

First Mennonite Church Edmonton

“”

May 30, 2021

Craig Janzen Neufeld

---

Last year, this year, and next year, MC Alberta is inviting congregations to be more deliberate in engaging with different aspects of our faith journey. Entitled “Encountering, embracing, embodying Christ in...” MC Alberta is inviting all its congregations, and members of those congregations to pondering ways that we “encounter, embrace and embody Christ in” ourselves, our faith communities, and in the world around us. Last year we focused, somewhat, on ourselves, learning spiritual disciplines and reflecting on ways that we connect with God, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit. This year the focus is on our faith communities.

The impetus for this short series on Paul’s letter to the Ephesians is to start getting us to think about community; what it means to be community; what are the qualities of community. This is a bit of an appetizer for a more focused series in the fall with respect to MCA’s E3 action plan.

I think our faith community has been something that has really sustained us over the past 15 months or so. A recent article shared with me from *The Guardian* suggests that over the course of the pandemic, and looking into the future post-pandemic, it’s those in religious communities who will have benefited from fellowship (as much as we were able) as well as shared meaning and healing. Our community has been one of our strengths that has sustained over this last trying year.

Whether it was through formal gatherings, for example the Facebook group “FMC Gathering Place” coordinated by Beth, our regular worship times, the Wednesday morning coffee, the ongoing bible studies, or the quilting social time, just to name a couple, or informal gatherings that have happened because of our natural connections, here’s looking at you the ‘first Friday’ board game group. Community has been one of the strengths we’ve leaned into. Community, I would suggest, is one of our defining characteristics.

I’ve made a point each week to begin my letter with very particular set of words, “My dear FMC family,” Each week I’ve typed those words, I haven’t used a template or copied and pasted them for the very reason that I want to remind myself who I’m writing to. I’m writing to my dear FMC family. It’s a small detail but it’s important. I’ve done that as a practice, because I think it’s important for me and for us to remember that we’re a family, that have chosen to come together to be God’s church together and also because we’re God’s family.

When I first heard about Lynette and Olivia’s idea for the children’s time, to reflect on our church family as a puzzle that’s fit together, it immediately resonated with me. It resonated because of the image and also because of how it piggy backs on last weeks reflection. Last week I reflected that we need all to be the Body of Christ. This week, I want to extend that thought, that we don’t just need, but in fact, we are all apart of the Body of Christ, the great Puzzle of Christ...Ok maybe that’s pushing it. But that we all have a place in God’s family.

Paul opens his letter to the church in Ephesus with his usual greetings and blessings, but immediately brings in a metaphor of family. That we’ve been chosen and adopted as children though Christ, by God. And not just that but that we’ve also are entitled to an inheritance. I don’t believe this to be mere happenstance. The reason why I chose Ephesians for the next couple of weeks is because of Paul’s focus on the church as community; the church as the Body of Christ; the church as a family. A family with all its different parts, with all of its eccentricities, with all of its smooth and rough bits.

Admittedly, I sometimes find it tricky to talk about church as family, because I recognize that not everyone has had an idyllic family upbringing, and so I want to take a moment recognize that for some to imagine the church as a family might be problematic. And also admit that even in the most idyllic family there are at the very least challenges and tensions that eventually arise. To talk about the church as a family, is not negating, or even elevating the family as the ideal image for what it means to be church, as imperfect a metaphor as it is, it's only one way to describe the many relationships that we hold in being church together. And also it's a good metaphor. I have images in my mind of all the different stereotypes of family members that we may have in our families, and how those same types of people are likely in our church family too. I'll leave it for you to make those connections yourself.

Being a member of God's Church, God's family is unique in that to become a part of this imperfect group of people we make the choice to join. There is no coercion. It's not a family that we're born into, rather it's a family we choose to join. I would go so far as to say that it's a family that God and Jesus call and invite us to join, and we choose to answer God's call to become a part of God's church.

I was talking with my brother-in-law earlier this week, he pastors Niagara United Mennonite Church in Virgil, ON in case anyone is interested. And we were talking about this commitment we make when we join with others as God's church. In our case we were reflecting on the impact of our respective ordinations, but the same can be applied to church attendance and even baptism. We were talking about what it means that we've chosen to commit ourselves to our respective communities, communities that we've chosen to bind ourselves to, communities where we offer and receive care and support, communities that are sources of encouragement and nourishment, communities that share collective wisdom, and communities that, because we love them so, sometimes frustrate us. Ultimately we were reflecting on our own answer to God's call to join and be a part of God's family, and the communities that we have each been adopted into. We were reflecting on why we did it? What keeps us a part of these communities? What strengthens us? And what has changed in our lives since.

And while it's good for me to do some of this reflecting, I think it's just as important for each one of us to reflect on what it means to be God's community, God's family. So, I want to turn the mirror around to you now, I want you to spend some time either today or this week, reflecting on what it means to be a part of this community, God's family? What led to you come here? What helped you feel adopted in? What's keeping you here? and even, How is God speaking to you through the community? How are you seeing God, Jesus and the Holy Spirit at work, in, through and amongst us? I think these are all important questions for us to consider and reflect on, especially as we focus on Encountering, Embracing and Embodying Christ in Community in the year ahead.

Later this afternoon we will be having a congregational meeting to attend to some of the more pragmatic and practical things of being community and being a family. In that too, it's important to remember that we are practicing what it means to be the Church. And so perhaps in anticipation of this meeting, I want end with a prayer from Paul to the Ephesians. Moving beyond our scripture reading Paul goes on giving thanks for the community that the church is. He prays that "God may grant you a spirit of wisdom and revelation as you come to know God." together.

Amen