

Welcome & Announcements:

Many of you know me, and still, it is polite to actually give my name and title. I am Patrick Preheim, and along with Luke Bushman, we are the pastoral staff at Nutana Park Mennonite Church. Today I am the worship leader and will preside over a communion service. Welcome to all have gathered for worship this Day. This July long weekend we are in a slightly different space and atmosphere than what is typical on most Sundays. About this atypical space and this worship service... the intent was confirmed for me in a conversation earlier this week.

This past Monday I had a good morning visit with one of our a.v. team. I was explaining what would be happening today and some of my interest in trying this new format. Central for me in giving this arrangement a go is my awareness that the a.v. team has been on every Sunday for the past four years. When we consider mid-week services like funerals and holiday services, they have been steadfastly on duty closer to 70 times a year. Musicians, gracious souls that they are, have been equally taxed. That is a long stretch regardless if using American or Canadian math.

I am one of this odd species that actually enjoys going to church. Sure, I often get paid for being here but I actually value worshiping together. And yet I, even I, recognize that some weeks it is simply nice to take a Sunday off for a walk in the park or a trip to see family or something just away from so many people. My conversation partner that Monday morning agreed—he thought it wasn't the worst idea and worth a try. In the words of a beloved musical group from my younger years, "Everybody needs some time away, far away, from the one that they love".¹ I am not sure the saying is true, but it is true at least some of the time. So there is no a.v. crew this morning, no livestream, no music. You have me to blame for the idea and worship deacon Don to blame for permitting it.

My thoughts, however, are not whimsical. I have read enough to know that the early church, and even our Mennonite ancestors, met during dangerous times in spaces far cruder than this space. This is so much better than a barn! They didn't necessarily sing; why draw too much attention to the gathering. In the early years, they often met in apartments adjacent to other apartments, or in the homes of the affluent. Their worship structure was basic. And this more minimalistic approach to meaningful worship touches upon some of my hopes for this summer series.

¹ *Chicago* from their album "Chicago 16", 1982.

Many of us have gone to church for much of our lives. We have even participated in the tradition we call communion—a ritual that re-enacts the table ministry of Jesus among his disciples and those who tagged along to hear some of what he had to say. We don't often stop to consider the location of those earliest communion moments and their implication. Some traditions suggest that communion, which is sometimes called a sacrament, has the power to mediate an awareness of the divine. That is what sacraments do—they mediate a sense of the Divine presence. The crazy thing is that communion practices have shifted through the centuries, and still they mediate something beyond ourselves in their various circumstances and locations.

Given nearly 2000 years of institutional Christianity and nearly 500 years of Mennonite // Anabaptist worship, I have loads of historical information available to dump on people. Alas, historical and biblical reflection is important for me and so I will subject you to it almost every chance I get. And yet I know what happens when an over zealous rancher puts too much feed in the trough—it is a waste of time for the rancher, a squandering of good hay, and it can lead to bloating amongst the creatures to which one has committed to care. It is my intention to serve rations in modest portions. There are wide ranging communion related topics which we can, and might, explore. Through the years, though, and not all today.

We could speak about sacred feasts in the scriptures and their connections to liberation (as in the Passover), or the heavenly banquet when death has finally been abolished (like Isaiah 25), or children as a part of communion. Do we have an open communion service to which non-Mennonites, and goodness gracious potentially un-baptized God fearers, are invited to receive at the Lord's table or do we take a more limited approach? And why? Over the course of summer long weekend services between now and 2030, I might actually exhaust all the beautiful and nuanced avenues of what contributes to the sacramentality of this ritual we call communion. Maybe, or maybe not. This year is a trial run.

My take it that this is a potential moment in our congregational life to impart teaching and learning about communion within the setting of worship itself where we partake of communion. Summer is a relaxed time—a time to try something new for us which is actually quite old. And maybe this is a good moment in our congregational life to do so. It does seem a manner in which we might draw strength from a central church tradition in a relaxed worship setting. I guess we will see how it goes and modify as necessary.

