

# Encountering, Embracing, Embodying Christ... In Life; in Community; in the World

Friday, November 1, 2019; SERMON

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## We Become What We Receive

To begin this evening, I invite you to recall a time in your life when you took communion and you found this act of taking communion especially meaningful for you. Recreate that image for yourself:

- Where were you? Were you in a building or outdoors?
- Where you with your regular congregation or with a more mixed group of people?
- Did you have wine or juice? Did you drink from a small cup or from one large cup? Did you tear your piece of bread from a common loaf or were you served your piece from pre-torn bits of bread?

And more importantly...

- What happened that made the experience of communion meaningful for you?
- Did you find the experience of communion meaningful because of the ritual itself or because of the larger context in which this communion experience was happening?

Now I won't ask you to raise your hands, but I wonder how easy it was for you to recall an experience of communion that was especially meaningful for you.

Of course, communion is often meaningful – sometimes because of the events of our lives around the time of communion and sometimes because of the ritual itself.

And yet... I have come to wonder whether we have lost something with respect to the ritual of communion. Let me explain:

Our ritual of communion is deeply bound to our sense of community, our sense of being the Body of Christ together. There is a reason why we call this ritual “communion” and not “Eucharist”. After all, the two words, “communion and community” share a common root. Our focus on community is also part of the reason we – mostly – only have communion four times per year. Once upon a time, bishops, pastors and deacons would visit each Mennonite home prior to communion to ensure everyone was ready for communion – and being ready for communion meant being at peace with one's neighbour. If two or more people were not at peace with one another, they would be encouraged to quickly go and make peace prior to communion so that they could still participate in the communion ceremony.

Of course, our approach to communion has had some challenges as well – insofar as the focus on community has sometimes also been used to exclude people. We do well to remember that the first person to whom Jesus offered the bread and the cup was Judas. In other words, Jesus allowed communion to honour the person with whom he had differences rather than using this ritual to exclude this person.

Imagine if we took both our relationships and the ritual of communion as seriously today as Jesus did – or as our Mennonite forebears, in their own way, also did.

I confess that I feel a sense of loss when I reflect on our communion heritage. I worry that we have lost some of the weight this ritual once held for us.

Sometimes it feels almost as though we are unsure how to regard our rituals, especially as the world around has changed at rapid speed. Do our rituals still have meaning? Do they still have power?

And while the question of how we regard the community focus of communion is significant, I wonder whether we also sustained a loss when we moved away from our Catholic roots 500 years ago.

In the Catholic tradition, the bread and wine literally become the body and blood of Christ. In the Protestant and Mennonite traditions, the bread and wine are only symbols of Jesus' body and blood, symbols that connect us to Jesus, to the Last Supper and, fundamentally, to one other.

To be sure - I am quite comfortable with the bread and wine acting as symbols of the body and blood of Christ - I am not suggesting that we change this. But I wonder... did we lose something when we stripped the communion service so fully of this mystery? By shifting to a "symbols-only" understanding of communion, did we give up on something related to its power? Do we risk forgetting that, somehow, Jesus is *in* the bread and the wine? Do we lose our confidence in the belief that in the act of taking communion, the *presence of Jesus in this ritual* has the power to transform us?

You may recall that when we met one year ago, we spoke about the time in which we are living, a time where people are longing for meaning, purpose, belonging and a deep sense of rest. There is a longing in our time to find our "home" again - *home* in something bigger than me and *hope* for something solid to stand on. In the midst of this longing, we are also seeing something else in this time. We know in our bones that a perfectly rational approach to faith has left us bereft - such an approach neither moves nor motivates us. But an emotions-only approach to faith has left us too much on a roller

coaster. The highs and lows of an emotional approach to faith are hard to sustain. And so, what we are seeing today is an openness to third way of faith. This third way is the way of mystery. It is not that emotion or logic are being left behind. Not at all. These two are still important. It is simply that a new (or maybe very old) way of knowing is wedging itself into the space between emotion and logic. This way of knowing is through an openness to mystery, ... through an openness to meaning that cannot easily be explained or put together like Lego building blocks. It is an openness to a power that is greater than ourselves and in whom and through whom both we and the world are being held, loved and transformed.

