

First Mennonite Church Edmonton

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Craig Janzen Neufeld

So the other day...

So the other day, I was in line at the grocery store when I heard the cashier say hello to Mrs. Janzen, except I wasn't sure if it was 't' Jantzen or a no 't' Janzen. I overheard them talking about her nephew, Harry Yoder, who was taking classes at CMU, which used to be CMBC, before that they had attended SCBI, and they are alumni of RJC, which like UMEI of MCSask.

So gathering up my courage, I tapped Mrs. Janzen on the shoulder, still not sure on the 't', and asked if her nephew, Harry Yoder was related at all to Elizabeth Toews-Yoder-Schwartzentruber. Mrs. Janzen's eyes went big, still not sure on the t', "Oba-jo!" She exclaimed, "of course they are," she said,

"Elizabeth is the daughter of Jacob Yoder, and Helen Toews; Toews, not toes, Toews, and she had married Paul Schwartzentruber. Harry's father is is Jacob's brother, who is my sister's husband. My sister is Mary-Anne Yoder who was originally a Klassen, single 'a' double 's', of course there are other spellings. She came from Winkler, where she worked at the MCC Thrift Store, and there go to know Steven Brubacher, who is also cousin, who attended AMBS and is Pastor First Mennonite, but she didn't say which one, so we're trying to figure out if it's, Chilliwack, Kelowna, Edmonton, Calgary, Saskatoon, Winnipeg, Kitchener, or Vineland."

She asked me how I knew Elizabeth, I replied, "I got to know Elizabeth when I attended the MWC in Zimbabwe. She was studying at CBC at the time, and was known for bringing Zwieback, Roll Kuchen and Schmaunt Fat to potlucks. Which would put everyone into a deep Meddachs chop . We later found out that her recipes came from Chortiza in the Old Country via her Oma, Irene Reimer, or was it Irma Regier. Anyway, she was Oma to us, Oma had submitted the recipes to the Mennonite Treasury. Which is where Elizabeth got them. Maybe that's why they tasted so familiar.

Elizabeth played volleyball with my cousin Helen Friesen, they met at Camp Valaqua. Helen is my father's sister's daughter, who attends Grace Mennonite Church, but we too aren't sure if it's in St. Catharines, New Hamburg, Kitchener, Steinbach, Winkler, Brandon, Regina, Neuanlage, Prince Albert, or Vancouver. She's moved around a lot because of her work with the Canadian Mennonite. In any case my name is Craig Janzen Neufeld, no 't' in either, no hyphens."

Mrs. Janzen, still not sure on the 't', asked, "of the 'Ivan Janzen's' from St. Catharines?"

At this point the cashier looking stunned, sheepishly said, "...and I'm a Atwood."

We both looked at her. "Is that Atwood with one 't' or two 't's'?"

The Mennonite Game

I suspect we were all laughing for a couple of reasons, either it's because some of us can relate to this exaggerated interaction; you, may have found yourself caught up in conversations like this before, or, we're slightly embarrassed at how ridiculous it sounds scouring the family tree to try and make connections with people in such an exclusive way. There is a problem, however, in that some here, may actually be feeling like there on the outside of an inside joke.

The Mennonite “Game” was never meant to be exclusive. We’re not the only group that does this, I’ve heard from a very good friend that the Christian Reform Church has their own version, Dutch Bingo. I suspect the origins of these strange familial games comes from a deep desire to belong. Something that all of us can relate to. We find safety in belonging to a particular ‘tribe.’ The Mennonite Game is one way for those on the ‘in’ to discover that.

A recent blog article on the Canadian Mennonite entitled, *The Mennonite Game’s winners and losers,*” explores just this. Author and storyteller, Laura Pauls-Thomas writes, “The Mennonite Game” is a part of Anabaptist culture that tends to highlight who is ‘in’ and who is ‘out.’... Often, it’s Black, Indigenous and people of colour Mennonites who are excluded. ... “In the case of “The Mennonite Game,” I’ve learned that there are often clear winners — well-connected, white cradle Mennonites — and clear losers — people from non-white cultures or those who are new to the Mennonite church.”¹

While many churches, and even our own have made great strides towards being welcoming and inclusive, there are still pockets of our church culture that are explicitly exclusive, the inescapable “Mennonite Game” being one of those.