Today, we will explore some of the context surrounding our earliest biblical account of communion. Paul's correspondences to the Corinthian congregation

circulated somewhere around 50 CE,² The gospels were all compiled at a time later than the letters of Paul. The Corinthian congregations would have eaten together, prayed together, reflected on the apostolic letters and stories of Jesus together, and participated in communion. It is my hope to impart three nuggets from this section of 1st Corinthians which can enrich our sense of God's care for us and God's call for this time and place. And then, as the Corinthian congregation would have done, we will eat together. Hopefully none go away hungry, as was the case in Corinth, but I will say a bit more about that later.

Announcements

There are no announcements I have been asked to highlight. Are there any to be mentioned from the congregation gathered? On this long weekend (June 30th, 2024), we are invited to consider the gift of this place we call Canada, those who were here previous to us, and our Creator God who seeks to reconciliation with us and the many peoples who bear the Divine image.

In that Spirit, we acknowledge that we are gathering on the traditional territory of Indigenous peoples. We give thanks to Creator, and to those peoples who have stewarded this land for generations. We are grateful for the opportunity to live, work, and worship here as we witness the reconciling movement of the Spirit and seek to live into right relations with our Indigenous neighbours and all of creation. (VT #878)

Call to Worship:

Our Call to Worship today comes from a book bequeathed to me from the library of Joyce Tremmel-- *Earth Prayers*.³ It comes from the Chinook Psalter:
“The garden is rich with diversity
With plants of a hundred families
In the space between the trees
With all the colours and fragrances.
Basil, mint and lavender,
God keep my remembrance pure,
Raspberry, Apple, Rose,
God fill my heart with love.
Dill, anise, tansy,
Holy winds blow in me
Rhododendron, zinnia,

² Dan Nighswander, *1 Corinthians* in the Believers Church Bible Commentary Series (Harrisonburg, VA: Herald Press, 2017), p. 21.

³ *Earth Prayers: From Around the World 365 Prayers, Poems, and Invocations for Honouring the Earth*, edited by Elizabeth Roberts and Elias Amidon (New York: HarperCollinsPublishers, 1991), p. 309

May my prayer be beautiful
May my remembrance O God
 be as incense to thee
In the sacred grove of eternity
As I smell and remember
The ancient forests of the earth.

Lighting of the Peace Lamp (Luke)

Children's Time (Luke)

Congregational Sharing and Prayer:

At this time I invite us to an informal time of sharing joys & concerns around our tables. We have two formally listed items of joy / concerns on our web-site, and there may be others with which you live.

After a few minutes, I will call us back to group space. If there is something to be shared more publicly, the microphone will be open. After this opportunity to share among the larger group, we will join together in a collective time of prayer.

Joys, Concerns and Congregational prayer (STJ #144 adapted)

- We recognize two families impacted by the reality of death. Aaron Derkson died June 23rd. He was a niece of Val Epp and sister in law to Erna Neufeld. Peter Regier died on June 24th; he was a nephew to Elva (Ernie) Epp; the funeral is later today.
- Now is the time where we are invited to share the joys or concerns with which we live. Passing on the opportunity is always an option.

Are there any items from table group sharing which would be good for the larger group to hear? (If not, we will join together in a time of prayer)

Most merciful God, we wait before you aware of our frailty, aware of the fragility of our world and the peoples of the earth. We remember that we are dust and to dust we will return. Give consolation to the Regier and Derksen families as they honour your walk with their loved ones. Give compassion to friends and family of all bereaved that we might offer the support they need. We hold before all in our circles coming to terms with their mortality, and grieving losses which they have experienced. We recognize you as the Great Physician, and give thanks for those in the healing arts. May they endure the challenges in health care which we

continue to experience. We hold before you those who suffer in body, mind and spirit. Lord, in your mercy.

You have brought a good creation into being and sustain it still. In the midst of your good garden, we recognize that there is violence perpetrated amongst people and against creation itself. Grant mercy to those who suffer drought and flood, wisdom for those who lead, and steadfastness to those who hope for peace rooted in justice. We pray for our world. Lord, in your mercy.

