

## SERMON

1/20/19

### *Reaching for Justice and Communion on the Journey*

One of our daughters and her husband lived in the San Francisco area from 2013 to 2017. She'd gone to grad school at Berkeley; and had gotten a job in Oakland after graduation.

After the results of the 2016 presidential election, most of the country (from both parties) was shocked. What I remember most clearly was a conversation I had with my daughter: "How did this happen?" she lamented. "Of all the people I've met out here, I haven't heard of one single person who voted for Trump."

I had to laugh a little – when it comes to political bubbles in this country, I think we can agree: Berkeley probably makes the list!

#### ***The Big Sort***

Soon after that conversation, I learned about Bill Bishop's book, *The Big Sort: Why the Clustering of Like-Minded America Is Tearing Us Apart*. Bishop says that:

*America may be more diverse than ever coast to coast, but the places where we live are becoming increasingly crowded with people who live, think, and vote like we do... We've built a country where we can all choose the neighborhood and church and news show most compatible with our lifestyle and beliefs. And we are living with the consequences... Our country has become so polarized, so ideologically inbred, that people don't know and can't understand those who live just a few miles away... Americans have been sorting themselves over the past three decades into homogeneous communities — not at the regional level, or the red-state/blue-state level, but at the micro level of city and neighborhood. <http://www.thebigsort.com/home.php>*

One of the big problems with this political sorting is that our vital critical thinking skills can start to become dull. When everyone we talk with agrees with us, it can get harder to recognize bad ideas on our "side", as well as good ideas when they pop up on the "other side."

It's become a lot tougher to belong to a theologically diverse group, too; and the pitfalls of this are the same as are true politically. As it turns out, we Mennonites have had our own version of The Big Sort that has also been experienced by many Protestant Christian denominations in the U.S. Many of the more conservative conferences and congregations have left Mennonite Church USA in recent years – including Lancaster Conference which officially split off at the start of 2018. For better or worse, we will be a much less theologically diverse group than we once were when we gather together at convention this summer.

It can be hard to choose to stay connected in relationship despite differences. It takes energy and time, and runs counter to our independent-minded culture. As self-sufficient Americans, we sometimes impatiently wonder: *Is it worth it? Why bother?*

### ***Reaching for both justice and communion on the journey***

In contrast, a familiar proverb attributed to an Africanist perspective challenges our American tendency toward individualism: *If you want to go fast, go alone. But if you want to go far, go together.*

I'm so grateful that we don't have to travel alone in our journeys of life and spirituality. Here at Community Mennonite Church of Lancaster, we have one another as traveling companions.

As a congregation, CMCL doesn't travel alone either. We're part of Atlantic Coast Conference – a theologically diverse association of 34 congregations and conference-related ministries - guided by Mennonite Anabaptist convictions and expressions of faith, mission and service, and justice and peace.

Through ACC, we are part of Mennonite Church USA – made up of 18 conferences. We gather around this vision of healing and hope:

*God calls us  
to be followers of Jesus Christ  
and, by the power of the Holy Spirit,  
to grow  
as communities of grace, joy, and peace  
so that God's healing and hope  
flow through us  
to the world.*

Through Mennonite Church USA, we are in turn part of Mennonite World Conference – made up of 102 national church conferences and one international association. This communion of Anabaptist-related churches is linked to one another in a worldwide community of faith - for fellowship, worship, service, and witness.

And, of course, as Andre Gingerich Stoner, director of interchurch relations for Mennonite Church USA, reminds us: "...Mennonites do not exist unto ourselves. We are part of the broader body of Christ. We have important gifts to offer, and we also have important gifts to receive. Being in relationship with Christians from other traditions helps us see our blind spots and areas of need as well."

So why this morning's focus on our Mennonite Anabaptist tradition? As Bradley P. Holt says in his book *Thirsty for God*, "A living tradition is a self-critical developing stream, not a moribund repetition of the past. Tradition is the shoulder of previous experience on which we stand as we reach upward for what is new." (p. 7)

### ***Mennonite World Conference's 2019 World Fellowship Sunday***

This morning at CMCL, we are celebrating World Fellowship Sunday. We do so along with the 1.4 million global members of the churches of Mennonite World Conference with whom we now share a common faith tradition. The worship resources were prepared by MWC member

churches in Latin America & the Caribbean; and the theme we're gathering around is *Justice on the Journey: Migration and the Anabaptist-Mennonite Story*.

