



**Mennonite
Church
Canada**

Resource Centre

Sermon

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United in Mind and Purpose

Week of Prayer: Praying over the broken body of Christ
1 Corinthians 1:1-17

“Unity” is our guiding word this morning. The call to unity is not only to our local congregations, but it has an international world-wide scope. We are connected together through the Mennonite World Conference.

This very diverse family contains more non-Europeans than folks of European descent, including 57,000 Ethiopians; and Mennonites in India, Ghana and Zaire for example, each of which have more members than we do in Canada.

And within MC Canada, we have churches that worship in English, German, French, Spanish, Laotian, Hmong, Vietnamese, Cantonese, Cambodian, Taiwanese, Cree and others.

Within our small denomination, we have a taste of the time, imagined by the prophet, when people from every tribe and nation, every language and race will come together to praise and serve God.

But there is also another story, that of fragmentation and division that goes back to the beginning of our history. In a report on “Mennonites in Europe,” Margaret Loewen Reimer looked back on Mennonites in the Netherlands:

“Soon after Anabaptists came to the Netherlands, in the late 1500s conflicts quickly arose over what constituted a ‘pure church’ and tensions increased with the arrival of Anabaptist refugees from Flanders, Germany, and elsewhere. Mennonites

were soon divided into various factions: Waterlanders, Young Flemish, Old Flemish, Frisian, Old Frisian, High German, Danzig Old Flemish, etc. In Haarlem, for example, Mennonites divided into at least 7 congregations which were not reconciled until the late 1600’s”

Our tradition of fragmentation thrives to this day.

It is a test of our faith and our imaginations to picture a unified church!

I have found 1 Corinthians a wonderful text for facing the call to unity within a unity-challenged church. 1 Corinthians calls us to “a grand-canyon stretch” between the reality of the church of Corinth on one side and the high vision that Paul presents on the other.

This church is divided into squabbling cliques...he calls for unity.

Their mood is quarrelsome and boastful...he calls for humility and charity.

They are bogged down in a swamp of arrogance...he presents the high points of 1 Corinthians 13.

They are high on their own spirituality...he points them to the cross.

I must confess that one of the impulses within me, would be to wash my hands of such an arrogant boastful, fractious lot and say... why bother?!

But, Paul does not walk away; nor does he bog-down in the ugly realities that he sees in the Corinthian church; rather, he looks at them and sees a vision of the church of Jesus Christ as God intends it to be.

Paul's imagination is inspired and alive as he writes. He does not just hold up the mirror that reflects the divisions and the in-fighting; he also holds up the greater mirror that reflects who they are in Christ!

Even in the opening greeting Paul reaches a high flight of inspired imagination when he names them with these words, (which do not match his later descriptions)

Paul addresses them as "those sanctified in Christ Jesus and called to be holy together with all those everywhere who call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ."

He sees for them: holiness and "togetherness."

The challenge for us as we meet together to study and to pray, will be to open our imagination.

The texts will also hold up two mirrors for us:

The first mirror reflects the realities of our church and the church around the world;

Then, the second mirror reflects how God imagines us to become.

First, a word about Corinth

Corinth was situated on a narrow neck of land between the Gulf of Corinthian on the west and the Aegean Sea to the east. It connected Greece to the North with the Peloponnesos to the south. Europe to the west and Asia to the east met in Corinth.

Its geography made it a natural meeting place. So over the centuries, Corinth served as a flourishing center for communication and commerce. Its geography was its destiny. Corinth was a place for coming together.

Just so, the church of Jesus Christ in Corinth was set to become a place of coming together of a community of remarkable diversity.

Let's take a look at their names. Names tell a lot as you know.

The names that you will find in any Mennonite church directory will give you a quick snapshot of the folks who belongs there and how diverse the congregation is or isn't.

I can very quickly get a sense of the proportion of those with Russian or Swiss backgrounds as well as the amount of ethnic diversity found there.

The names we find in Paul's letters to the Corinthian church and in Luke's account of Paul's ministry in Corinth in Acts 18, tell their story.

We discover that in the Corinthian church there were orthodox Jews such as Crispus and Sosthenes, the synagogue official who believed... as recounted in Acts 18.

There were names that scholars identify as slaves or freed-slaves, such as Chloe, Fortunatus and Achaicus. There were Greek names such as Stephanas along with an abundance of Roman names.

Paul comments "not many of you wise by human standards..." This possibly indicates a preponderance of common slaves or ex-slaves. (this is not surprising, as over 50% of the general population of the Roman empire at this time were slaves.)

The Church of Corinth was made up of poor folks and rich ones, Jews and Gentiles, urbane sophisticated believers and simple un-lettered ones.

It was a church of great diversity. Diversity can lead to great enrichment, or it can lead to fragmentation.

Fragmentation was the case in Corinth and Paul penned this letter to the Corinthian church to provide pastoral counsel.

He addressed the divided and quarreling factions.

"...it has been reported to me by Chloe's people that there are quarrels among you."

Whoever Chloe and her people were is not at all clear other than that they told Paul about the scandalous dividing that was going on in their church..

So Paul wrote:

"Now I appeal to you brothers and sisters by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ that all of you be in agreement and that there be no divisions among you..."

What follows is a lengthy epistle with one main idea:

"That there be no divisions among you."

Could they begin to imagine that? Can we...?

How important is this idea?

As we look at the big picture of the church in our world, we see that the church of Jesus Christ is in seriously fractured condition. One source indicates that there are 34,000 separate Christian groups out there.

It does seem that when it comes to splitting and dividing ...Christians have Olympian skills!

