

SERMON

5-19-19

Loving one another – a spiritual discipline to practice

I've been enjoying the reflections that people have been offering in this *Who do you say that I am?* worship series. Christy, thank you for what you shared this morning – your meaningful words and your music that goes beyond words and also the collage you put together for the front of the bulletin.

As Susan suggested for this series, we're looking today at the gospel text from the lectionary readings. Here Jesus give his followers a new commandment: "Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another."

Ouch!

For some reason, upon reading this text, a January 2018 item from *The Daily Bonnet* came immediately to mind. Perhaps you've heard of this online news outlet from the heart of the Bible belt in Manitoba, Canada?

The title read: *Church with 250 Members Splits into 250 Churches.*

After a particularly heated membership meeting this past week, the South Lancaster Mennonite Church has decided to split the entire congregation into more manageable units of one.

"At first, we decided to just split into two groups: those in favor of buttons on their shirts and those who preferred hooks," explained Johan Landes, former South Lancaster elder and recently appointed pastor of Johan Landes Memorial Church. "But then the button-users started talking amongst themselves and found they had differences of opinion on baptismal water temperature... So then we had pro-button pro-cold, pro-button anti-cold, anti-button pro-cold and anti-button anti-cold groups... Upon further discussion, the groups realized they couldn't agree on whether to sing five or six hymns each Sunday, and... well, you get the idea. The groups just kept getting tinier and tinier. Eventually we all decided to each form our own churches..."

The once thriving South Lancaster Church is now 250... individual churches, although the division has still not stopped.

"This whole starting-your-own-church thing has got me studying theology," explained Landes. "And now I keep changing church doctrine every day. I don't even agree with myself anymore!"

Johan Landes says he has excommunicated his past-self for differences... but is concerned that a future version of himself might also disagree.

“Who knows what I might believe this Friday afternoon,” explained Johan Landes. “I always get a little too liberal when the weekend is approaching. Being my own pastor is a lot harder than I thought. You get so much criticism from all sides and it’s almost impossible to get the people to agree.”

Pastor Johan is arranging an ecumenical reconciliation service between his various selves for Sunday morning...although he can’t figure out whether they should use real wine or... grape juice.

[\(https://dailybonnet.com/church-250-members-splits-250-churches/\)](https://dailybonnet.com/church-250-members-splits-250-churches/)

Ouch! How do we square this kind of all-too-familiar non-example of loving one another with what Palmer Becker identifies as the three core values that Anabaptist Christians try to live out?

- Jesus is the center of our faith
- Community is the center of our life
- Reconciliation is the center of our work

Anabaptist Christian core values meet real life

How well do we Mennonites follow Jesus’ teaching to practice love for each other? In this era when people are so quick to sort one another by political and theological labels and align according to litmus tests, in what counter-cultural ways are we being called to relate? Is it possible to both speak the truth of our convictions and also stay connected in loving relationships when we honestly disagree?

As Larry Penner noted in his Lent devotional this spring: “If only loving one another were easier to do!”

Since the early 2000’s, I’ve been intentionally wrestling with Jesus’ commandment to love one another. We were attending Frazer Mennonite then – a suburban Philadelphia congregation made up of 50% people from Anabaptist background and 50% people raised in other Christian faith streams. The church was part of Lancaster Mennonite Conference at the time; and I do remember sometimes being surprised – and occasionally dismayed – by a few letters to the editor in *The Mennonite*, the denominational magazine. But Frazer was a geographically removed congregation of fairly like-minded people. As first-generation Mennonites in that context, we didn’t come up against many important differences in the first 20 years we were there.

But by 2001, all three of our kids were attending Lancaster Mennonite High School and our family began to regularly interact with Mennonites whose convictions didn't always line up with ours.

As administrative elder at Frazer, I also began to interact more directly with Lancaster conference around that time.

As Frazer began to talk more openly together about membership for people who are gay or lesbian, some differences also surfaced there. Theological and political differences increasingly became an issue in my extended family, as well.

In my work at Bridge of Hope National, I was also connecting with many different congregations across the country. The culture wars had ramped up and I began wondering: How much do we Christians have to agree on before working together? Despite our differences, can we at least come together - in the name of Christ - in support of single mothers and children facing homelessness?

In school, church, family, and work settings, I suddenly found myself mightily challenged by Jesus' command to love one another. I began to look for examples of people choosing the Jesus' way and staying in loving relationship across differences.

More often than not, these examples included people *showing up, nurturing curiosity, and being open to change in themselves and others.*

Loving one another – a spiritual discipline to practice

Now when Jesus talked about loving one another as he loves us, I want to be clear that I don't think he meant continuing in hurtful patterns of relating. After all, throughout his ministry, Jesus sought to heal people and promote healthier relationships.

I also don't think that Jesus' commandment means we are to be silent about our convictions. Too often, the interpretation of this teaching has devolved to: *loving others means keeping quiet in order to keep the peace.* In contrast, Jesus was usually clear and outspoken – often challenging those he loved.

