

Rempel vs. Rempel

Psalm 113/1 Tim.2:1-7 by Patty Friesen (Sept 18/16)

Psalm 113 speaks of a God who has an eye for the lowly ones and who chose to come in the lowly human form of Christ, our mediator and Saviour. Paul reminds us that he himself is a teacher of the once lowly Gentiles. In communion we remember Jesus' human form and mediation of God's love to us through his acceptance of even Judas at the Last Supper. How does our practice of the Last Supper shape how we view the lowly among us?

I present to you the trial of Rempel vs. Rempel; Mennonite Church Canada theologian Elsie Rempel in charge of faith formation of children vs. Mennonite Church Canada theologian John Rempel in charge of Anabaptist History. Unlike Kramer vs. Kramer, Elsie and John are not getting a divorce – both are still very committed to the Mennonite Church but they are fighting over custody of the children! John taught Patrick and I at Anabaptist Mennonite Seminary in Elkhart, Indiana and we so appreciate John's wry humour and dedicated research in Anabaptist History. It was from John that we learned of the high price Anabaptists paid for their practice of taking Jesus seriously by following Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount, that true faith feeds the hungry, clothes the naked, visits the prisoners. Ours is not a faith that merely gets us into heaven but tells us how to live as Christians on earth. John also taught us that serious Christians get baptized and that serious baptized Christians have a high view of communion – of the reverence and holiness of this sacrament – this remembering Christ's life and death that renews our souls and empowers us for the work of being Jesus' disciples. John Rempel made us proud to be Mennonite.

Enter Elsie Rempel, theologian of faith formation of children started talking 20 years ago about children needing to imitate our practices in order to want to be a part of the church after they've grown up and left home. She said children need to go on service projects with us and they need to help take the offering and put money in the offering themselves and they need to take communion with us in order to learn the importance of communion and to feel a part of the church.

Last Sunday we looked at our historically high view of communion as Mennonites. We shared during the Sunday School hour of the practices we grew up with – like the time of soul searching and contemplation – there was a German word for that - two weeks before an evening service. Wine was served at communion until someone joined the church who was alcoholic, then in consideration for him, we switched to grape juice. The bread was received with a white hankie because it was too holy to touch. We talked about how communion has changed over the years. It is practiced now four times a year by most congregations – on Maundy Thursday, Pentecost, World Communion Sunday – the first Sunday of October or in our case this year on Thanksgiving and then again on either Memorial Sunday or New Year's Day to make four. We have moved communion from Sunday evening to Sunday morning, which has led to some of our current dilemma about who gets to take it. When we had it in the evening, only the serious members came back to church but on Sunday morning, we've got everyone, including children and not-yet baptized and they want a part of the action. And we have more not-yet baptized. It used to be that people got baptized so they could get married but now people aren't getting married and they aren't getting baptized either! How do we practice communion to make it attractive to those growing in commitment to Christ?

We also have more people among us who come from non-Mennonite backgrounds, thank goodness and they have a different view of everything. They've been baptized as babies and they have been confirmed in grade school and they've been taking communion for a very long time and can't figure out why Mennonites are so hung up on things.

Other changes in communion: we experience communion in more settings than we used to. We had communion with 2000 people at TCU place this summer and had communion at our Sunday School picnic. This makes communion more versatile and perhaps more confusing also because we aren't doing it the same way every time. We also used to pass communion down the pews and pass the peace to each other as we passed the bread, now we've been coming forward to receive the bread and cup from the deacons and pastors. We heard last week about the desire for both – to return theologically to serving each other in the pews but also once in awhile coming forward requires another conscious effort to come forward for grace.

Before children weren't allowed communion, now we have been serving them a cracker and grape and that seems to somewhat satisfy but they still come up for real bread after the service. Are they just hungry or do they want to feel a part of what the adults are doing? How do we teach them this isn't just a snack but a special reminder about Jesus? How do we teach them meaning and reverence? How do we teach them about faith? How can they grow into it?

As we wade more deeply into the waters of diversity of our church attenders and members, we see that people feel like they belong to our church and want to take communion even though they may not believe exactly as the rest of us do. In the old

days, you believed first and then you belonged through baptism and communion. Now this relationship between belonging and believing is moving around. This is why we have changed our membership guidelines to include people who desire full membership in two congregations, say like Osler Mennonite and Nutana Park Mennonite, or Osler Mennonite and Knox United. We have also changed our membership guidelines to include associate members who are not yet baptized. No one has taken us up on the offer for that category of membership but it is there for the taking. It reflects our recognition that people are still sorting out belief but we certainly want them to feel like they belong.

Eleanor Kreider in her book *Communion Shapes Character* notes that communion is the faith practice that builds desire for baptism. In communion, we all grow one step closer to Jesus as Naomi described it and children and youth will more likely want baptism if they've been growing in Jesus. If this is how we view communion – it has as much to do with faith formation and mission outreach to children and other unbaptized individuals, as it does remembrance and renewal for us already baptized? Can't it be both?

Eleanor Kreider is a Mennonite theologian from the United Kingdom where Anabaptism was formed in the past decades around house churches and the taking of communion as families around tables. In fact, every time Eleanor has supper guests, they begin the meal with remembering Christ's presence with them with a taste of bread and sip of wine before supper. Eleanor and Elsie - it strikes me that our women theologians are the ones advocating open communion.

Back to the communion for baptized members only, Tom Yoder Neufeld and The Mennonite Confession of Faith Article 12 and John Rempel say, We believe that the

Lord's Supper is a sign by which the church thankfully remembers the new covenant which Jesus established by his death. In this communion meal, the members of the church renew our covenant with God and with each other. All are invited to the Lord's table who have been baptized into the community of faith, are living at peace with God and with their brothers and sisters in the faith, and are willing to be accountable in their congregation. That's huge.

Elsie's Confession of Faith says: Jesus is the host who calls us, we don't decide who gets to come to the table. Jesus does not coerce us, to receive God's grace and thankfully remember Christ's life, death and resurrection at his table. Jesus meets, equips and sends all who welcome him, wherever they are on the journey of faith, at the communion table. Jesus' broken body and shed blood are signified in the elements we receive at communion as we remember our own brokenness and that of the church. Christ's work of reconciliation is also with us in the church as we join together at his table. Christ invites believers and the Holy Spirit equips them to renew their relationship with God and the church. Christ invites and welcomes faith novices to participate as novices, receiving God's blessing and giving their thanks and love to God and the church.

In Rempel vs. Rempel, my guess is most of us come down somewhere in between, eager for children to grow in their faith and feel included in the church and equally eager for our faith to be taken seriously. We will take this SS hour to hear from MC Canada delegates about how discernment happens in the larger church. Who says church is boring.

Let us pray...