

*“Theological Reflections of 19-year-old Ruth Richardson
on the Meaning of Communion”*

Delivered at Conrad Grebel College, Waterloo, Ontario, Canada

At the footwashing in preparation for Richard Kennel’s baptism

on Good Friday, April 7, 1977

Delivered again as the 64-year-old Rev. Dr. Ruth Ragovin,

who still struggles with the meaning of communion

at First Christian Church, Murray, Kentucky

World Communion Sunday, October 3, 2021



One of the stained glass windows at Conrad Grebel College

I Corinthians 10:1-4, 16-17 (Revised Standard Version) ~ I want you to know, brethren, that our fathers were all under the cloud, and all passed through the sea, ² and all were baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea, ³ and all ate the same supernatural food ⁴ and all drank the same supernatural drink. For they drank from the supernatural Rock which followed them, and the Rock was Christ. . . . ¹⁶ The cup of blessing which we bless, is it not a participation in the blood of Christ? The bread which we break, is it not a participation in the body of Christ? ¹⁷ Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread.

Something extraordinary arrived in my mailbox recently. My friend Lynn Sommer, in going through old boxes opened up a file folder of hers entitled “Spirituality.” In it was a sermon that I wrote and delivered when I was only 19 years old. She must have liked it and asked me for a copy of it. And I think she probably has the only copy since what she mailed me is the original typewritten copy written before electric typewriters on that onion skinned looking paper. I had forgotten the content of it over all these years. All I remember was that it was my very first sermon ever preached and that I was extremely nervous as I delivered it as a student in the chapel of the Mennonite-affiliated Conrad Grebel College in Waterloo, Ontario, Canada, where I was a student. My friend Lynn wrote on it that it was delivered at a footwashing ceremony a day or two before my friend Richard Kennel’s baptism on Good Friday, April 7, 1977. The topic was the meaning of communion. The Mennonites only took communion two or three times a year and it seems that it was the practice in that faith community that one first had to go to confession before one could take communion.

Since on World Communion Sunday we celebrate communion with Christians of all times and places, it seems appropriate for me to bring a message written by my 19-year-old self, who never could have imagined that one day she would stand in such a beautiful sanctuary, so far away from her home in Canada, in a congregation with what I consider to be the wonderful people in the world, whom I have grown to love, respect, and appreciate so very much. So here goes ...

What is Communion to me?

My first experience with communion was when I was about ten years old and I went to mass with a Catholic friend of mine—we all kneeled in a long row in front of the alter while the priests came by and very carefully placed a wafer in my mouth while he mumbled something about it being the body of Christ, and gave me a tiny glass of grape juice which I was told was the blood of Christ. *[Note: I remember going with my friend Mary Beth Russo, but surely my memory fails me here because it must have been a Chalice with wine in it. They must have told me not to tell the priest I was not Catholic.]* It was a very terrifying experience for me—everyone beside me had their heads bowed in prayer for this holiest of acts and there was a great deal of mystery involved in this event. Practically speaking what I was doing was simply eating a wafer and drinking some grape juice but I was told that I was actually eating Christ’s body and drinking his blood. Then I was not able to think in symbolic terms and it was not only a frightening but also a very morbid experience. The Catholics take the eucharist literally. I take this act symbolically as the reenactment of the Last Supper in which Christ tells his disciples:

²⁶ Now as they were eating, Jesus took bread, and blessed, and broke it, and gave it to the disciples and said, “Take, eat; this is my body.” ²⁷ And he took a cup, and when he had given thanks he gave it to them, saying, “Drink of it, all of you; ²⁸ for this is my blood of the^[a] covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins. (Matthew 26:26-28, NRSV)

The second time I took communion was last year at Conrad Grebel College [in Waterloo, Ontario, Canada]. I remember feeling very much the pressure of being perfect when I came before the Lord. I had to be at absolute peace with all those I knew and to have asked forgiveness for my many sins.

I felt very much the way Thomas Kempis did in his book *The Imitation of Christ* when he says: [**“THE VOICE OF CHRIST: ‘Come to me, all you that labour and are burdened; I will give you rest. This bread which I am to give is my flesh, given for the life of the world. Take, eat; this is my body, given up for you. Do this for a commemoration of me. He who eats my flesh and drinks my blood lives continually in me and I in him. The words I have been speaking to you are spirit and life.’ ...**

THE VOICE OF THE DISCIPLE: O Christ, the eternal Truth, these are your words ... and they are true, and so I must accept them with gratitude and faith. ... Such loving words, so full of sweetness and affection, they draw me to you—but my own sins frighten me away.] When I think of receiving so great a mystery, the knowledge of my guilt repels me. Your sweet words invite me, but the weight of my sin holds me back. [You bid me come to you with confidence, if I wish to have any companionship with you. You bid me take the food of immortality, if I desire to attain eternal life and glory. ‘Come to me,’ you say, ‘all you that labour and are burdened; I will give you rest.’ How sweet and kind that sounds to a sinner; for you, O Lord my God, are here inviting one who is destitute and worthless to share your most holy body.] But who am I, Lord, the presume to approach you? The very heavens cannot contain you, and yet you say, ‘Come to me all of you.’ What does this mean, this affection and kindness, this loving invitation? How dare I come, when I know there is no goodness in me to give me a right to come?”¹

¹ Thomas A Kempis, *The Imitation of Christ*, trans. Betty I. Knott (London / Glasgow: Fontana, 1962), pp. 213-214.

