

16 May 2021

John 6:51-56; 1 Corinthians 10:16-17; 1 Corinthians 11:17-26

Communion with Christ AND Others

First Mennonite Church



Communion in the early church: 2nd century fresco in the Catacombs of Rome. The scene represents seven persons at a table, six men and a woman. On the table there are two large plates, one containing two fishes, the other five loaves. At each end of the picture are baskets filled with loaves. Outside the frame of this picture, but in the original fresco, are an additional four baskets at one end, three at the other.

In Acts 2 it says, *Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts...* (Acts 2:46).



Ever since Jesus' life and ministry, the church has eaten together. The church in the book of Acts did, and so did the Christians in Corinth. Our last meal together was back in the Fall of 2019, if I'm correct. That's a long time ago. We planned to eat soup and bread together at our Maundy Thursday meal in April 2020. Unfortunately, we had to cancel it because of the pandemic.

For Jesus, sharing meals was a way of enacting the generosity of God toward everyone, especially those hungry ones living on the margins, who were seldom, if ever, invited to special occasions. It was also a way of anticipating, in a celebrative way, the full coming of the kingdom

of God. Jesus' friends and followers carried on the tradition of eating and drinking together as a central feature of their shared life.

But the Corinthians didn't do well at this, as you already heard from our scripture readings. I didn't have Vicki read all of chapter 10 and 11 as it would have been WAY too long! But from these chapters there are several examples that show how the Corinthians didn't fully appreciate what they were doing when they met at the Lord's table.

First, some saw no tension between communing with Christ on one occasion and participating in ritual meals devoted to other gods at the local temple on another ("demons," Paul calls them, 10:21).

Second, the early church included both Jews and Gentiles. If you ever eaten with someone from another culture, you know how different, unfamiliar, and questionable the food can be. One of the most difficult meals I ever ate took place in rural China. The hosts were a group Christians who wanted to honour me as their guest, so they invited me to a local restaurant where the meal consisted of many different dishes from a goat. No, there was no steak, no roast, no ribs. All the dishes were different internal organs of the goat. A brain dish, an intestinal dish...you get the picture. I wish I could tell you that these things tasted like chicken...they didn't! Yet I ate what was there. Why? Because the hosts served what, was in their minds, the best for me. If I had refused to eat, I would not only have offended them, but our relationship probably would have ended.



Stewed lung and intestines.

I think of this example when I think of the Corinthians eating together. I can imagine Jewish believers, with their strict food laws, would have really struggled to eat with those Gentiles as they were, from the Jewish perspective, unschooled in the ways acceptable to God.

Finally, what really irritated Paul was the way in which the Corinthian believers treated each other at their common meals. Folks, especially the wealthier ones, ate with their own kind—other wealthy members. In doing so, however, they simply respected and reinforced the social hierarchies prevalent in their society,

but went against the reality of the new creation ushered in by Jesus. Remember that in Christ, there is no Jew or Greek, slave or free, male or female but all are one in Christ.

Who were excluded and ignored? We should not be surprised if it were the poor and the slaves who were excluded and ignored. Smug about their own status, the wealthy were oblivious that they were marginalizing all over again those whom Jesus had welcomed. Paul accused them of not “waiting for each other” (11:33).

So, the believers in Corinth failed to grasp:

1. the degree to which their eating together represented communion with the living Christ, and
2. They also failed to grasp that their communion with Christ was inseparable from their communion with each other as members of the body of Christ.

As Paul put it, they did not “discern the body” (11:29).

Early in chapter 10, Paul writes about what it is they’re doing, what it is they’re eating when they gather. Paul compares their eating together with Israel in the desert eating from the same one loaf and drinking from the same rock. Like Israel the Corinthians too consumed “spiritual food” and “spiritual drink.” Like Israel they too ate Christ. And each time they did so, they remembered Christ’s self-offering for them in anticipation of God’s reign coming in its fullness.