Our divisions seriously limit all the possible ways to express our mission to the world; and more than anything else it undermines the credibility of the Church to the watching world.

It's not just about the integrity and effectiveness of our church, it's about the integrity of our humanness and the wellness of our souls. We were created to be connected to one another with a profound quality of "shalom," a wholeness that we can only experience when we give it one-another.

The importance of the experience of unity among us is echoed in our souls' longings. And at least during moments of insight, we can be moved to tears by a powerful nostalgia that erupts from within for authentic closeness and community.

Jesus prayed for us that we would be "one!"

Jesus' upper room prayer is a compelling call for his followers to imagine new and different possibilities than the present reality with all the polarized divisions of the church, each championing their rightness, bugling forth their distinctive traditions, histories and doctrines.

"I pray also for those who will believe in me...that all of them may be one...that the world may believe that you have sent me." (John 17:20)

What has gone wrong? What went wrong in Corinth?

In chapter 1 Paul names divisions and "quarrelling among you."

The congregation had polarized into at least 4 groups, with each group claiming the certification of one of the leaders.

"One of you says, 'I follow Paul,' another, 'I follow Apollos;' another, 'I follow Cephas;' still another 'I follow Christ.'"

The congregation had become a badly-fitting confederation of tribes, with each tribe claiming superiority over the other, each faction claiming the certification of one of the apostles; and one even of Christ. My guess is that "the Christ group" saw themselves as the "super-spiritual" ones.

How could this have happened? What breaks unity?

Unity is not broken by differences per se. There is a sense in which the genius of the Church of Jesus Christ is in its attractiveness to radically different folks.

When people get together in groups they usually do so on the basis of things they have in common; so dog-lovers have groups, barber shop quartets have conventions, motor-cycle

enthusiasts ride together, and so on. But in the church of Corinth and any authentic Christian church, there will be a dramatic lack of common ground represented. God adds to the church folks of different class, language and culture.

What breaks unity is when difference become the focus and is allowed to overshadow the thing we have in common, which is the presence of the living Christ.

So difference of interpretation leads to competing camps each attacking the other, each seeking to show its superiority over the other.

The Apostle Paul's lengthy discussion of wisdom suggest that there was something we might call "wisdom-wars" going on. The "Apollos group" particularly seemed to be claiming greater wisdom than the others.

Nor is unity destroyed by conflict per se.

It was inevitable that there would be conflict in the Corinthian church. Look at the charter members. Conflict happens quite naturally in healthy families and churches. Conflicts are not the problem; it's the way we handle conflict that escalates them to become divisions.

Nor are strong leaders the cause of disunity.

Strong confident leaders are a gift from God. But leaders contribute to fragmentation when they indulge in boasting (3:21) or allow their followers to hold them up as superior in their preaching or leadership. (4:6-7) Or, when attitudes of arrogance and "up-againstness" are allowed to go unchecked.

What had gone wrong? What has gone wrong when our experience matches that of the Corinthians?

We have begun to imagine the wrong dream. We have dreamed that our group, our church, our denomination would be the best, the truest, the closest to true form.

Paul holds up the mirror that reflects their true identity and call...that they are called to be holy and to be together. That God's intention was not competing tribes but a unified body.

The most searching question posed in this text is:

"Is Christ divided?!"

I wonder how this question hit the first readers of this letter?

"No!" They would have responded; they knew better than to think that Christ their Lord could be divided. That would make him something that they could manipulate or change.... and he would not be lord at all.

Yet their factions and disunity suggested a dividing up of Jesus....because each of them believed that He was their Lord.

IS Christ divided? A Catholic Christ? A Mennonite Christ? An Orthodox Christ? A Charismatic Christ, a non-charismatic Christ?

"No!" we would say. And yet, the state of our disunity suggests otherwise.

What is the call of this text to us?

Paul's message to the Corinthians was to go back where they began. To quit their boasting and fighting. To leave off their competing against one another. To go back to the foundation where all of them had their beginning.

"No one can lay any foundation other than the one already laid, which is Jesus Christ." (1 Cor. 3:11)

That is the only place of unity. There is the place of healing, for putting together the broken pieces of our church, of our families of our own hearts.

The trouble with this basic issue of unity is that we end up having to examine our own hearts. How can we embrace our family members and church members locally or as a denomination, when inside of us the committee of selves that we are is itself divided and in civil war.

A divided heart cannot build a unity beyond itself. We will only end up telegraphing the reality of our hearts into the community. If our hearts are at war, what else can we contribute, but division? But if our hearts are robust... in the process of being healed, we will bring that healing and strength to our community.

If the foundation is Jesus, and, as Paul says it "Jesus becomes for us wisdom from God- that is our righteousness, holiness and redemption," and he truly is our foundation and our focus, then on that foundation the temple of worship and service will grow and flourish!

The response needed to this text is a response of prayer.

"Praying over the broken body of Christ" is the theme of these sessions that we are beginning this morning.

This theme points us to two things:

First, it points to the sad reality of the church, "the body of Jesus Christ." It is broken. It is divided. It is fragmented. And our intention this week will be to pray over this broken body.

Second, it points us to the place to begin our prayers... a place that gives us the orientation that we need... to encounter the reality of a divided church:

We pray "over the broken body of Christ...that is, we pray eucharistically... we pray with the broken body of Christ in our hands and on our lips.

There we find the one place, of all the places in the world, where we are drawn together like no other place can... because at the Lord's table there is a solidarity of brokenness and need, devoid of pride or boasting; there we receive together the unifying work of God in Christ... reconciling the world to himself and providing the basis for all the needs for healing and reconciling that we may bring.