Let me say that again: *We are seeing an openness in our time to a power that is greater than ourselves and in whom and through whom both we and the world are being held, loved and transformed.*

And while this openness has multi-layered expressions, our core and collective symbol for this power and this mystery is communion.

Our forebears - including in the Mennonite Church - infused the ritual of communion with mystery and meaning, believing that in taking the bread and the cup, by ingesting the body and blood of Christ - *even* in its symbolic form - we *are* somehow changed.

Quite simply and quite boldly our communion ritual stands guard against the despair of our time and claims to all who partake: We become what we receive. Somehow and in some way, by ingesting the symbolic body and blood of Christ, we somehow become the Christ to and with one another.

Take, eat, this is my body, broken for you.

Take this cup, it is poured out for you.

(Pause)

What if we become what we receive?

I want to play for you a hymn that we will also hear during our communion service later today. It is a hymn with only four words: "I become what I receive." I invite you to simply close your eyes; let the words of this hymn wash over you. Listen for the mystery it seeks to convey. And open yourself to the love of God for you embedded in the words of this hymn.

<hymn>

We become what we receive.

<pause>

Symeon the New Theologian, a 10<sup>th</sup> Century monk, left us a poem to reflect this way of thinking about our relationship with Jesus. I would like to read Symeon's poem to you but must preface the poem by saying that it will sound strange to our ears because it is not how we talk today. Nonetheless, I believe there is something in this poem for us to consider. *Symeon's poem reads as follows:*

We awaken in Christ's body as Christ awakens in our bodies,  
and my poor hand is Christ, He enters my foot, and he is infinitely me.

I move my hand, and wonderfully my hand becomes Christ, becomes all of Him (for God is indivisibly whole, seamless in His Godhood).

I move my foot, and at once He appears like a flash of lightning.

Do my words seem blasphemous? Then open your heart to Him and let yourself receive the one who is opening to you so deeply.

For if we genuinely love Him, we wake up inside Christ's body where all our body, all over, every most hidden part of it, is realized in joy as Him, and He makes us utterly real, and everything that is hurt, everything that seemed to us dark, harsh, shameful, maimed, ugly, irreparably damaged, is in Him transformed and recognized as whole, as lovely, and

radiant. In His light he awakens as the Beloved in every last part of our body.”

End Quote

*In His light he awakens as the Beloved in every last part of our body.* I find Symeon’s words both comforting and just a little bit uncomfortable at the very same time. Is God’s love really so great that God is willing to love every last part of our body, every last part of ourselves? And if this is true, how do I receive this love? Can I manage such great love??

Because in truth, God’s love is often too much for us. There is a reason our Biblical forebears responded with fear when they encountered God face to face. And it is not by accident that we have tended to sanitize our communion experiences.

And yet, this is the communion promise – that in taking the bread and the cup *we open ourselves to a direct encounter with God’s great love.* This encounter not only promises to transform us, it promises to lay a claim on us, to bind us to God (not in oneness with God but in a relational unity with God).

To be fair, we can’t manufacture this transformation. Nor can we manufacture a sense of mystery in the communion ritual. But by opening ourselves to the *possibility* of mystery and meaning, we take up a stance that offers the least resistance to the lived experience of an encounter with God’s presence.



It is not magic that we are talking about here. It is not that we are lost one day and Christlike the next. Or scoundrels today and saints tomorrow. But slowly, with each day that we awaken to Christ within us, and with each day that we open ourselves to the realization that we are deeply beloved of God, we are transformed into the likeness of the Christ. Slowly but surely we become what we receive. We become transformed in our personhood. And, as we eat the bread and drink the cup, we join Jesus in pouring ourselves out for the world. *We become the Body of Christ.*

As Symeon states: “For if we genuinely love Him, we wake up inside Christ’s body where all our body, all over, every most hidden part of it, is realized in joy as Him, and He makes us utterly real, and everything that is hurt, everything that seemed to us dark, harsh, shameful, maimed, ugly, irreparably damaged, is in Him transformed and recognized as whole, as lovely, and radiant.”

It is because of this promise that Paul can exhort the people of Ephesus – and us here today – to be the Body of Christ together, to “...lead a life worthy of the calling to which we are called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit, just as we are called to the one hope of our calling, one Lord, one faith, one

baptism, one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and, yes,  
*in all.*”

There is one Spirit that is in all. This promise is also true for us. We become  
what we receive. AMEN.