

First Mennonite Church Edmonton

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I have often times feel like a fish out of water. And this is for a couple of reasons. First, because where I grew up, is very different than where I live. Yes, I embrace the adage, grow where you're planted, but it doesn't mean that my roots don't feel like they're in soil that feels a little bit different, or foreign. The other reason why I feel like a fish out of water, is the realization that not everyone sees the world the way I, or we, see the world. Growing up, there was a time, where it seemed like everyone shared the same world view. It, of course didn't but I was just that sheltered. And as I've grown up, I've noticed that what's normal for me, isn't normal for everyone. That what I value, isn't what everyone else values. You mean, not everyone wash and reuse their ziplock or milk bags? Not everyone went to church? Not everyone knows who MCC is or what they do? Over time, I've learned to embrace those differences, not as deficiencies, but instead, as things that are distinct.

Sometimes I wonder if we can appreciate the monumental task that Paul was undertaking. When you think about Paul's journey and what he was trying to accomplish, its rather staggering. Paul's message of God is love, for many of his listeners, would have been revelatory. In the cities surrounding the Mediterranean, Paul would have been encountering a plethora of religions and faith expressions. Some who worshipped a single deity, and others that worshipped many. Most often, he would have encountered a variety worshipping cults connected to either the Greek or Roman Pantheon. For Paul to preach that God is love, and is concerned about the least, the lost, and the neglected, is quite radical. Considering that many of the surrounding religions were concerned with appeasing angry gods, currying the favour of other gods, and generally treating gods as out there, Paul's God, who chooses to become human, who chooses love and grace rather than offering and obligation, and who begins with a posture of love, Jesus and God, are very very different. And Paul was doing all of this with the most advanced technology at the time, pen, parchment, and a rudimentary postal system. So it's no wonder to me that there were a number of 'misunderstandings' along the way or as I sometimes like to think about it, 'Adventures in Missing the Point.'

Choosing to become a follower of 'the Way' as it was known and to become a member of some of these early house churches was a radical departure form the 'norm' at the time. And Paul spent a good deal of time, energy and ink tending to the beloved house churches. The church in Corinth was no different. Which is where we stop on this leg of our journey through the early church. It's believed that 2nd Corinthians isn't necessarily one letter on its own but rather a compilation of at least 3 separate letters. With these possible 3 letters and also 1st Corinthians, Paul, it would seem, had had a lot to say to the Corinthian church. Some of it was corrective, some of it was encouragement, and some of it was new teaching. New converts to 'The Way' likely came not as blank slates, open to learn everything with fresh eyes, but instead likely came from other faith backgrounds, from other religions, and so much of what they were doing was unlearning older practices and learning new ones. With the many different backgrounds people were bringing with them, no wonder there were tensions, and divisions

within the Corinthian church. It's no wonder to me that there were some 'growing pains' if you will in becoming a follower of 'the way.' No wonder, the Apostle Paul had his hands full. And really, when I think about it, that's no different than now.

To be Christian, Mennonite, a follower of the Jesus Way now, either means that you subscribe to a whole host of ideologies which I think many of us would push back against, or it means that we live in ways that are radically different than our surrounding culture. I think about how one of our values is mutual aid and support, and then I think of how messaging from the world and our provincial leaders is focused on 'personal responsibility' and individuality. It seems to be a little at odds. When I think about how we value each person and how we seek the best for the community, instead of the best for the individual, I'd say that our values vary. When I think about how we place our trust in God, Jesus, and God's vision for the world, a vision which places people first, a vision that sees healing, hope and wholeness, it strikes me how our provinces pandemic response, seems to place people second to another deity altogether, the goddess economy. It makes me realize just how different our values are. And I don't know if that's necessarily a bad thing.

I like to imagine that the question that the Corinthian church perhaps wrestled with is the same questions that you as FMC in your early days wrestled with, is also one that we wrestle with today, "How then shall we live?" I can't help but wonder, what it must have been like for some of the founders of our church. The history of our congregation is one that started as a study group, which grew to a kind of house church, which then became an established church. In those early years, I wonder what it must have been like? I wonder about the energy and excitement of doing something new, of forming something new? How radical it must have felt, to be aligning oneself as different than the surrounding culture. And I wonder, what challenges did you face in being distinctive? Where did you find the rub, the friction of being a different and distinct people? And how has that defined you, us, as a congregation?

I think about that question for today, "How then shall we live?" And so many more questions appear for me. So many more wonderings. How do we demonstrate and live out our values? How do we live the faith, how do we embody the faith we hold? How do we live being the church that God is calling us to be? How do we be the church, that sometimes sees things a bit differently? How do we be the church and live out our values?

I have no grand answer except, perhaps the same answer as Paul, practice. Keep on practicing. And trusting in God's grace. The church, as Paul says, God's church is a new creation. And because we are a new creation we have a message that's relevant to the world. We have a message that is one of hope in the midst of dark times. We have a message that is Good News, that God's love, in the end, remains. That God's love is for all. And it's a message that we needn't be ashamed of. Each week when we gather to worship, we are practicing how we live out that message, first with each other, and then with the world. And it's this message of healing and hope, this message of peace and wholeness, which is new life, which is a different way to live, it's a different set of values, that speaks up, sometimes in loud ways, and sometimes in still quiet ways. And because we're different, I like to think that it makes us

distinct, it makes our message unique. It makes us, as one author writes, a peculiar people. And I'm ok being a bit peculiar.

Amen