I felt very much then that the only way to face communion was to stand perfect before God. This is something which I have changed my mind about lately. Jesus came for the poor of spirit and for the sinners. It is rather proud of us to try and reach up to him when He can and wants very much to stoop down to us. I don't think that this means that we should have faith without works. I feel that we as Christians should try and follow Jesus' example and work on becoming more Christ-like persons. However I also feel that Christ can meet and forgive us at any level we are at. I feel that it is O.K. for us to bring our sins with us to communion as long as we honestly ask Jesus' forgiveness for them.

In the book Life Together by Dietrich Bonhoeffer we read: ***“The day before the Lord’s Supper is administered will find the brethren of the Christian fellowship together and each will beg the forgiveness of the others for the wrongs committed. Nobody who avoids this approach to his brother can go rightly prepared to the table of the Lord. All anger, strife, envy, evil, gossip, and unbrotherly conduct must have been settled and finished if the brethren wish to receive the grace of God together in the sacrament.”*** (p. 121)

First of all I would like to turn our attention to the fact that the place we get the idea of this brotherly reconciliation and confession is found in Paul's first letter to the Corinthians. Here we read that there are many divisions between members of the church plus something needs to be done about these divisions.

Paul says, ²⁷ ***Whoever, therefore, eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty of profaning the body and blood of the Lord.*** ²⁸ ***Let a man examine himself, and so eat of the bread and drink of the cup.*** (I Cor 11:27-28, RSV)

Here Paul is speaking to a group of Corinthians who were celebrating the Lord's Supper as though it were the messianic banquet and are forgetting to leave food for the slaves who came in late from work. There are several things which occur to me when I read this passage. Firstly, we have in a certain sense pulled this passage out of context. Before our communion services we have elaborate ceremonies of forgiving and forgiveness (confession). All this is good and fine but Paul is speaking to a very specific incident namely people gorging themselves with food without waiting for all the members of the community. This makes me wonder whether we should in fact even have a confessional service before communion.

Secondly, it seems to me by the tone of this passage that the Lord's Supper was something that was celebrated often and quite regularly. This implies to me that therefore confession too was something which was done often and regularly.

I think our one dreadful mistake in our thinking about confession is that it is something we set aside time for two or three times a year, before communion. Forgiveness and confession imply to me a certain amount of openness and honesty in relationships—it implies a certain attitude and lifestyle. I feel that forgiveness and confession should be part of our lives every hour of the day, every day of the week.

However this doesn't down play the importance of confession before communion. It is important, but it should be something that we will not only take part in tonight but it should be something we strive for in our everyday lives.

The third time I took communion was again last year at Conrad Grebel College, only this time it was immediately after my baptism. Before then communion had always seemed to me to be an absurd act of ritual in which people stood around and shared bread and supposedly some wine with each other while they remembered that Jesus had died on the cross for mankind's sins. And that is fine—it is one of many good ways of remembering Christ.

Still there was a certain amount of mystery in the act which I was beginning to grasp then but am more fully starting to understand now. This is the notion spoken of in I Corinthians 10:17: ***“Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread.”***

This passage sums up the importance of communion for me. I remember at the communion service after my baptism feeling at one with all the members in the room, because we were all taking part in the same rather absurd and very humbling ritual, of sharing bread and wine, symbolic of the body and the blood of Christ.

Today this passage has become even more meaningful to me. Lately I have begun to understand that in communion I am not only one with Christ with all those immediately in the room with me but I also become one with the historical Church and become one with those that are yet to be born. This is because we all in communion are following Jesus' example of breaking bread and drinking wine.

In communion I take part in a ritual which my ancestors have meaningfully taken part in and one which my children will hopefully continue to participate in. Therefore, communion is important to me because it puts me into historical perspective and joins me into the one body of Christ with all Christians past, present and future. ***“Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread.”***

Closing Prayer (from the 2nd century Didache, Chalice Hymnal 394)

“As the bread which we break

Was scattered over the mountains

And when brought together become one,

So let your church be brought together

From the ends of the earth into your eternal realm;

For yours is the glory and the power

Through Jesus Christ forevermore.” Amen.