

One in Love
Pastor Cynthia Lapp
World Communion Sunday, October 7, 2012

Psalm 8
Isaiah 1: 11-17
I John 4:7-21
Mark 9: 38-41

Today, on this World Communion Sunday, we join with Christians all over the globe in breaking bread. Though Christians across the globe have been sharing communion for generations, World Communion Sunday is a relatively new development proposed in 1936 by Presbyterians. Within five years, it had become an ecumenical event — now celebrated even among Mennonites.

This past week I attended the monthly meeting of the Capitol Area Anabaptist Network — CAAN for short — lunch. People from a number of Anabaptist congregations in the Washington area meet at the Mennonite Central Committee Washington office each month to build relationships across congregations and reflect together on the Biblical text. This week, in preparation for World Communion Sunday, one of the members invited us to share our experiences of communion.

One person shared how meaningful it was to receive communion with her brother after he had given his life to Christ. She felt a new kind of connection with him — biological sister and brother became spiritual sister and brother as well.

Another person shared how communion was not joyful for him when he was a young person. The preparation for communion included meeting with the Mennonite bishop to make sure that everything was right with God and other members of the congregation. He remembered the threat of eating and drinking damnation upon himself

if he did not repent. He remembered one person who approached communion visibly shaking with fear. This extensive preparation and pressure meant that communion was held only twice a year.

Confession as a prelude to communion is not uniquely Mennonite. Ideally, Catholics go to confession each week before taking the Eucharist. Years ago this also meant fasting after dinner Saturday evening so that the fast was broken when one received Eucharist at mass the next morning.

Confession signals that we have individually, and collectively, messed up. As it says in the Book of Common Prayer —

we have sinned against thee
in thought, word and deed,
by what we have done,
and by what we have left undone.

In thinking about my own experiences with communion, I am aware that there have been times when I was unsure about participating in communion. I asked myself the questions that someone steeped in the Mennonite tradition asks — Am I in good standing with all the others in this room? Am I worthy to take this bread and cup being offered in the name of Christ?

There have been times when I answered those questions in a way that meant that I did not participate in communion. There have also been times when I very much wanted to participate, but because it was a Catholic service I could not.

Some of the most memorable, as well as painful, experiences I have had of communion are with the larger Mennonite Church. It is precisely this Anabaptist

understanding of unity in communion, the need to have everything right with others, which makes it so difficult. And yet if we wait until we perceive unity, we may be spiritually hungry for many years.

One summer Sunday at Allegheny Conference, the key theological differences between this congregation and many in conference had just been preached about. And then we were to share communion. I was hungry for communion even though the differences had just been highlighted. I remember wondering where this left Hyattsville delegates that morning. We each made our own choices, but I chose not to let this diversity of belief keep me from the table. Was it defiant of me, perhaps even sinful, to participate in communion in that setting?

Another time I felt called to share my communion bread with someone with whom I have a history of conflict. I imagined that the broken body would somehow heal the broken relationship, that the broken bread would unite us. Did I approach the table with my own idea of how and when reconciliation should happen instead of allowing God to work?

I think these experiences are part of what happens when we take communion. This is how Mennonites traditionally talk about communion; we take communion. We prepare ourselves with confession, acknowledging that we do not have it all together and yet we approach the table prepared to take communion, as if it is our preparation that unifies us with each other and God. We have done what needs to be done, have left nothing undone. This small piece of bread is our reward.

It is not just our words; our bodies say the same thing. When we take communion, we show that we are in charge; we reach out and take the bread. We have

earned it, we have worked for unity with God and the people around us and now we will take it from the one who serves the meal.

In many other Christian traditions, where one receives communion, approaching with open hands, the body says, "I will receive what you have to give me, and I am grateful." It is in receiving and eating that one is made right with God and with others. It is not the preparation that makes one whole; it is the receiving and eating in which one experiences unity.

This dissection of whether we "take" or "receive" communion may seem ridiculous, picking at obscurities. It is obvious that the traditional Mennonite way of observing communion is faithful to the command of Jesus, to remember him in the breaking of the bread.

But sometimes I wonder if what we have traditionally observed is more of a "solemn assembly" or "appointed festival" as Isaiah writes about in the passage we heard this morning. Is it pleasing to God for the faithful to go through the motions? How do we know when we have become a "burden" to God, and God is hiding her eyes from us, as Isaiah says.

This is a theme of the prophets: God is not keen on empty actions in religious rites. The whole point of the ritual is to move us into a new way of relating to each other. The prophets are very clear that ritual is fine and good, but it must be related to the way we live the rest of our lives, as Isaiah says — seek justice, rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan, plead for the widow.

We are often beguiled by the fiction that as Christians, or at least as Mennonites, we must all believe the same thing in order for there to be unity; we imagine that it is our

common belief that makes us one. We discount the image that Paul gives us of the body, diverse with many parts and functions and yet it works as a unit.

Instead of unified belief, I propose that it is our unified action that demonstrates unity. The work that Mennonites, of all stripes, do through Mennonite Disaster Service or Mennonite Central Committee speaks louder than all of our confessions of faith. How we live out our faith, each day, is what matters most in the long run.

In the gospel reading today the disciples are learning this. John comes to tell Jesus that the disciples have seen someone healing in his name. It sounds a bit like 2nd grade tattling. “There is someone healing in your name, but we don’t know him, we told him to stop. And now we are telling you.”

Jesus doesn’t get upset with the unknown healer. Instead Jesus tells the disciples to step back. “If they are not against us, they are with us.” It is a pretty low bar in some ways. If people are doing good work, giving cold water, then they will be rewarded.

In this short episode we see the humility with which Jesus works. He doesn’t need to be in control of everyone who speaks his name. He doesn’t need only insiders to get good work done. The disciples had just been fighting over who was the greatest, and Jesus told them that whoever wants to be the greatest must serve others. Now here is this unknown person serving others — by healing — and they are offended because he is not part of their group? Will they never learn?

As we receive communion today, may we be reminded that while confession is needed, it is the meal that unites us with God. The action of eating together unifies us

not only with other Christians, but with all people. Humans of all faith traditions, indeed all animals, eat and drink if they have access to food and water.

As we eat the small piece of bread, the mere suggestion of a future feast, we are reminded not only of Jesus and his disciples, but of people across the globe, eating to celebrate. We are reminded of our Jewish friends who recently fasted and then feasted for Yom Kippur. We are reminded of our Muslim friends who fast for a month during Ramadan and then feast with the community. And we are reminded of people all over the world who struggle daily to have enough to eat and to survive.

May this action of eating together, of receiving what is given in love, speak of our commitment to each other and our commitment to bring more Love into the world. May it be so.