

SERMON TITLE: "Do This in Remembrance of Me"

TEXT: Luke 22:14-23

PREACHED AT: Lethbridge Mennonite Church

BY: Ryan Dueck

DATE: September 9, 2012/15th Sunday After Pentecost

Well, summer is officially over, and today marks the beginning of our fall church schedule.

Today, our focus is on the Lords' Supper, as we already heard in our gospel text.

The more I studied this week, the more I began to get a sense of just how big and important this practice was and is in the life of the church.

In addition, the more I looked at worship service that was taking shape throughout the week, the more I realized how little time I would have!

So, here at the outset, a disclaimer: I cannot possibly say everything that needs to be said about the nature and meaning of the Lord's Supper or about how this has been understood and practiced throughout church history or Mennonite history in 10-15 minutes.

There will be *much* that is left unsaid in today's sermon. I am hoping to at least open the door to further conversation and to give us some good starting points for thinking about how and what we are doing.

If there is one thing that Christians have historically been really, *really* good at, it is taking a life-giving, life-sustaining, and meaningful practice or command from Jesus and turning it into something to fight over...

... or a basis for erecting divisions between one another...

...or as a way of deciding who is *really* a Christian and who isn't.

This is perhaps most obviously true when it comes to baptism. What was meant to be a profound symbol of dying to sin and rising to new life in Christ has turned into one of the most historically divisive issues in Christ's church.

We know this well as Mennonites. Our identity was forged not exclusively through the baptism issue, but the very name we embrace in the Christian spectrum—Anabaptist!—is a reminder that we came into being over a dispute about baptism (that's another topic!).

The same is true for the Lord's Supper.

As we heard in our Scripture reading already, this practice was instituted by Jesus himself, and meant to be a tangible way of honouring and remembering his suffering on our behalf.

But over the course of two thousand years, Christians have, at times, turned this intimate moment between Jesus and his followers—what was meant to be a practice that nourished the memory and hope of the church—into a litmus test for authentic Christianity or “correct” church practice.

In a book called *Christ Centered Worship* Bryan Chapell puts it like this:

Debates rage over whether to partake “at rail or while seated,” “at or about table,” by elder service or personal procession, with separate or common cup, “in total or by tincture,” with wine or juice, with loaf or wafer, and so on. Churches divide over whether the minister should elevate the host, practice Fraction, stand behind or before the table, and so on. Entire worship philosophies develop over the content and sequence of the... prayer, the order in which leaders serve and are served the elements, whether to require preparation services, how to fence the table, whether to allow Scripture reading or music during the distribution, whether to partake individually or corporately, when to serve the organist, and how to fold the cloth that covers the table prior to distribution.¹

(The last two were tongue in cheek 😊).

We’ve come a long ways from that first meal with Jesus and his disciples in the upper room! Or even from the practice of the early church which, as most historians agree, was characterized by weekly observance of the Lord’s Supper.²

Ironically, according to Chapell, given all of the historical disagreements about “proper” practice, “today virtually no major church or denomination practices Communion as did first-century Christians.”³

¹ Bryan Chapell, *Christ Centered Worship: Letting the Gospel Shape Our Practice* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2009), 290.

² Chapell, 291.

³ Chapell, 291.

A first-century Christian accustomed to the New Testament love feasts would probably guffaw in amusement if told that our thimbles of wine and wafers of bread reflected the practices of the early church.⁴

What about us as Mennonites? Surely we have done better, right?

Well, not really.

While Mennonites have always been clear that the Lord's Supper was meant to be a symbolic memorial of Christ's sacrifice (as opposed to a "sacrament" or a "means of grace, as in other traditions), we have struggled to articulate and implement a unified perspective on more practical issues such as frequency, who is allowed to administer the sacraments, how they are to be received, etc.

Part of the reason for this is that persecution during the first years of the Anabaptist movement prevented uniformity around the Lord's Supper from developing.

But Mennonites can quarrel as well.

