

Title: **The church is a mess (—thanks to God). Thanks be to God!**

Prelude, prologue:

So I bring a fair amount of discouragement about the Mennonite Church-USA, and about the Mennonite Church in the widest sense. Slight overstatement maybe, but I think there is a civil war going on in our Mennonite Church. In the last couple of years, the Mennonite Church-USA has gone from 120,000 members to 60,000 members, and lost 1/3 of its congregations. And the rending, the dividing, in the MC-USA, is not done. This civil war, this time of dividing and separating, is mostly around issues of human sexuality; but also probably around issues of red-blue, older-younger, urban-rural, more educated-less educated, (and people of the global majority congregations-white educated liberal middle class/affluent North Americans ones, i.e. privileged whites). This is a time of such polarization, of increasing harshness and defensiveness, of so much anxiety...

At this year's Mennonite convention, passing in the halls between events I met my longtime friend ___-a past high-up hou-ha in the Mennonite Church). You know how he greeted me? "What are you thinking Paul?" and then before I could answer, "Whatever you think Paul, you're wrong!" That stopped me. I hear ___ needing to be listened to, needing to vent, as he has been on the front lines of this civil war for many years, ___ trying to keep his arms wide open to embrace, love all of this, and he's had to absorb a lot of pain and anger and mistrust and anxiety, and he bears scars; my friend, entrusted with an institution's health and trying to keep its tent big and wide, maybe just trying to keep it from dying on his watch, in tumultuous times, **suffering** the pain of this civil war. "Whatever you think, Paul, you're wrong! Whatever you think, Lancaster Mennonite Conference, you're wrong! Whatever you think, CMCL, you're wrong!"

(PP slide:) Here is the structure of this sermon: three movements, ideas:

- I. Diversity, separation/ God is gathering all things into Christ
- II. Spirit. Body.
- III. Therefore...

Here is the structure of this sermon: three movements, ideas:

This sermon comes out of my attendance at MennoCon19 last month. As a delegate I spent many hours sitting on my duff and listening. The best part for me of all that sitting and listening was hearing Dr. Thomas Yoder Neufeld's deep dive into the New Testament letter to the Ephesians and our present contextual moment. This sermon comes straight out of that listening. From beginning to end, it is hugely indebted to Tom Neufeld's thinking, so much so that I think of it as mostly taking his 3 hours of teaching and figuring out how to preach it in 20 minutes. One more thing: listen between the lines of this sermon. When the text says aliens, listen to it back then, but listen to it from hearing this week's news¹ too; those connections are intentional, are how God wants us to hear these texts, I think.

(PP slide:) Ephesians 1:9-10 [NRSV]: With all wisdom and insight ⁹ God has made known to us **the mystery of God's will**, according to God's good pleasure set forth in Christ, as a plan for the fullness of time, **to gather up all things in Christ**, things in heaven and things on earth.

([NIV, alternate reading:] ...**to bring unity to all things in heaven and on earth under Christ.**)

God is gathering up all things in Christ. Or as the NIV translates this, God is bringing unity to all things under Christ. (Both of these are excellent translations.) Gathered into the One: with God, through Jesus Christ, by the Holy Spirit: gathered into the unity of God—it defies explanation. And gathered into a unity with each other. All things gathered into Christ. This is a cosmic and mystical vision, “all things, in heaven and on earth,” human and animal and all manner of thing and more than that, I think. But for today we will concentrate on us humans.

When we look around us, we certainly recognize a lot of **diversity** in the world. Why all this diversity? I think first of all, that is how God wanted it. God created this world full of so much difference and variety; God loves diversity. But that's not all. And **separation**. Diversity coming in because of fear, our limitations, sin, tragedy, failures, unhealed hurts, leading to divisions, to strife, to many difficulties.

