainstream Mennonites dismantled the legalism that had come to be associated with Communion but in the process often lost the awesomeness of the service as I remember it on the day of my baptism. Today coming to the Lord's Table seldom involves communal and personal self-examination. Communion has become a flashpoint in the enormous tension on all levels of church life in our denomination between 'inclusion' and 'covenant' such that in some congregations baptism is no longer the basis of admission to the Lord's Table. We struggle to find a balance between God's act and ours, between fellowship with Christ and with our sisters and brothers, between coming to the Table 'just as I am' and being reconciled with those who have something against us before we do so.

With your deliberate attention to and weekly practice of Communion you have much to teach the wider church about these unresolved aspects of our theology and practice.

Like the people Jesus met in John 6 we are hungry; we have come here in search of the bread. The people in this account first followed Jesus because he had given five thousand of them bread for their physical hunger. When they came back for more, he told them about 'the true bread from heaven'. "Sir, they replied, "give us this bread always".

May that be our prayer also. AMEN