One of the early disputes seems to have been whether the bread and wine were to be distributed by the officiating elder or minister while the members kept their seats, or whether the members were to come to the front of the meeting place to receive the bread and wine, seated around a table.⁵

The first Mennonites seem to have practiced communion weekly, as they were accustomed to doing in the Catholic Church. Then, gradually, the practice became more infrequent.

I was surprised to discover that there don't seem to be any conclusive reasons for why this is the case—mostly guesses!

Ironically, one of them seems to have been the traditional Anabaptist insistence that communion involved reconciliation with the community and unity of the gathered community. Because this often was not the case, or because members were scattered as a result of persecution, it gradually became infrequent.

To put it bluntly, it seems that at times it was easier to just have communion less frequently than to do the hard work of reconciliation!

⁴ Chapell, 293.

⁵ <http://www.gameo.org/encyclopedia/contents/C654ME.html>

Because communion came to be infrequent, a lot of dread and awe came to be associated with these events. Rather than celebration or thanksgiving, these events took on a tone of almost morbidity.

Again, we are a long way from that first meal in the upper room with Jesus and his followers!

Well, that's a bit of (inglorious) history. Where do things stand for us today? How do we, as Mennonites in the twenty-first century understand and practice the Lord's Supper.

From our *Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective*:

1. The practice of the early church was to celebrate the Lord's Supper frequently, every Lord's day or even daily (Acts 2:46). The Anabaptists in the sixteenth century also shared the Lord's Supper often as a sign of their renewed covenant with God and each other. **Our churches are encouraged to celebrate the Lord's Supper frequently, so that they may participate in the rich meanings of this event for the worship and life of the church.**

From our Lethbridge Mennonite Church Constitution (Article 5.3):

All baptized believers and others who love God and have faith in Jesus Christ are welcome to participate in the Lord's Supper. The practice of our congregation is to celebrate the Lord's Supper four or more times each year. We encourage members to prepare for the Lord's Supper by seeking reconciliation with each other and through personal reflection.

Both our MC Canada COF and our church constitution seem to allow for room for of interpretation in how we approach the Lord's Supper: "Celebrate the Lord's Supper often..." "four times or more..."

Perhaps this brief consideration of the history of the Lord's Supper as well as our stated convictions about it as Mennonites could lead us to reexamine our practice as a church.

Does the frequency with which we observe communion fit with our collective understanding of its significance? Why or why not?

Are we open to exploring how to creatively participate in this sacred meal without either becoming too rigid and routine or neglecting the essential dimensions of what the Lord's Supper is about?

These are questions worth considering.

Speaking of essentials, what *is* the Lord's Supper about? Well, I am very aware that my time is limited, but I want to briefly touch on "seven words" that describe some of what we are doing each time we celebrate communion together.

These are taken from Gordon Smith's very helpful book, *A Holy Meal*⁶:

1. **Remembrance:** The Lord's Supper as Memorial
 - a. Most common for Mennonites—we remember what Jesus has done for us through ritual and reflection
 - b. "Do this in remembrance of me" (Luke 22:19)
 - c. Memory is hugely important in understanding who we are and to whom we belong
2. **Communion:** The Lord's Supper as Fellowship
 - a. Something irreducibly communal about this meal—it is not a private act (e.g., weddings!)
 - b. We are saying something about who we are as individuals, but also who we are as a community!
 - c. Sometimes communion can seem too private—all in our heads, too much of this already!
 - d. Often, the Lord's Supper will involve serving each other! In John's gospel, Jesus washes his disciples' feet prior to this meal setting an example of servanthood (John 13:1-20)
3. **Forgiveness:** The Lord's Supper as a Table of Mercy
 - a. Jesus went the way of the cross to pay the penalty for our sins—In Matthew and Mark's accounts we read, "this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins" (Mat. 26:28)
 - b. Repentance and forgiveness are central to remembering the sacrifice of Jesus
4. **Covenant:** The Lord's Supper as a Renewal of Commitment to follow Jesus
 - a. Historically, church membership, baptism, and the Lord's Supper have been bound together in a way that is not easy to justify from Scripture
 - b. Again, our own LMC constitution invites "those who love God and have faith in Jesus Christ" to the table
 - c. We have to ask, based on the teaching and example of Jesus, does this meal seem like something that ought to be used as a wall or a doorway? Maybe we can use Erin's analogy from last week—if we're going to have walls, we had better make sure they are short enough to see outside, and that there are lots of gates in!
 - d. At the same time, coming to this table can be a good opportunity to consider the possibility of baptism for those who haven't taken this step