And the writer of Ephesians is saying, God has let out a secret: God is gathering up all things, God is bringing unity to all things under Christ. This is beyond imagination: in a world marked so much by keeping out, removing those who trouble us, loathing those with different views, destroying those different (how else to explain the wall, billions wasted on military spending, anti-immigration efforts, [250 mass shootings so far this year in the US,] drone warfare, segregated neighborhoods and gated communities, suspicion, callousness—inside us as well as in “the world”). This passage packs quite a countercultural punch!

Let's turn now to the second text, Ephesians 2:11-22, but I won't read it out loud in the interest of time; it's on your bulletin insert for you to consult and follow.ⁱⁱ Ephesians is a beautifully constructed piece of literature—and here's one example of that. This section about the unity of Christ/unity in Christ, is one of the great Christological passages of the New Testament.

At the beginnings of the Christian church, there was a huge, painful **division** between Jews and Gentiles. This new movement, called “people of the Way,” or Jesus-followers, was all Jewish at first. But soon some non-ethnically Jewish Judaism-sympathizers got attracted to the movement too. And the Apostle Paul became convinced (by the Spirit) that this good news, this gospel, was for all, not just good news for his own ethnic group, and began a radical missionary quest. Apostles James and Peter and the Jerusalem churches, and Paul and churches he founded, argued for years about this Jewish—Gentile mixture in the church and how to think about that: terms for membership, rules for conduct, etc. And Paul's profound, radical vision, is laid out here.

Eph 2:11-22 [NRSV]: ¹¹ So then, remember that at one time you **Gentiles** by birth, called “**the uncircumcision**” by those who are called “the circumcision”—a physical circumcision made in the flesh by human hands— ¹² remember that you were at that time without Christ, being **aliens** from the commonwealth of Israel, and **strangers** to the covenants of promise, having **no hope** and **without God** in the world. ¹³ But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near...

- (1) Here on the screen is the beginning of this Ephesians text so that we can make a first observation: notice how the writer, who is Jewish, starts by naming this painful divide in the starkest of ways? He speaks all the Jewish stereotypes about Gentiles: uncircumcised—yech, unclean, dirty, disgusting! Aliens, strangers, foreigners, hopeless, without God. It’s painful to see this prejudice full in the face; but that’s where they started, and this passage is about God, Spirit, calling them past that.

“But now in Christ you who once were far off have been brought near...”

(PP slide:) Ephesians 2:11-22

a 11-12 Remember! You Gentiles were once aliens and strangers and enemies, Godless and hopeless

b 13 Christ brought the far near through his blood

c 14-16 Hymn to Christ “our peace”

Broke down the dividing wall between ‘us’ Jews and ‘you’ Gentiles, and between us both and God

Created a “new human” out of former strangers and enemies in one body

Christ “killed” the hostility through his own death on the cross

b1 17-18 Christ the evangelist of peace to the near and the far; the Spirit brings us together into the presence of our Divine Parent

a1 19-22 Now you are no longer strangers, members together with us of God’s family and a home for God built by the Spirit

Here, now, is a summary of this passage:

(2) See how the writer centers in Jesus his argument for uniting Jews and Gentiles in the church [**at c, in red/the middle of this passage**]? This is a very early hymn that these churches sang, an early confession of faith.ⁱⁱⁱ A hymn to Christ our peace.

(3) Now notice the parallelism in the passage:^{iv} [a, a1, first and last lines] once aliens and strangers...now strangers no more, members together...; [**b, b1, in blue/second and next to last lines**] Christ brought the far near...Christ the evangelist of peace to the near and the far.

(4) Also, let’s notice the destruction in these images: wall crashing down, law being abolished, a cross, that awful instrument of shaming and torture and execution. And by the cross Christ “killed” divisions:

by your greatest brutality and horror, a gift of reconciliation. God's Spirit's work is not always gentle or nice or easy!

What are the most painful divisions we experience in our church today? Let's name a few: Welcoming/affirming—or not. Racism and white privilege, divisions between people of color and whites. Between humans and our planet. Class divisions. Do we see signs of God gathering in any of these divisions, unifying anything? Can we imagine Christ breaking down dividing walls, putting to death hostility, making peace? Can we see Spirit moving?