So what does it mean to love one another across differences? How do we care about and for each other in the midst of conflict?

These are the questions I've been thinking about as Susan, Larry, and I prepare to join Amanda and the Senior Youth at the Mennonite Church USA www.mennoniteusa.org conference in Kansas City in early July. As you may or may not know, our denomination has shrunk from over 120,000 in 2001 to some 67,000 adult members today. Most of this decline has been due to the more conservative congregations leaving.

With mostly moderate and progressive congregations remaining – I wonder how it will be now. Will we simply re-divide in new ways? Try to figure out who is the most conservative of the moderates and the most progressive of the progressives?

I sincerely hope not. Instead, I hope we practice connecting across our remaining differences and loving one another well. This spiritual practice may prove more life-giving - both at convention and when we return home where we live and worship among many former MCUSA congregations.

In preparing for convention, I've been remembering what I've learned from others about connecting across differences and loving well by: *showing up*, *nurturing curiosity*, and *being open to change*.

At a Pink Menno gathering at the MCUSA convention in Pittsburgh several years ago, Pastor Sheri Hostetler talked about First Mennonite Church of San Francisco's <https://menno.org/> intentional decision to participate in as many of their conference gatherings as possible. Despite knowing that a number of sister congregations disagreed with their LGBTQ+ welcoming stance, they decided to keep connecting. They attended all regular meetings, volunteered to fill conference roles, and looked for opportunities to work alongside other congregations on service projects whenever they could. In short, they **showed up** – rubbing shoulders with a variety of Mennonites, finding common ground, and breaking down stereotypes in the process.

When it comes time to talking about convictions, *nurturing curiosity* about the other is vital - as demonstrated by The People's Supper, a non-profit launched after the 2016 elections to bring people together to break bread and listen across political differences. (<https://thepeoplesupper.org/>). They now focus more generally on "healing and human connections" – turning from dead-end debates to curious questions aimed at starting better conversations. When we met recently with leaders from Atlantic Coast Conference <http://atlanticcoastconference.net/>, I appreciated the spirit of their questions regarding same sex weddings at CMCL. We acknowledged that ACC congregations understand the Mennonite Confession of Faith differently when it comes to marriage; we also tended our relationships and kept lines of communication open.

Being open to being changed or to changing our view of the other is another important part of loving across differences. This requires humility, as modeled by Jesus' washing his disciples' feet earlier in John 13. Humility includes the willingness to acknowledge our humanity, the humanity of others, and the possibility that we can both grow and change for the better.

Author Elizabeth O'Connor – a member of Church of the Savior in Washington, D.C. <http://inwardoutward.org/churches/> – held out the promise of this kind of liberating love practiced by pilgrims in a community on a journey with Jesus Christ:

We can create the climate and nurture the trust in which a deep giving of ourselves can happen. Much more than the confession of our light or our darkness is involved. What is involved is the recovery of love itself, the communion that is the deepest need of every life, the unlocking of that infinite capacity that each one has to be a friend and to have a friend. If the pilgrim journey is a journey toward freedom, then the liberating work is the freeing of love in me and the freeing of love in you.

([The Liberation of Love – May 7, 2019](#))

For our good and for the good of the world

As individuals and as a community, who are we being challenged to love in our families, neighborhoods, church, schools, or work settings right now? Might showing up, staying curious, and being open to change in ourselves and in the other help us stay connected while also speaking our truth?

Does this kind of love across differences come easily? Often not. Does it take energy and stretch us? Absolutely. Will we do it perfectly? Not in this life.

In Wendell Berry's fictional community of Port William, Jayber Crow is the barber, church janitor, and grave digger. From the unique vantage point of his roles, Jayber observes:

Love overflows the allowance of the world... My vision of the gathered church... had been replaced by a vision of the gathered community. What I saw now was the community imperfect and irresolute but held together by the frayed and always fraying, incomplete and yet ever-holding bonds of the various sorts of affection. There had maybe never been anybody who had not been loved by somebody, who had been loved by somebody else, and so on and on.... It was a community always disappointed in itself, disappointing its members, always trying to contain its divisions and gentle its meanness, always failing and yet always preserving a sort of will toward goodwill... My vision gathered the community as it never has been and never will be gathered in this world of time, for the community must always be marred by members who are indifferent to it or against it, who are nonetheless its members and maybe nonetheless essential to it. And yet I saw them all as somehow perfected, beyond time, by one another's love, compassion, and forgiveness, as it is said we may be perfected by grace.

(Jayber Crow, p. 205.)

Who do you say that I am? One way I would answer that is Jesus is the one whose sometimes hard teachings continue to challenge and stretch us – for our good and for the good of the whole world.

This morning, Jesus' words ring as clearly to us as when first spoken to his earliest followers. "Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another."