We give thanks for the support we receive among family and those who are practically family. May the children of our lives be graced with acceptance in our families, communities and congregations. May the summer break bring times of connection among families and rest for school staff. Grant understanding and patience to those charged with summer programs which seek to fill in the gaps of the school structure. May the Gospel of Peace which we hold dear begin in our hearts, radiate in our homes, and shape our communities and countries. We pray for our children, our homes, our colleagues and our fellow believers. Lord, in your mercy.

We offer to you other joys which we celebrate and other concerns we carry. Lord, in your mercy.

Gracious God, we give thanks for the care you extend to us and all creation. Your love never ends. We rest in your care. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Scripture Reading: First Corinthians 11:17-34

Now in the following instructions I do not commend you, because when you come together it is not for the better but for the worse. For, to begin with, when you come together as a church, I hear that there are divisions among you; and to some extent I believe it... When you come together, it is not really to eat the Lord's supper. For when the time comes to eat, each of you goes ahead with your own supper, and one goes hungry and another becomes drunk. What! Do you not have homes to eat and drink in? Or do you show contempt for the church of God and humiliate those who have nothing? What should I say to you? Should I commend you? In this matter I do not commend you!

The Institution of the Lord's Supper

For I received from the Lord what I also handed on to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took a loaf of bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, 'This is my body that is for you. Do this in remembrance of me.' In the same way he took the cup also, after supper, saying, 'This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me.' For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes.

Whoever, therefore, eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be answerable for the body and blood of the Lord. Examine yourselves, and only then eat of the bread and drink of the cup. For all who eat and drink without discerning the body, eat and drink judgement against themselves. For this reason many of you are weak and ill, and some have died. But if we judged ourselves, we would not be judged. But when we are judged by the Lord, we are disciplined so that we may not be condemned along with the world. So then, my brothers and sisters, when you come together to eat, wait for one another. If you are hungry, eat at home, so that when you come together, it will not be for your condemnation. About the other things I will give instructions when I come.

Sermon:

I do not want to belabour the historical reflections and their implications. Still, though, I expect that most of us do not know the context into which Paul's words were written. I will keep my points to three.

First, the worship format in Corinth is a good place to begin. "At the heart of early Christian worship was table fellowship. Throughout the first three centuries Christian communities gathered once a week for a meal." The early decades are what Alan Krieder has called the "evening banquet".⁴ We might think that those early Christians were so clever to offer food as a potential lure for newcomers. Actually, the format of a proper meal reflected the practices present in the Greco-Roman world. Quoting now from Dan Nighswander:

"Fellowship meals were widely practiced in the ancient world, in both Jewish and Gentile settings, both religious and secular, with many functions and purposes. At least some of the Corinthian Christians had previously been involved in pagan religions. In Hellenistic cults, especially in the mystery religions, fellowship meals were associated with deities. They understood that honoring the deity in the meal would result in blessing, and offenses would result in sickness and death as punishment. We do not know exactly what illness and deaths had been experienced in the Corinthian congregations, but we do know that Paul associates those experiences with improper practice of the Lord's supper. This would have been an apparent connection for the Corinthians because of their previous experiences".⁵

⁴ Alan Kreider, *The Patient Ferment of the Early Church: The Improbable Rise of Christianity in the Roman Empire* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Publishing Group, 2016), p186-188..

⁵ Nighswander, pp. 252-268

Krieder details what these evening banquets consisted of. To begin, they had an evening meal. This makes sense if you consider that the working class were coming off their day time jobs and would benefit from a physical nourishment. This is, after all, before days off for societal Sabbath took effect. Around the conclusion of the formal meal time, there would have been a specific re-enactment of the Lord's Supper. After this was what was a symposium time at which people gave speeches, conversed, and true to Corinthian form drank. People were invited to share during the service. They prayed together. It was physical nourishment. It was emotional connection. It was grounded in the generosity of Jesus. It went on longer than most of our worship.

I will stop with the sociological stuff to share some of what strikes me about these learned observations:

- Eating together is good. In a conversation with in-coming fellowship deacons Jean Wiens and Janet Barnes, we observed that much of what the fellowship committee does these days focuses on food. Good things happen when we eat together.
- Opportunities to share are good. We all need to be heard. From the lowliest of labourers to the managers of estates to the captains of industry—space was created for voices to be heard. All of this across genders. This participation contributed to the attractive nature of Christianity.