God is gathering us all, from the ends of the earth, unifying all, into unity within Christ. What does that unity look like? Well, the unity of Christ, the oneness of Christ, is the base—for the hard work to begin. God pulls us all together, and we work toward unity within Christ. Unity means that God's passion for gathering in is at the core; and it is a ceaseless struggle to live into it.^v God's wisdom and God's love are multifarious, manifold, contain multitudes; the church is not nearly that diverse.

Unity means God's passion for gathering in is at the core; and it is a ceaseless struggle to live into this unity.

The church is a mess. --thanks to God! Thanks be to God!

II. Spirit. Body.

In the spirit of Spirit surprises, we're going to sing HWB #31 Wind Who Makes All Winds now, here at the 2/3 place of this sermon, Daryl leading (with "Daryl's pipe organ")

"Spirit" is everywhere in the letter to the Ephesians. It is one of the slipperiest words in English. Spirit is partly a way of acknowledging the manifold workings and nature of God. Think of God's Spirit as energy which makes things happen, which fires the sun...

Genesis 1:1-2, before the earth was born, **1** In the beginning when God created^[a] the heavens and the earth, **2** the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, **while a wind from God^[b]** (Or *while the spirit of God* or *while a mighty wind*) swept over the face of the waters.

Genesis 2, the creation of humans: **7** then the Lord God formed *adam* from the dust of the ground,^[b] and **breathed** into its nostrils the **breath** of life; and the human became a living being. What are we humans, but dirt and God's breath, God's Spirit?^{vi} vii

Luke 4, Jesus beginning his public ministry: "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..."

The primal energy of God ready to burst prisoners' chains. The creative energy of God in Jesus' healing...

What if every time we read "Spirit" we think:

An energy fueling the universe
 A breath that gives us life
 Wind—a force that we don't control
 Primal energies of the world being brought into play for our re-creation.
 What if we were thought of as the people of the wind?

Jewish-born believers were being told to accept Gentiles in, however unsettling that was for them. Paul and James argued repeatedly, trying to understand and be with the unsettling wind of God's Spirit on their movement. The Holy Spirit is not confined by us and our efforts to control. Spirit often means hard, painful work: Spirit blowing us around. That's the meaning of the unity of the Spirit, until we meet God face-to-face.

The church is a mess! Thanks be to God!

Body:

We the church, the body of Christ: what makes this body most beautiful is its generosity in accepting, welcoming in the least desirable, wounded, alienated body pieces. Let's rejoice in the awkwardness of this body: it is a God-given body! This body is the temple of God, of the Spirit, Ephesians tells us. ^{viii}

The church is nothing more than God's peace project for mending the world. The church is a place where God the artist is at work—an artist who takes pieces others have thrown away and makes works of art. God loves it where we are struggling at making a place of radical hospitality and radical transformation. The church is a mess; the mess we should be in is the mess of transformation, of re-creation work. We can test whether we're a peace church by our hospitality, by the hope we have for each other, by the prayer we do for each other. Are we up to this level of God's peacemaking mission?

III. Therefore...

The first three chapters of Ephesians are a remarkable artistic representation of the blessings of God. We've been let in on the secret of the universe: God is gathering all things in. Centering on Christ being our peace, bringing together 'us' and 'them', celebrating that.

Then this little Greek word "*ou*," therefore. We are blessed—for good works. Put on your apron; we've

(PP slide:) Ephesians 4:1-3a, 32 [NRSV] I therefore, the prisoner in the Lord, beg you to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all **humility** and gentleness, with **patience, bearing with** one another in love, making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.... and be kind to one another, tenderhearted, **forgiving** one another, as God in Christ has forgiven you.

got work to do!