The Greek word Paul uses to indicate the intimate connection we have with Christ and each other is **koinonia**, like the Mennonite camp in Manitoba. When we use **koinonia** in the context of eating together, we translate it as “communion.” It speaks to the foundational nature of the bond between us and Christ and lends itself perfectly to food and drink as a metaphor that is most foundational for life itself.

We cannot live without food and water. I’ll admit that I’m not a dietitian. Nor am I a nutritionist. But I do know that the phrase, you are what you eat, is true. Nutrients from the foods you eat provide the foundation of the structure, function, and integrity of every little cell in your body, from your skin and hair to your muscles, bones, digestive and immune systems. Eating a well-balanced diet is important for your body to remain healthy and grow.



Conversely, scientific studies show that fast food, junk food, and processed food are not good for your body because they lead to increased obesity, heart disease, diabetes and other chronic diseases. What you eat in private, you wear in public.

Food is also key for Jesus, Paul, and the writers of the gospels. Food and drink are metaphors for the very essentials of life itself. When Jesus speaks of himself as the “bread of life,” he’s making a connection between himself and the manna in the desert. Without it the people of God in the desert would have starved. When Paul reminds his readers that the desert wanderers drank water from the rock, he makes an explicit connection between that rock and Christ. Whether manna or water from a rock, both metaphors speak to the foundational nature of Christ as our “spiritual food” and “spiritual drink.” Jesus is foundational for our very existence. That is what we say in our celebration of the Lord’s Supper—the body of Christ broken for you before we eat the bread; the blood of Christ shed for you before we drink the wine.

In some Christian traditions, like the Roman Catholic tradition, the bread and wine are mysteriously transformed into the very body and blood of Christ during the eucharistic prayer and by the power of the Holy Spirit. In a mysterious way, the congregation consumes Christ together.

Our Anabaptist-Mennonite tradition has been very suspicious of such an understanding of the Lord’s Supper. Instead of mystery, Mennonites have stressed that the Lord’s Supper is a symbolic meal. It’s not a “Eucharist” but an “ordinance.” Our tradition has placed emphasis on moral integrity, self-examination and unity and peace among the members as prerequisites for the observance of the Lord's Supper. I vaguely remember when a child my parents receiving a visit from the deacons in the lead up to communion. Now, I realize that this visit was for the deacons to admonish and make sure that all differences and offenses should be resolved between members before the Lord's Supper. Weeks before communion, pastors would preach on the need for people to be reconciled with their brothers and sisters. This is one reason why communion, in our tradition, has been celebrated 3-4 times per year. The Lord’s Supper was a very serious and solemn time of recommitment to following Christ and to the church as Christ’s body.

In the last 20-30 years, some Mennonites have shifted their understanding of communion. Some have moved away from communion as a solemn, almost funeral-like atmosphere to one that is more celebratory. Why the change? Rather than understanding communion almost exclusively from these verses in 1 Corinthians, some have looked to the gospel accounts of Jesus' feasting and celebrating with disciples and outsiders in anticipation of God's Kingdom coming. They ask, should communing with Christ and others not be a time of celebration? And shouldn't we allow anyone who has faith to celebrate with us?

Of course, there is always tension around change, right? Those who see communion as a celebration are uncomfortable with those who understand communion more as a solemn meal. And vis-a-versa. Generally speaking, many Mennonites wonder whether our past suspicion of that mystery of communing with Christ and others as we share the bread and wine hasn't come at a cost. Have we stressed remembering Jesus and following him **more than** communing with Jesus, becoming one with him, and he with us?

The metaphor of food and drink, of bread and wine, of body and blood, invite us to ponder what it truly means to have "communion"—koinonia—with Christ, and through him with each other. Both the gospel accounts—and even Paul—suggest that we do more than remember. Communion is not a funeral.

