

Practice makes perfect?

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Psalm 119:1-8, 1 Corinthians 3:1-9, Matthew 5:21-37

The Good News?

Thanks be to God? When I hear this gospel reading, I want to slam my Bible shut and throw it across the room. Or, more accurately, vigorously click my online Bible browser closed with as much drama as my index finger can muster. These words Jesus shares with his disciples on the mountain are, for me, some of the most difficult and convicting words in scripture. My anger will be judged as harshly as murder? My lust will be condemned as equivalent to adultery? My half-truths will be treated as lies under oath? “Be perfect as God is perfect,”¹ Jesus concludes at the end of the chapter. CLICK. I am so far from perfect I may as well just give up now. Fortunately, the lectionary does not let me do that. And neither does the Mennonite tradition.

Going deeper into the law of love

These words from Jesus have been so important to the Mennonite community over the centuries as we have struggled with what it means to be people of God’s peace. Often we have interpreted this section of the Sermon on the Mount as Jesus rewriting the law to include inward disposition as well as outward action. This has fuelled the perfectionism that has characterized Mennonite thought and practice.

Today I invite us instead to reflect on how Jesus, rather than creating a new law that trumps the old law, takes us deeper into the existing law by exploring its spirit and purpose. Does anyone remember the Greatest Commandment? If you know it, say it with me: “*You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.*” And the second is like it: “*You shall love your neighbour as yourself.*”² All the law and the prophets hang on these two commandments, according to Jesus.

In the reading this morning, Jesus explores what this love looks like in more detail.

Don’t nurture hard feelings—love makes peace.

Don’t desire what is not yours—love respects boundaries.

Don’t walk away from your promises without good reason—love keeps commitments.

Don’t take oaths since you should always say what you mean—love speaks the truth.

Although this may at first sound like another list of rules, upon reflection it is *more about who we are than what we do*. It is love that is about *identity as much as action*. It is love that requires all our emotional awareness, all our spiritual energy, all our intellectual acuity, and all our physical strength.

¹ Matthew 5:48

² Matthew 22:37-40, Mark 12:29-31, Luke 10:27

Mennonite communion practices

These teachings of Jesus have brought out the very best and the very worst in the Mennonite tradition, especially when it comes to communion.

When you are offering your gift at the altar, if you remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift there and go; first be reconciled to your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift.³

Mennonites have historically used this text as the basis for rigorous preparation for communion which may include congregational meetings and personal visits from the church leaders. Church members were expected to be reconciled to one another, and submissive to the discipline of the community, before participating in the meal.

For example, a story is told about two men from neighbouring farms who were members of the same congregation. A dispute developed between them regarding property lines. For several decades neither neighbour was able to participate in communion because of their conflict. When they were at last reconciled they shared the Lord's Supper together with joy.

This approach to communion, at its best, has encouraged us to be accountable to one another to passionately follow Christ's way of peace in our own relationships. At its worst, it has given us license to viciously and legalistically exclude others—and ourselves—from our communities when we need them most. The desire for a purely peaceful community, a church that is "perfect as God is perfect,"⁴ that is, as Menno Simons said, "without spot or wrinkle,"⁵ has led us to do violence to one another.

Practices express and form identity

The root of this connection between communion and church discipline is the expectation that, when we celebrate communion, we should be expressing something we have already achieved: a perfectly reconciled community. *Expressing* our identity as a community of faith is certainly *part* of the experience of communion. But it is not the whole story. When we celebrate communion, we are also *being formed* into something we are continually becoming: we are a community always in the process of reconciliation. Communion *both expresses and forms* our identity as a church and as individuals.

Arnold Neufeld Fast shared with us a couple of weeks ago about practices of spiritual formation: *practices that become habits that become identity*. Communion is one of these practices. It shapes our identity as people in relationship, people in community. Like practicing soccer or piano, when we practice community we make mistakes, we have to be persistent, and there is always room for improvement. Like practicing soccer or piano we eventually recognize that *we do not master the practice, the practice masters us*.⁶ It tones our muscles, it tunes our ears, it transforms our relationships, it forms our identity.

