

First Mennonite Church Edmonton

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I got in trouble a couple of years ago for using a three letter word starting with an ‘a’ in a sermon. Now before you start thinking too hard trying to figure out what word it was, let me put your mind at ease, it’s not the 3 letter word your thinking of, it was the word ‘all.’ This particular person took umbrage with me using ‘all’ suggesting that God’s love and Jesus’ healing actions on the cross were for everyone. They much preferred to think of it as an ‘all’ with a little star, or all with caveats.

God’s love is for everyone but.... God’s love is for all people, except...God’s love includes all of humanity, other than...

The conditions that this person was placing on God’s love demonstrated for me the distance that the church, and by that I mean the larger church, still has to go to in embracing everybody has befitting of God’s love.

As I read the Pentecost story this year and as I kept reading further into the book of Acts, I came to notice that so much of it is about Jesus’ disciples trying to wrap their heads around the broadness of God’s love for all people. Time and time again the disciples find themselves facing situations that a) they never would have imagined themselves in, and b) pushed their own sense of what ‘all’ could mean. I think of Philip and the Ethiopian eunuch, I think of Peter and Cornelius, and then I think of Paul, of not only his experience on the Damascus Road, but also his subsequent ministry to into the Hellenistic cities surrounding the Mediterranean. This all led me to consider for today our reading from Paul’s letter to the Corinthian church. And more specifically his image of the church as the Body of Christ.

In seminary, at the beginning of each Worship and Preaching class, we went through a regular exercise of mindfulness. June Alliman Yoder, would have us all stand up, and walk us through picturing each joint in our body, and blowing a ‘poof’ of air into them. I’ve continued this practice off and on, when I’ve needed to ground myself, and it’s been helpful in picturing and being mindful of all the little connections within our body. For instance being mindful of one’s pinky, or little toes, seemingly insignificant, but toes which play an important part in our tripod balance, along with the heel and the big toe.

An awareness or mindfulness of the many parts of the body that work together to make the most mundane thing, like walking, happen is a beautiful application to Paul’s image of the Body of Christ. In that the church needs all the parts of the body, the parts we may deem significant, and the parts that we may deem insignificant. And Paul would even go so far as to suggest, what we may consider significant or important may be less so. Extending Jesus’ upside down teaching about the last and the least as the first and the greatest.

On this Pentecost day, we’re reminded that the church needs, or better yet, is all kinds of people. The litany which many struggle to pronounce in Acts 2, speaks to the diversity of people which the Holy Spirit touches. On that first Pentecost Sunday its “Parthians, Medes, Elamites, and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, Cretans and Arabs. Who is it today?

When I think of who God’s church is today, I think of the many different way that people connect with God. I think of how people experience God. I think less of geography, and more

of disposition. God's church is filled with intellectuals, and it also needs its contemplative mystics. Yes, God's church needs people who think about God, who think carefully and critically, and God's church need folk who desire nothing more than to simply be with God. And God's church is a place for folk who are passionate about righting the wrongs in the world around us to find a 'home base' a place to come to be grounded. And God's church also needs to be home for those who desire nothing more than to have an experience with God, and a place to heartfully share about their experiences and encounters with the divine. When I think of diversity I think of a church that makes sure that the heart and the head, the hands and the feet, and the spirit are not separated or left out or singled out at the expense of the others. I imagine a Church where all are valued and honoured, where all are important parts of being the whole Body of Christ.

And it leads me to wonder, what kind of church are we? Are we a church that not only welcomes but embraces many different kinds of God's people. And I'm trying to key in a bit more than gender, racial or sexual diversity. I'm wondering about the different ways we connect with God. Are we a church who are focused in one approach to God? Do we have room for both the seeker and the faithful? Is there space for the doubter and the stalwart? How do we hold space for the tension between the ethnic and the theological Mennonite? That is, those who've grown up in the faith and those who've adopted the faith for themselves? Is there room to wonder about who Dirk Willems is? Why do Faspa and Roll Kuchen matter? And why is this Menno Simons guy such a big deal? What might our unconscious exceptions be? Who might be the little toe in our Body of Christ? What kind of church are we?

Following our sharing time, we will be celebrating communion with one another. A reminder for you if you don't have the elements nearby to take a moment and find a candle, something to represent bread, and something to represent the cup. A practice that I've embraced as a part of our Pandemic Communion is to bake a loaf of bread for each time that we celebrate. One of the things that I've been disappointed in, is that this lovely loaf of bread is made, and broken, can't be shared as widely as I'd like it to be. This time, it's particularly disappointing. I tried a new recipe this time, and I got a much larger loaf of bread than I expected or counted on. The bread that draws us all together in one common practice, this time is so big, there really actually is enough for all and more, and yet, because of the limitations that we live with, it can't be shared. And so, this time in particular, I lean into Jesus' words, which say, I dearly long to share this meal with you, because I do.

This Pentecost Sunday is for all, this bread; this celebration of communion is for all, and this is because God's church, God's love is for all, no exceptions, no caveats, no excuses. God's been trying to teach this to the church for a while, may we embrace God's vision for God's church.

Amen.