Last week, I talked about baptism. I gave an example of the early church, where baptismal candidates would walk up to the one end of the baptistry, take off their old clothes, representing the "old human," go down into the water and be baptized, walk up out of the water at the other end, and put on new clothes representing the "new human." For those who weren't here, I even did a live demonstration! I also said that putting on Christ, wearing Christ takes a life-long practice, where we are transformed more and more into Christ.

Eating the bread and drinking the wine is like that. As we commune with our living Lord and his body, the church, at his table, we take in the basic, foundational "elements" that give us life, energy, and the means with which to participate in the reign of God. In communion we are receptive to Christ. We consume the one who gave himself for the sake of the world. In communion we desire to have Christ become part of us as we become part of his body. Even if we retain a strong sense of the metaphorical nature of "eating the flesh of the Son of Man" (John 6:51-56), as John says, or of communing with the "blood of Christ" (1 Corinthians 10:16), we can allow this ritualized meal of the church to give us a deeper sense of what participation—koinonia—in Christ means. We can let the Lord's Supper open us up to the one who is foundational for our life the

way food and drink are foundational to the life of our bodies. And for this we need to give thanks.

Let me suggest three ways of giving thanks. **First**, when we eat and drink we are doing the most elementary thing we can do as creatures of God. When we chew and swallow the bread and sip the wine, let's do so with a prayer of gratitude for the gift of life itself, and for the way in which Jesus Christ is himself the most elemental foundation of our life. I'm okay with calling communion a Eucharist as Eucharist means thanksgiving.

Second, when we break the bread in memory of Christ's own broken body and drink the wine in memory of his shed blood, let us give thanks for the way he gave himself in life and death for our salvation, thus giving us new life. Yes, there is necessary and proper solemnity to this moment, but let's not forget the reality of **Christ's exhilarating victory over death!** This is something to be thankful for and celebrate, which is why I think Mennonites ought to celebrate communion more often than we do. Of course, I say this assuming we will not always be living in the middle of a pandemic!

Third, the metaphor of food and drink reminds us that we become what we eat. That means that when we "take in" Christ, his life becomes our life. To paraphrase Paul only slightly, "it is no longer we who live, but Christ who lives within us." So, we give thanks for Christ's gift of life, and we give thanks for the cost of that gift. We give thanks that we can commune with Christ's living presence, which includes living as Christ's body in the world.

Finally, there is no place for picky eating at the Lord's table, taking only what strikes us as tasty, and leaving the strange stuff that takes some chewing on the



side. Too often, we like our Jesus meal pre-packaged, cheap, preferably without having to get out of the car. Cheap grace, we might call it. But there is no wolfing down a fast-food Jesus. For bread to represent the body of Christ, it should not come to us as cube sized Wonderbread, or these little pandemic-all-in-one containers and that paper-thin wafer that melts as soon as it touches

your tongue. I'll go on the record as saying that this is NOT my preferred way to share communion, but it's what we got in a pandemic. Part of being Christian is being flexible.



Of course, I prefer a crusty loaf, laden with whole kernels, nuts, and whole grains. You must chew on this bread, sometimes long and hard before you are able to swallow it. After all, the Christ who is “eaten” in this bread came into the world not

for an easy care-free life but as a healer and sage, confronting a hostile world with the good news of the kingdom, finally offering up his own life for the sake of his enemies. Consuming that good news takes time just like a good bread takes time to chew and swallow.

The wine that represents his shed blood should not be sweet dessert wine, but neither should it be vinegar. The life-giving blood of Christ is wine that bursts old wine skins; it is blood-red, hearty, and bracing. It makes our head spin, may even make us cough or break into a sweat. It lightens our spirits, even as we taste the cost of our salvation in it.



Friends, even the best food, eaten with the greatest of care and appreciation, can become poison for us if we get no exercise, if we do not use the body to which the food and drink give life. In other words, we must put into practice the one we consume.

With food, what you eat in private, you wear in public. With the Christian faith, the food we consume in communion manifests itself outward action. Amen