In-and-out

Who’s in and who’s out, this has been one of the significant struggles for God’s people. A survey of the biblical story would reveal over and over again, stories of the ‘in’ group, those who keep God’s covenant, acting as gatekeepers for the ‘out’ group, those who don’t. By the time Jesus arrives on the scene, the separation of God’s people from the surrounding people has not changed, instead of Hebrews and Egyptians, we have instead the Jews and the Romans. However, within the Jewish people divisions have also grown, and not just by familial lines, but also through social standing. For some of the Pharisees, an air of superiority has emerged.

It’s into this setting that Jesus tells perhaps his second most famous parable, colloquy known as the Parable of the Prodigal Son. I am personally reluctant to go with this title for this particular parable, because I think it has a particular bias towards the parable, and I think that misleads us.

By calling this the parable of the Prodigal Son, our attention is immediately drawn to the youngest son, takes his inheritance and frivolously spends it all giving in to the desires of the moment. Often interpretations of this passage have focused on the gracious redeeming actions of the father, welcoming back the son who we’ve identified as Prodigal. And that’s great, except, I think it misses the point. Because Jesus’ makes this a family story.

Unlike the preceding lost parables, the parable of the lost sheep, and the parable of the lost coin. This parable has three characters, a father, a younger son, and an older son. And so, because of the three main characters in the story, I am reluctant to call it the Parable of the Prodigal Son, because that suggests that the main character is the youngest son. I don’t like that. Because, I think we, in the church, have more in common with the older son, than we do the younger son. To that end, I would much rather call this parable, the story of the “Compassionate and Gracious Father, and the Two Lost Sons.” So let’s take a look.

The Context

¹ Laura Pauls-Thomas, “The Mennonite Game’s winners and losers,” Canadian Mennonite, March 10, 2022, <https://canadianmennonite.org/mennogame>.

This parable is concerned with responding to a challenge set before Jesus by some scribes and Pharisees. Earlier in the chapter, it was observed by the Pharisees and scribes that Jesus was spending a lot of time with tax collectors and sinners, those whom the Jewish people would have considered unclean, clear and obvious outsiders. The Scribes and Pharisees, had a bit of a superiority complex, and often considered themselves more 'in' than others. And they, perhaps, had their noses out of joint, because they felt that Jesus should have been giving them preferential treatment. And so they did what everyone who's upset does, they grumbled, they complained, they belly ached about who Jesus kept company with. In response Jesus tells a series of three stories. The first about a Shepherd foolishly going out to find one lost sheep, the second about a woman who after finding one lost coin, celebrates with friends and neighbours and thirdly this morning's parable.

The Younger Son

The parable begins with the younger son "requesting his share of the property that's to be his." This is a very round about way of requesting his share of the inheritance now. But with our Western ears, we tend to miss the tragedy of such request.

In a middle eastern village society, a request such as this can mean "only one thing: *The younger son is impatient for his father's death.* The division of the father's wealth would naturally come only at the very end of the father's life."² The tragedy in this is that the younger son is saying to his father, "I wish you would drop dead." This is not a simple or routine request, this isn't a smart business move, this is a devastating request, one that, no doubt, broke both the father's heart, and fractured their relationship.

We often attribute the sin of the younger son to the way that the son spent his inheritance, the dissolute living, but I think what the real sin here, is not a wasteful, irresponsible living, but instead, is the broken relationship between the parent and the child. The younger son was well within his rights to make a request of this, and he broke no rules, he broke no laws, but what he did break, was his father's heart and his relationship with both his father and his brother. In the way that he took the inheritance and skipped town, he does a number of things that destroy relations with his family.

Through his selfishness, in requesting his inheritance, he is thinking only of himself and it seems that he doesn't care much about others in the family. Through his own sense of entitlement, he demands privilege without responsibility. Notice his request, he doesn't ask for his inheritance, because that would imply some responsibility, no instead, he wants the property, which he turned into cash, not the responsibility that comes along with inheriting part of the family property.³

All this happens before he even leaves town. Once he leaves town, he spends everything he has. We assume that he spent his money on sex, drugs, and rock n' roll. If we look closely at the scripture, that's not the case, we assume this is how he spent his money just because later

² Bailey, pg. 41.

³ Bailey, pg. 42-44.

on, the brother says it's so, but how does he know? All we know from the way it's described in the greek is that it was spent recklessly or wastefully. And that can mean a lot.

Wastefully, he spends all his money away, a famine hits, and he sinks to the lowest of the low, I don't need to over emphasize the irony of a Jew, tending to a herd of pigs. It's insult added to injury. He comes to his senses, and decides to return home, ready to work to reclaim his position in life.