Today's worship planners explain why this theme was chosen:

*Nearly 500 years ago, Anabaptists were persecuted because they claimed primary citizenship in God's kingdom. [In addition], Anabaptists recently celebrated 100 years of presence in Latin America and the Caribbean...*

*[Now] Latin America is experiencing a large displacement crisis, where organized crime, violence, and poverty are forcing thousands to flee their homes. Migrants, including Anabaptists, face hardship as they seek safety. Churches, including Anabaptist churches, are investing in...outreach to these vulnerable people.*

What captured my attention most about this morning's worship focus is how the planners frame the current migrant crisis. Instead of "us and them", they talk about "we, the church". In this, they offer us the gift of a bigger perspective, as well as a call to respond.

With the current shutdown of the federal government, the political conflict around immigration dominates our time and attention in the U.S. these days. But the news we seem to get focuses mostly on the U.S. and Mexico border, and is too often boiled down to a simplistic *Wall or No Wall* debate.

In stark contrast, our Latin American family in Mennonite World Conference reminds us today that migration is far more complex on the ground, in real life; and we're all called to find ways to act in response. They write:

*Anabaptist Christians today are called to follow Jesus in his ministry of justice-making. This includes welcoming migrants. In Latin America, Anabaptist churches are composed of both those who have been migrants, and those who welcome migrants. It is not easy to be or have been displaced, nor is it easy to welcome these strangers. [But] God is faithful in the midst of these stories of up-rootedness and change.*

Their prayers are:

- For local churches to commit to action in support of migrants in their communities during this year
- For the countries from which the greatest number of people are trying to escape from violence or leaving in search of economic opportunity: Honduras, El Salvador, Nicaragua, Mexico, Columbia, and Venezuela
- For the countries receiving Latin American migrants, such as: Brazil, Ecuador, Peru, Columbia, Mexico, the US, and Canada

I really appreciate the breadth of these prayers for all who find themselves part of this mass migration and all who need to decide how to respond.

***By way of direction, the worship planners point us to three texts***

Luke 4:18-21 draws us together with a reminder of who we follow and for what he stands. After being tempted in the wilderness, Jesus returns to Galilee - filled with the Holy Spirit and teaching. When he came to Nazareth, he entered the synagogue and began reading:

“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.”

Leviticus 19:33-34 is an even more specific reminder of the just actions God desires of us now: When an alien resides with you in your land:

- You shall not oppress the alien
- The alien who resides with you shall be to you as the citizen among you
- You shall love the alien as yourself, for you were aliens...

And I Peter 2:11-12 urges us all to travel well on our journey of faithful life together.

- Abstain from all that wages war against the soul
- Conduct yourselves honorably among the Gentiles – that they may see your honorable deeds and glorify God...

***So how might we at CMCL – in communion with other Anabaptists around the world - act to respond with justice to migrants in our community and beyond?***

Here are a couple of ways we’re already reaching for justice on this journey. I’m sure you may well know of others:

- CMCL financially supports Mennonite Central Committee in our annual budget. By pooling our resources with other Anabaptists, we have a greater and more just impact in the lives of those impacted directly by migration. With compassion, MCC supports vulnerable people on the move in several ways – while they travel in caravans, after they arrive in the U.S., as well as helping those who stay and struggle to survive in their home countries.
- As chair of PAX JC – CMCL’s Peace & Social Justice Committee – Marty Kelley shared a number of ways that CMCL has supported new arrivals to the U.S.:
  - Welcoming several immigrant families through Church World Services
  - Providing financial and other support for one immigrant family of 10
  - Working with Covenant UMC to offer free before school care for low income families, including several new immigrant families, through MOOS – the Mornings on Orange Street program which runs M-F during the school year
  - In addition, various members of CMCL are or have been ESL teachers who provide direct support for migrant and immigrant families
  - And, of course, CMCL’s annual coat drive and shoe drive provide warmth for all in need

***Let’s continue to challenge each other to welcome the stranger***

I’m so glad we are finding ways to welcome the stranger here in the Lancaster area, and I hope we continue to challenge each other to find more ways to do that.

Let's also remember that we aren't traveling this journey towards faithful action alone. We need the voices and actions of those who travel with us.

With this in mind, let's pause for a moment to pray with others around the globe:

*God,*

*We give sincere thanks that Anabaptists around the world gather together in Christian faith across language and cultural differences.*

*We join together to pray that Mennonite World Conference members who are suffering persecution and hardship may have the courage and hope to persevere.*

*We also pray that Anabaptist Churches all over the world will be responsive to the needs of newcomers in their communities. And we give thanks for the growing networks in the Mennonite World Conference family, like those around mission, service, health, peace, and education.*

*Continue to challenge, call, and empower us here at CMCL that we may better join your Spirit's work towards justice in the world.*

*Amen*

Despite our many differences, the people and churches of Mennonite World Conference are traveling together on this journey of life and faith. As counter-cultural as it is and as challenging it may be at times, may we continue by God's grace to reach for communion and justice together.