All of this great so long as it stays on track, which takes me to my second area of reflection.

Corinth, we have a problem. Hungry people are **not** being fed, we hear in the text. So what is going wrong at the potlucks???

[Gerd] “Theissen has assembled illustrations from the writings of Eratosthenes, Plutarch, Hagias, and Plato to demonstrate the common practice of wealthy diners bringing their own provisions to public feasts, though it also criticized by other ancient writers. Theissen believes that ‘the wealthy Christians not only ate separately that food which they themselves had provided, but it appears that they began doing so before the commencement of the congregational meal’. When the common meal did begin, some people were given more and better food than others, as was the common practice in meals hosted by wealthy patrons in other settings.⁶

Apparently, the better off Corinthian Christians were more accustomed to traditions within the Corinthian club scene than the Jesus model. The upshot is that....

⁶ Ibid.

1. The elite from the congregation were bringing their food in a picnic basket rather than as a potluck dish.
2. the upscale folk who had time on their hands started the party after their afternoon naps rather than waiting for the gathered body (and discerning the body is mentioned directly in chapter 11). That in itself is a Jesus concern, but not a Corinthian context concern.
3. Oh, the food is now gone and the wine processed—not a great situation for the working class dragging in after a day of hammering marble for those lovely Corinthian columns.

Knowing the context helps, I think. What might we possibly learn from this reality of Corinth?

- Food insecurity and equitable distribution of existing food continues is not a 1st century issue; it continues in our world. Not all can afford to be generous; others can be. Consider what might be spent on food in your household this Canada Day long weekend and consider a matching grant to your local food bank, CHEP or MCC.
- The church is asked by Jesus and Paul to be a space in which some of the class distinctions which exist to be minimized. I would hope we do this at NPMC, but it is always an important question to ask.

My final area of consideration comes in the sense of betrayal Jesus experienced and betrayals within the Corinthian congregation. Unworthiness dogs many of us; and obliviousness to the sins of omission and commission is equally prevalent. If anyone needed to be worthy of the cup and bread honouring Jesus, who could receive? And equally true is that if a person felt worthy of, entitled to, the bread and cup honouring Jesus without reflection, should they really be joining in this meal which honours Jesus? Perhaps you understand the quandary. Paul is calling out neglectful behaviour on the part of some Corinthian Christians, and is also linking his critique to the grace filled actions of Jesus.

“The meal that Christians call ‘the Lord’s Supper’ was instituted *on the night when he was betrayed* (v.23). This is a historical reference to the night when Jesus was betrayed, or handed over, to the authorities who then instigated his crucifixion. It was also particularly apt in the Corinthian setting, where the Christians have ‘betrayed’ Jesus in the way they commemorated this very event in Jesus’ life (v.27).⁷ This language is not present in so many of the Communion meals at which Jesus presided, with the exception of one.

⁷ Dan Nighswander, *1 Corinthians* in the Believers Church Bible Commentary Series (Harrisonburg, VA: Herald Press, 2017), pp. 252-268.

Judas was present at the Eucharist in John's gospel. John tells us that during the meal Jesus broke off a piece of bread, dipped it into the common dish and offered it to Judas (Jn 13:26). This is a traditional Middle Eastern act of kindness often used by one person to express deep friendship to another. The piece of dipped bread is usually offered with the accompanying phrase, 'Eat this for my sake'. Jesus extended this friendship ritual to Judas, who refused it and then withdrew from the table. John reports ominously 'and it was night' (Jn 13:30); indeed it was! In spite of everything, Jesus singled out Judas and extended to him a profound demonstration of costly love. Judas preferred his chosen path of deception and death.⁸ We can apply several aspects of Paul's language and biblical studies to our own context.

- A humble spirit of self reflection is good when preparing for a communion service. I am not talking about a visit with the bishop, deacons, or anything so dramatic. A weekly inventory (nay, a daily inventory!) grounded in the teachings of Jesus might be good for us all.
- Secondly, Jesus extended to Judas the bread. Even the betrayer is invited. Especially the betrayer. We make mistakes, Jesus welcomes us still. Can we be compassionate to ourselves? Can we be compassionate to others? Invoking the betrayal motif of communion gives space to accept our best intentions and that of others.