A few words about humility, patience, forbearance, and forgiveness. In these earliest churches were healthy people and diseased ones, old-timers and newcomers, the strong and the weak. Remember the movie “O Brother, Where Art Thou?” ...the chain gang scene, the three protagonists chained together trying to run away? There’s an image of the church for us! You want to run fast? Great, we need you. Only problem, you’re shackled with those of us who are pretty slow; you’re going to have to learn some humility^x and patience!

There were huge problems and disagreements between (and within) these earliest churches in the NT—all part of the unity of the church, the unity of God. The reason these issues show up is because it is so hard to build community, to be community, with all this diversity, it’s so hard to do this!

If we want to live in unity, some considerations: we do not walk alone. God, Spirit, walks with us. We walk with others—including those who irritate us! When we enter into relationship with Christ, we enter into relationships with others—enter into a real unity, which is a mess. I don’t know about you’all, but I aimed to bring my bright shiny best self into church...but my unresolved issues, my pain, my emotional immaturity, my unhealed hurts, my shadow came clunking along too, dragging behind. That’s the way it is - and this is where Christ wants to transform, can do transforming work.

Maybe we should tell people wanting to join the church, church hurts?! Patience is about hoping for, and a willingness to suffer. **We suffer each other**—as Christ suffered for us—**and daily Christ suffers us**, as we mess up, miss the mark, make mistakes. Christ suffers us every day, why shouldn’t we suffer each other too? Maybe more conservative churches are called to suffer more progressive ones—and vice versa; racial minorities are suffering a mostly white denomination, and those of us whites are being called to start to suffer (and to understand suffering); sexual minorities suffer the dominant hetero-normative culture in our churches... Suffering each other: that’s forbearance. We won’t be able to maintain community without this.

Forgiveness is gracing each other as God has graced us. When we forgive we are making salvation here in this church, we are participating with salvation. Jesus’ disciple Peter comes to him and says, OK, OK, I get this forgiveness thing already! But if someone in the church wrongs me, how many times must I forgive? As many as seven times? Seventy times seven, Jesus replies; you can’t count.

In the story of the prodigal son,^x the father has been wished dead, shamed, left behind. But he keeps scanning the horizon, never giving up hope, always ready for connection and relationship, never stopping loving... The Mennonite Church-USA is suffering rifts—but don’t stop scanning the horizon! God doesn’t give up; God hasn’t stopped working. The unity of the Spirit is much bigger than we can imagine. God can use even these breaks, our schisms, and gather them in; isn’t that amazing?!^{xi}

The church is a mess! Thanks be to God!

Two practical examples of this forbearance, patience, suffering each other. (I’m hoping to plant some ideas!)

One. The apostle Paul had an ongoing fight with James and Peter and the Jerusalem churches. At one point he even boiled over with this diatribe: “If anyone tells you another gospel, let them be cursed!”^{xii} But whenever he started a new little church in some far-flung city in the Roman Empire, almost the first

thing he did was collect an offering for the Jerusalem churches! They needed help, and he was making it very hard for them to say no to these new churches. Spirit, and money, and peacemaking. For us in the MC-USA, we could use our creativity to try to mend, to repair. To use our family connections. To look for ways to work together. To share food...

Two. On Sunday I gave an example of someone **suffering** this denomination, our Mennonite church, in love and hope, but will not put that in this written text. Instead I want to show some photographs of other Mennonite congregations in our city of Lancaster. Other signposts of God's Spirit working, other outposts of God's peace project for mending our world. People whom God loves dearly, part of the beautiful, God-given, difficult diversity of our Mennonite church.





(Iglesia Menonita Roca de Salvacion [Rock of Salvation Mennonite Church])





(Crossroads Mennonite Church)



(Bhutanese-Nepali Church of Lancaster)



(East Chestnut Street Mennonite Church)



(Tree of Life Church)





(Sunnyside Mennonite Church)



(Mosaic International Fellowship)



(Laurel Street Mennonite Church)



(Riversedge)



(Grace Ubuntu Fellowship)



(Iglesia Evangelica Menonita El Buen Pastor [Good Shepherd Evangelical Mennonite Church])



(CONNECT)



(West End Mennonite Fellowship)



(James Street Mennonite Church)

In the midst of all our world's diversity and divisions—knowing we are each blessed and beautiful and broken—joining God's Spirit which is gathering all things in, Spirit's work bringing unity to all things—in the middle of our mess-of-a-church—may we all grow into more capacity for suffering (each other), for love and hope.