⁶ Gordon T. Smith, *A Holy Meal: The Lord's Supper in the Life of the Church*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2005.

5. **Nourishment:** The Lord's Supper as Bread from Heaven
 - a. In the Gospel of John, Jesus declared to the crowds following him, "I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never go hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty (John 6:35).
 - b. Links to Passover, God's provision in the Exodus and desert period
 6. **Anticipation:** The Lord's Supper as a Declaration of Hope
 - a. 1 Cor. 11:26—"For as often as you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes."
 - b. Proclamation component of the Lords' Supper—in participating in this event—weekly, monthly, quarterly, whatever—the church continues to proclaim that this same Jesus who died for us has promised to return—"Surely, I am coming soon" (Rev 22:20); this same Jesus is the one who says, "See, I am making all things new!" (Rev 21:5)
 7. **Eucharist:** The Lord's Supper as a Joyous Thanksgiving Celebration
 - a. We are not remembering a dead Christ, but a living Saviour!
 - b. The word "eucharist" is the Greek word for "thanksgiving" and "blessing"
 - c. I like how Gordon Smith puts it: "In our remembering, we give thanks. God is Creator and Redeemer! We give thanks for Christ Jesus himself and for the gifts of his Spirit in our lives. We thank God for his work in Christ Jesus, for the cross and the resurrection, for the amazing grace that would reach out in love and conquer death."⁷
-

In our text today, Jesus shares a meal with his friends. He is about to walk a very hard road—for their sake, for ours, for the sake of the world.

He takes bread and wine, and he shares it with them. He links it in a profound way to the sacrifice he is about to make.

He doesn't explain it.

He doesn't say, "here is how often I want you to do this in remembrance of me" or "here are the words that you should say when you do it" or "here is who is allowed to participate and who is not" or "here is the mode in which you ought to ritually remember my sacrifice."

He doesn't say anything like that. He simply shares a meal with his friends. And, in Luke's telling of the story, with his enemies—Judas had not yet left the table!

On the cross, Jesus gives his life and prays for those who "don't know what they are doing"; here, he shares a meal with those who don't know what they are doing.

⁷ Smith, 104.

He shares a meal with his friends and links his coming actions on the cross with the past (Israel's Passover—exodus, deliverance) and with the future ("the fulfillment of the kingdom of God).

And he invites his friends to participate.

Last week Erin talked about how we live or act our way into believing. She used the example of a daughter who was having a tough time with her dad deciding to just concentrate on kissing him good night. After a few weeks of doing this one thing, she discovered that the tension in their relationship had eased. This one small act had led to a transformation of her situation.

The same thing is true of our participation in the Lord's Supper. In regular participation in this simple act of taking bread and juice, we *act* our way into the life of discipleship.

Just like regular meals nourish our physical bodies and minds, so regular participation in this event nourishes our spirits and transforms us into people whose souls are shaped by the way of the Gospel (in the seven ways above and more, no doubt).

Behind all of the squabbling and disagreement about the Lord's Supper that has been a part of the Christian tradition and even our own history as Mennonites or, is the simple invitation of Christ:

Do this in remembrance of me.

Do this.

In a few moments, we will follow the invitation of Jesus, our brother, our friend, and our Lord.

First, Vern will lead us in a song.