

# Attention Deficit

1 Corinthians 11:17-34

Lethbridge Mennonite Church

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We've arrived at the last Sunday of part one of this year's Faith Question sermon series. We'll pick up the last three questions on an assortment of Sundays after Easter.

As I said at the outset of this series, I tried to tackle most of the "issue" questions in between Epiphany and Lent, and then the "text-based" questions after Easter.

So, for this last Sunday of part one we have a question about communion:

"Why do we say 'Attend to your relationships' before communion in our bulletins?"

For example, last Sunday's bulletin included these words:

**Communion next Sunday:** Because a Christian understanding of communion is a celebration of the unity of the Body of Christ, we are encouraged to attend to our relationships in preparation for receiving communion.

The person who asked this question expressed some frustration with this practice:

I don't understand this concept. I believe we should be taking care of our relationships on a continuing basis, all year long, all the time as soon as the need arises. It should be a non-issue at communion time.

So, what are we saying with this bulletin announcement? Are we saying that our relationships should only be a priority in the six days preceding communion?

Most of us would (I hope) say that this is absurd. So, why do we put this note in our bulletins in advance of communion?

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Well, we're going to get there. But before we do, I want to talk about communion more generally. What is it? What isn't it?

What are we doing when we come to the table (as we will later this morning)? Maybe even more importantly, what are we *proclaiming* as we participate in this sacred meal?

My own thinking on communion has morphed and shifted over the years. When I was a kid, communion was this sort of secret activity that the adults did on Sunday evenings.

I didn't know much about it, only that you had to be baptized to do it.

When I was baptized as a sixteen-year-old, I was suddenly granted access to the club. And so, I went. And I discovered that it was kind of like another church service but one where we got a bit of juice and bread passed around at the end.

I also discovered that it was a serious affair. I don't recall much joy or celebration. It was a solemn reminder of the price that Jesus had paid for our salvation.

By the time we moved to BC in 2005, things were starting to change in many Anabaptist-type churches. Communion was moving from evening services to Sunday mornings.

I don't know if this reflected a deliberate theological shift or because it was getting more difficult to get people out in the evenings.

And it was, in some places, not tied so tightly to baptism and church membership. It was left up to the people in the pews and their own consciences if they wanted to participate.

I was also starting to be introduced to new forms of communion. Some of the most meaningful communion services I ever attended took place at Regent College.

There were eloquent, thoughtful liturgies accompanied by beautiful music, all anchored in the historical church's practice and theology.

We would be invited to the front of the chapel where someone would say, "The body of Christ, broken for you; the blood of Christ, shed for you." We would participate by intinction (dipping a bit of bread in the cup).

This was all new to me. And I loved it. I loved the practice of physically coming to the table as opposed to sitting in my pew waiting for the elements to be passed down to me.

I loved the ancient words connecting us to saints down through the ages who had been nourished by Christ at the table.

And as I look back, I think that my theology of communion, such as it was, was shifting a bit.

In my early years, I think I picked up the idea that communion was something for the super-Christians. It was for people much holier than me. Not just anyone could take it. You had to be baptized and a member of the church. It was a very serious business.

Later on, I started to rub shoulders with Christians from other traditions, some of whom took communion every week, some of whom said it was the focal point of every worship service (not the sermon! Imagine!).

(I had one pastor tell me once what a relief this was. "Even if my sermon is terrible," he said, "I know people will still encounter Christ at his table.")

I started to hear respected pastors and professors invite us to the table with words that you have heard me say here at Lethbridge Mennonite Church.

*This table is not a reward for the righteous but an invitation for the hungry.*

Well, speaking of Lethbridge Mennonite Church, when I got here in 2011, I was surprised by how infrequently we celebrated communion.

I was used to at least monthly communion in all of my previous churches. Here, it was only three or four times a year, usually associated with a significant day in the Christian calendar. The First Sunday of Advent. Maundy Thursday. Pentecost.

I remember asking someone in the church about this in my early days. The person responded, "Oh, well communion is special. If we did it every month, it would lose its significance."

I don't remember finding this argument very persuasive at the time. I still don't. I pointed that we heard a sermon every Sunday, so what did that say about sermons? I think I got a chuckle in response.

I've tried to encourage us to celebrate the Lord's Supper more frequently over the years. Perhaps you've noticed.

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That's a small window into my own journey with communion. Yours might have some similarities, probably some differences, too.

But to return to the question. What's with this "attend to your relationships" business in the bulletin? Where does this come from.

This practice preceded my arrival at Lethbridge Mennonite. I don't know the specifics of when it started or why.

But to the best of my knowledge, the thinking behind statements like this comes out of passages like the one we heard earlier from 1 Corinthians 11.