We desperately need practices to form our identities as followers of Jesus, as followers of God's law of love. I know I need as much help as I can possibly get to embody: love that makes peace, respects boundaries, keeps commitments, and speaks the truth. This is why I choose to be formed by the practice of communion. I trust that this will take more than a lifetime but also that I am already beginning to be mastered by the practice. Practicing communion, in various forms, has been an important part of my spiritual formation, especially over the past few years.

³ Matthew 5:22-24

⁴ Matthew 5:48

⁵ Based on Ephesians 5:27. Menno Simons. *Admonition of Church Discipline*. 1541.

⁶ Kenda Creasy Dean and Ron Foster. *The God Bearing Life*. Upper Room, 2005.

Practicing peace

I remember the many dinners shared by the House Church a circle of Mennonite friends and I initiated my last year in Waterloo. Every Sunday night we met for a meal and some form of worship, which could be anything from a Bible Study to a walk in the freshly fallen snow to an evening of praise and worship music. The relationships among us were not always peaceful. There were times when sitting and eating together was a struggle. Yet we continued to practice sharing a meal, despite the occasional uncomfortable silence or unfortunate comment. I suspect our identity as peacemakers grew more that year around the table than it did around the Bible. As we practiced communion, we practiced making peace.

Today after we celebrate this communion meal together, we will share a sign of the peace of Christ with one another. We do so to express the peace that already exists among us, but also to practice the reconciliation toward which we continue to grow.

Practicing boundaries and commitment

I also remember the many occasions on which I have attended Roman Catholic mass over the past few years. Mass always includes the celebration of the Lord's Supper. As I look back, I think about how my body has learned to bow, to kneel, to perceive whether it is appropriate to pass the peace with an almost imperceptible nod or a warm hug. I am amazed by how a commitment to repeat the same words each week has made words that were once foreign the words I find most familiar when I am in unfamiliar places and the words that spring to mind when they are needed the most.

I also think of how difficult it has been to respect the boundary of always receiving a blessing instead of the bread because I am not a member of the Catholic Church. Even if one local church welcomes me to participate fully, the global community does not – and I respect that. Attending mass has been one way of practicing keeping commitments and respecting boundaries that has transformed my identity and relationships.

When we celebrate communion together today, we reflect on our commitment to God and one another. For some of us this includes remembering the promises we made at our baptisms. For all of us it involves a commitment to learning the words and actions of this community and acknowledging the boundaries that guide our relationships with one another and those beyond these walls.

Practicing truth

One more example: I remember the first time I participated in communion at Chapel on the Green in New Haven, Connecticut, an outdoor church intended for people who are homeless. Chapel on the Green celebrates communion every Sunday afternoon. Bread is served directly onto the tongues of all who wish to receive. The peace of Christ is shared with smiles and handshakes. I am ashamed to admit I was not sure I wanted to shake hands with everyone present. Worshipping with Chapel on the Green forced me to confront hard truths about who I am really comfortable calling my community, about who I am truly able to touch and talk and eat with. These are yeses and noes I continue to struggle to express with honesty, even to myself. Practicing communion with Chapel on the Green was good practice for truth telling.

In preparation for celebrating communion together today, we spoke our truth to God and ourselves in confession and were assured of God's life-giving love and forgiveness. We come to the table as we actually are, without the pretence of perfection, trusting we are forgiven and accepted.

Practicing communion

I hope the practice of sharing this communion meal together today will form our identities and relationships, perhaps not over the next twenty minutes, but maybe over the next twenty years, or twenty decades. How might this meal form us as people who live love that makes peace, respects boundaries, keeps commitments, and speaks the truth? How might this meal inform how we share our next family dinner, or church chili lunch, or thanksgiving feast, or office coffee break?

When we practice communion, we choose to be formed in a certain way. However, we are not primarily forming ourselves. Paul writes to the Corinthians: "I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth."⁷ *God gives the growth.*

This communion meal is a means of growth, of spiritual formation, but it is so much more: it is a thanksgiving celebration for God's goodness for the gifts of growth, of forgiveness, of love. So we come to the table with joy to meet our God and one another.

⁷ 1 Corinthians 3:6