**A Place at the Love Feast: Membership Transfer Sunday**

**Co-Pastor Susanne Guenther Loewen**

**October 30, 2016**

*Scripture: John 2:1-11*

Today we welcome five people into official membership of this faith community, formalizing their sense of belonging and participating in our life together, the knowledge that this is their church family and their church home.

Perhaps more than other Christian denominations, the Mennonite church tends to celebrate community – our life *together*, our *shared* faith, the *gathered* people of God. We enthusiastically research and tell our communal stories, our Mennonite and family histories. In a context in which individualism can isolate us from each other, this is an important emphasis. And yet we can sometimes underemphasize the ways that God walks with us in our ordinary everyday lives as individuals, the different paths that each of us take, the faith journeys we are each on, which are not identical, but diverse.

One of the hymns from the early Anabaptists in the 1500s talks about the balance between individuals and the community in a really striking way, using the imagery of the elements of Communion: it states,

“Just as one bread [is made] from many kernels,

And one drink from many berries [grapes]

So all true Christians

Are one bread and one drink . . .

In Christ the Lord. He nourishes us,

Multiplying true love and communion.”[[1]](#footnote-1)

What a beautiful image, to think of our individual stories and experiences being mixed and baked together like kernels of wheat into bread, or pressed together like many grapes and aged into wine.

And this same diversity is present around the table when we gather to share the Communion meal; there are many different paths to the Table. A few weeks ago, Patrick and I had a conversation during the sermon time about Communion as a Thanksgiving meal, as an abundant feast at which all are welcome. We looked at Jesus’ feeding of the 5000 as an inclusive sign that there is enough for all, multiplied by Jesus from a child’s humble lunch. Today we heard about a different kind of feast in John 2, the story of the wedding at Cana. Now you might be wondering what exactly a wedding banquet has to do with Communion, but this image of the Kingdom or “Kin-dom” of God as a wedding banquet appears several times in the New Testament, from Jesus’ parable of the wedding banquet (Luke 14) at which the invited guests all make excuses not to attend to the metaphor of the Marriage Feast of the Lamb in Revelation 19 to this wedding feast in the town of Cana in Galilee where Jesus turns water into really good wine, traditionally understood as the story of Jesus’ first miracle of his ministry.

So what does it mean to think about Communion as a marriage feast or “agape” love feast? As I was pondering this question this week, it struck me that even as a whole community attends a wedding and shares the love feast afterwards, they are nevertheless experiencing it differently – or it has different meanings for people depending on their season of life. For those who are married, it can be a reminder of their own wedding vows, a renewal of the covenants they have made to each other. For those adults who are single, it symbolizes a covenant they may undertake in the future, have undertaken in the past, or other covenants they make in their lives. For children, the whole practice is slightly mysterious – they don’t really understand what’s going on, and yet their presence there reminds us to celebrate the joy and simplicity of love. These children may marry when they grow up, following the example of those whom they’ve seen undertake marriage covenants with the blessing of the community upon them and their loving commitment.

And isn’t something similar going on today, just in terms of a different kind of covenant – namely, baptism? As we celebrate Communion today, we are celebrating the formal commitments that these new members are making to love and be loved within this community – though not all of us have made such covenants, we all celebrate those who are doing so today. But those of us who are baptized experience this as a renewing of our baptism covenants, while those who are not are nevertheless invited to participate in this commitment to walk together in love, perhaps one day making their own covenant commitments in their own way and their own time. In other words, here we have one practice – Communion – which has multiple meanings within the gathered community, depending on where we are in our faith journeys.

Viewing Communion as a love feast in this sense helps us to recognize the diversity of experiences around the table – one doesn’t have to be married, after all, to attend a wedding banquet! It also helps us recognize that our many paths to the Table are not linear. In the past, a certain order of things might have been assumed – first baptism, then marriage, then children – but I would hope we no longer assume that everyone has one way of patterning their lives, and recognize that the reality of our lives is not that neat and tidy, and that God’s presence with us is not limited to that understanding of having it all together or of being “successful” in a formulaic way; there is no “one-size-fits-all” journey of faith. In this way, it makes sense to move from an understanding that we must have our “affairs in order,” so to speak, *before* we gather around the Table for Communion, to an understanding that gathering around the Table *helps us* and makes it possible for us to figure things out. In other words, the love feast can reorient us to celebrate God’s love and our love for each other and thus transform us, even make us holy with a kind of contagious holiness.

After the service today, we will continue our worship with Communion around the potluck tables, a fitting symbol of Communion as love feast – or at least I think so, since Kris and I had a potluck feast at our very simple wedding! As we share our ordinary potluck foods around the tables, they become sacred offerings of love to each other; the “water” we pour thus becomes the “best wine.” It’s not so much what is shared that matters, but that it is shared; in our Anabaptist tradition, it’s the gathered church, not the bread and wine, that becomes the presence of Christ or the “sacramental community.”[[2]](#footnote-2) Also, this celebration of Communion also overflows the symbolic cube of bread and sip of wine or grape juice into a full meal. Symbolic nourishment here spills over into all actually being fed and having enough. And as we pool our contributions to the potluck love-feast, we all contribute our gifts to the Body of Christ – we become the many members of Christ’s body as we feed each other and commit or recommit to each other and to God’s work in and through us. And thus the love feast empowers us to be God’s hands and feet, making possible our love of neighbour, stranger, and enemy alike. AMEN

1. From the *Ausbund* hymnal (early 1500s), quoted in C. Arnold Snyder, *Following in the Footsteps of Christ: The Anabaptist Tradition* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2004), 102. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. See Andrew P. Klager, “Ingestion and Gestation: Peacemaking, the Lord's Supper, and the Theotokos in the Mennonite-Anabaptist and Eastern Orthodox Traditions,” *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 47, no. 3 (Summer 2012): 437, 455. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)