This is a passage where Paul offers some of his most explicit instructions on the Lord's Supper. This is where the idea of eating the bread and drinking the cup in an "unworthy manner" and "examining ourselves" before taking communion comes from.

It's a stern warning to a dysfunctional church. A church characterized by sexual immorality, infighting, divisions, abuse and neglect of the poor, and bad theology.

The Lord's Supper at the time was not a bit of bread and grape juice in a Sunday service; it was a communal meal, a "love feast."

And apparently some people were getting drunk, cutting in line, taking too much, leaving not enough for others. Kind of the opposite of a feast demonstrating anything like "love."

Paul's harsh sounding words about judgment and despising the church of God are a response to a church not connecting the Lord's Supper with the example and teaching of the One who instituted it in the first place.

My guess is that we also conflate this with Jesus' teaching in the Sermon on the Mount:

So when you are offering your gift at the altar, if you remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift (Matthew 5:23-24).

What Jesus is saying here is what he says elsewhere. God is not interested in religious observance and performance that has no connection to the way in which we treat one another.

Heart, mind, body, soul, hands, feet, words, deeds... they all go together, Jesus says. Don't bother with elaborate rituals and religious observance if you're not going to pay attention to the way you're treating your fellow human beings. *First be reconciled...*

So, at its best, the practice of encouraging us to attend to our relationships in advance of communion is meant to be a reminder of all this.

It's a guard against the hypocrisy that comes so easily to us as human beings. It's a reminder that if we're going to come to the table of the one who laid down his life for his friends and his enemies, then our lives should be seeking to reflect that same self-denying, other oriented love and care.

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The title of my sermon today is "Attention Deficit." I chose this because I think we must acknowledge that too often we do not attend to our relationships as we ought to.

Relationships are hard work. They take time and effort. They take working through misunderstandings and improving communication. They take setting our needs aside for the sake of others.

They take saying sorry for when we hurt one another. They take saying hard things like, "I forgive you."

They take attention. Relationships require tending. This is worth stating explicitly.

Because we need each other. Our well-being is bound up with that of our neighbours.

A recent study made this clear. Since 1938, the Harvard Study of Adult Development has been investigating what makes people flourish. After starting with 724 participants—boys from disadvantaged and troubled families in Boston, and Harvard undergraduates—the study incorporated the spouses of the original men and, more recently, more than 1,300 descendants of the initial group.

What makes people happy? What makes them flourish? The study yielded a perhaps surprising conclusion. It wasn't money. It wasn't status. It wasn't professional accomplishments.

Here's what the study found:

[T]he longest in-depth... study on human life ever done... [has] brought us to a simple and profound conclusion: Good relationships lead to health and happiness. The trick is that those relationships must be nurtured.<sup>1</sup>

*Attend to your relationships.* We might have mixed feelings about having this in our bulletins the week before communion, but it seems like solid life advice more generally.

And of course, what the Harvard study presents in secular terms, the church has always known, at least in theory. We are the body of Christ. We are given by God to one another to grow in faith, hope, and love.

Christianity is not for lone rangers. Christ has bound us to one another. We are in this together.

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I've meandered a bit on the subject of communion and tending our relationships this morning.

I want to end with two comments, one about the note in the bulletin and then about Jesus and his table.

First, our note in the bulletin. I'll confess that over the course of reflecting on this question and writing this sermon, I came to feel a bit more ambiguous about it.

Like the person who asked the question, I wonder if it communicates some things that we might not intend.

It might be time to rethink this note. I commit to reflecting on this further and discussing with others in church leadership.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2023/01/harvard-happiness-study-relationships/672753/>

I do think it's important to attend to our relationships—I hope this is clear by now. But I don't ever want people to think that coming to the table involves checking off a long list of moral prerequisites.

As I've said throughout our Faith Questions series, we are all sinners in need of grace. This does not change. And this table is nothing if not an expression of grace.

Which brings me to Jesus, with his disciples, at the very first Lord's Supper.

I reread the story from Luke's gospel yesterday. I was struck again by who was seated with Jesus at the table.

- Peter, who would deny Jesus explicitly three times
- Unnamed disciples (my guess is that it's James and John, who still haven't learned their lesson) who *at the table* quarrel about who was greatest (not the greatest example of tending to relationships! This presumably would have earned them a stern word from Paul!).
- And, of course, Judas. The one who would betray him into the hands of sinful men.

These sinners were the ones Jesus broke bread with. These sinners were the first ones to whom Jesus said, "This is my body, given *for you*, Peter, James. This is my blood, poured out *for you*, John, Judas..."

And Jesus still invites sinners to the table. Those who are tending their relationships well and those who are struggling. Those whose relationships are characterized by peace and harmony and those who feel like failures.

Christ's table is, indeed, not a reward for the righteous but an invitation to the hungry.

Thanks be to God.

Amen.