The Homecoming

Coming to his senses, the younger son realizes that he'd be much better off back home, and so he schemes up a plan for him to return home and work off his debt, saving face, still not taking responsibility for the harm that he's committed.

As the young son returns home, the father notices him, is filled with compassion and does something both astounding and incredibly shameful, he runs to meet his son. For a man of his age and stature, he would almost always walk in a slow, dignified fashion. Running is humiliating and undignified, but the father doesn't care. His compassion has the better of him, and in running out to meet his son, he takes upon himself the shame and humiliation that's due to his son. But that's not all..

Graciously, he welcomes his disgraced son, not by asking questions, not by interrogating, he interrupts his son's well rehearsed speech, and instead, embraces his son, and through a cloak and shoes and other refinery he returns the young son to his stature within the family, and hosts a great banquet to celebrate their reconciliation.

The Older Brother

We often stop reading the parable after the younger son returns home, it would seem to be a natural climax to the story and it leaves us with a nice ending, but it's not the end. In this story both children are lost, just in different ways and at different times. For much of the first act of this story the older brother is in the background

At the beginning of the third act the older son returns from the field, mystified by what is going on, he asks a member of the community present what's going on. Upon learning that this banquet is because of the reconciliation between the father and the younger son, the older son becomes angry, and out of protest, refuses to join in the festivities.

The older sons' refusal to join in the celebrations isn't just some child sulking in the corner, it is, instead an intentional insult to his father. Bailey again writes, "In any social situation, banquet or no banquet, the male members of the family must come and shake hands with the guests even if they don't stay and visit. Failure to fulfil this courtesy is a personal insult to the guests and to the father, as host. The older brother knows this."⁴ His actions are no accident and word spreads.

⁴ Bailey, pg. 82.

This situation is just as devastating as the younger son leaving town with a portion of the families wealth, especially because it's public. "This is an open rupture of relationship between the [older] son and his father. The situation is very serious because all this takes place publicly during a banquet."⁵

And for the second time in the same day the father's response is incredibly graceful. "Once again, he demonstrates a willingness to endure shame and self-emptying love in order to reconcile." The father deliberately leaves his guests, humiliates himself and goes out to publicly try to reconcile with his older son.

Through verses 29-30 the younger son verbally lashes out at his father, and in doing so he, sins again and breaks relationship with his father. Throughout his tirade he is consumed with envy, pride, bitterness, sarcasm, anger, resentment, self-centeredness, hate, stinginess, self-satisfaction, and self-deception, and as such, he sins against his father.⁶

And how does his father respond? One would expect the father to place this child in line, but by contrast this father "looks past the bitterness, the arrogance, the distortion of fact and the accusation of favouritism. There is no judgement, no criticism and no rejection...Very gently he corrects the one point of the sons's speech as he reminds him that the prodigal is "your brother."⁷

For some the grace that is offered is amazing, for others, the grace is infuriating. The grace the father bestows upon his younger son is missed by the older son. In his jealousy, the older son even misses the grace that the father is offering him. The older son is so consumed with jealousy for his brother, so consumed with anger, so consumed in his own thinking, that he misses out on the grace being offered, both to his brother, and to himself.

And this is where the parable ends. We're left hanging, we're left wondering what the conclusion is, and I think that's great. I think that's great because it gives us an opportunity to write the end of the story.

This parable can be a hard pill to swallow especially for those who have been 'in' all their lives. It certainly was for the grumpy Pharisees and Scribes. They had carefully cultivated a social order which Jesus was upsetting. Their privilege was being threatened. For those on the outside this parable is fresh air, presenting God who is gracious and welcoming.

The good news for the church is the image of God that's presented, a gracious parent, willing to embrace humiliation and shame to welcome and include. God is presented as the Father of the two lost sons, a parent who is willing to be shamed to go out both children to the welcome table. We are presented with an image of a banquet to which 'all' are invited, both insiders and outsiders. Even though one son insults and wishes is father dead, and the other one is stubborn of maintaining family honour, God the father goes to both, and tries to draw both to the table.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶Bailey, pg. 86.

⁷ Ibid.

The challenge for the church is accepting the graciousness, mercy, and love of the great Parent. The younger son embraces the honour bestowed on them, the older son's decision is left for us, the Church, to answer for ourselves. How will we respond to the actions of the great Parent? Will we join in with the celebration, or will we stand outside, indignant?

Jesus offers us an image both of God and of God's way; the way that we're being encouraged to travel this Lent season. May God's spirit of grace, mercy and welcome, lead us to honour and embrace all who come to God's joyous celebration.

Amen.