I conclude with a small observation from Alan Krieder. Christians claimed that through their worship services God changed them and strengthened them to cope with precarious realities and daunting problems of daily living

We come today to formed in some small way towards a greater discipleship of Jesus.

Questions for Conversation

1. What was your first communion experience? Is there anything which caused comfort, concern or confusion?
2. What varied forms of communion have you celebrated, and what were their circumstances.
3. Some congregations celebrate communion weekly; Mennonites less so. How often makes sense to you and why?

Communion Service

⁸ Kenneth E. Bailey, *Paul Through Mediterranean Eyes: Cultural Studies in 1st Corinthians* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2011), pp. 314-324.

The bread and wine we accept in communion today connect us with our ancestors who have departed this world, the living God who continues to nourish us, and those who will one day yet embrace the love of Christ. The bread we accept is the same which our loved ones accepted. The wine we accept today is the same which our children will accept in years to come. “Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever”. We remember those who have died. We remember those who grieve their going. It is Jesus who remembers us, even as we remember him. This is the Lord’s table. All who wish to receive from the Lord are welcome to partake.

For we received from the Lord what we hand on to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took a loaf of bread, and when he had given thanks, broke it saying, “this is my body that is for you. Do this in remembrance of me.”

In the same way he took the cup also, after supper, saying, “This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me. For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord’s death until he comes.”

We take a moment to reflect on our lives and the reconciliation to which we are invited and the reconciliation asked of us.

As the grain of this bread was scattered and then gathered into one to bless us so let us be gathered together, refined and made ready to bless the world.

Prayer: We give you thanks, O God, for the ways in which you have sustained your people in the past. You supplied our ancestors the bread they needed in their journey to this place. You walked with them through struggles, illness, and death. We also recognize, O God, that you have sustained us. The same spirit and substance which fed our ancestors has nourished us. So we give you thanks, O God, for the ways in which you have strengthened those of Nutana Park Mennonite Church over the years. We give you thanks that you have brought us to this table today. Forgive our sins. Free us from whatever binds us. Remove our anxiety, fear, anger, and guilt. Come to us in the breaking of bread this day. Amen.

In your table groups, please serve each other and hold the bread so that we might all eat together.

May Christ’s body be bread for our souls, to give us strength as we continue our pilgrimage. Take and eat for the Lord is good.

Let us give thanks in prayer for the cup that has strengthened God’s people through the generations.

Prayer: We give you thanks, O God, that you took human form; that you showed us a new way of living; that you showed us courage in suffering; that you showed there is a power greater than death. Our loved ones gained strength from your teaching, your life, your death and your resurrection. It enabled them to be peacemakers in the midst of hostility, to offer kindness in the midst of anger, to remain faithful in the midst of uncertainty. Forgive our weaknesses. Free us from concerns about the future so that we may truly live today. Help us feel your presence in suffering, loss, and death. Let your life flow into us through the sharing of the cup. Amen.

As we share the cup with our table mates, we do so as a deliberate act of service. The cup contains grape juice. Please hold the cup so that we might all drink together.

Have all been served? May the new wine of Christ help us live with courage and hope so that God's kingdom comes to earth as it is in heaven. Take and drink to life eternal.

We conclude our communion service in prayer: Holy God, you have first remembered us. May we be faithful in remembering your goodness, manifest in the lives of those whom we especially remember today. Unite us with those who have died, those with whom we worship today, and the whole church of your Spirit around the world. Lead us always closer to Jesus who feeds us and loves us and never forgets us. We speak together now the prayer he taught his disciples, saying, "Our father..."

Benediction

Eternal Lord God hear the prayer of we, your children. You hold all souls in life: Give to your whole Church in [heaven] and on earth your light and your peace; and grant that we, following the good examples of those who have served you here on earth and are now at rest, may we be given strength to join with them in faithful discipleship and enter with them into your unending joy; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen. -Book of Common Prayer, Collect for Special Days #8 (adapted)

Blessing for the Meal

Doxology