Benediction:

Now to God who by the power at work within us
is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine,
to God be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations,
forever and ever. Amen. Ephesians 3:20-21

Eph 2:11-22 [NRSV]: ¹¹So then, remember that at one time you Gentiles by birth, ^[b] called “the uncircumcision” by those who are called “the circumcision”—a physical circumcision made in the flesh by human hands— ¹²remember that you were at that time without Christ, being aliens from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world. ¹³But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. ¹⁴For he is our peace; in his flesh he has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us. ¹⁵He has abolished the law with its commandments and ordinances, that he might create in himself one new humanity in place of the two, thus making peace, ¹⁶and might reconcile both groups to God in one body^[c] through the cross, thus putting to death that hostility through it.^[d] ¹⁷So he came and proclaimed peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near; ¹⁸for through him both of us have access in one Spirit to the Father. ¹⁹So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God, ²⁰built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone.^[e] ²¹In him the whole structure is joined together and grows into a holy temple in the Lord; ²²in whom you also are built together spiritually^[f] into a dwelling place for God.

Eph 2:11-22 [NIV]: ¹¹Therefore, remember that formerly you who are Gentiles by birth and called “uncircumcised” by those who call themselves “the circumcision” (which is done in the body by human hands)— ¹²remember that at that time you were separate from Christ, excluded from citizenship in Israel and foreigners to the covenants of the promise, without hope and without God in the world. ¹³But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far away have been brought near by the blood of Christ.

¹⁴For he himself is our peace, who has made the two groups one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility, ¹⁵by setting aside in his flesh the law with its commands and regulations. His purpose was to create in himself one new humanity out of the two, thus making peace, ¹⁶and in one body to reconcile both of them to God through the cross, by which he put to death their hostility. ¹⁷He came and preached peace to you who were far away and peace to those who were near.¹⁸ For through him we both have access to the Father by one Spirit.

¹⁹Consequently, you are no longer foreigners and strangers, but fellow citizens with God’s people and also members of his household, ²⁰built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone. ²¹In him the whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord. ²²And in him you too are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit.

[3 movements, strands, ideas:

I: Diversity & separation/God is gathering all things into Christ/ (Eph 1:9-10)

Paul's great hymn of Christ (Eph 2:11-22)

The church is a mess! Thanks be to God!

II. Spirit: as primal energy, breath, wind (forces we don't control)

III. Blessed by God (Christ being our peace) – therefore:! (Eph 4:1-3a, 32)

humility, patience, forbearance, forgiveness... “suffering each other”]

ⁱ For example, this, from Friday morning 8/9/2019: <https://www.npr.org/2019/08/09/749659087/mississippi-prosecutor-on-ice-raid-aftermath>

ⁱⁱ It's built of long and convoluted sentences that Paul is famous for, and chock full of first century CE referents that take work to understand.

ⁱⁱⁱ (I can't see the song in this, but scholars agree about this—maybe if we could see the koine Greek we could see the rhythm and poetry here?!)

^{iv} This passage is a **chiasmus**. A chiasmus is a rhetorical device in which two or more clauses are balanced against each other by the reversal of their structures in order to produce an artistic effect, an esthetically pleasing and stronger argument. <https://literarydevices.net/chiasmus/>; see also <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chiasmus>]

^v Unity in Christ is not a state of harmony. We in the Anabaptist/Mennonite stream have not been served well by our notions of the church as a spotless bride. What makes the body of Christ perfect is God's work pulling enemies in. God's understanding of unity is fundamentally missional, fundamentally always reaching out, and therefore by definition messy. Rather than the spotless bride, perhaps a more useful image of **the church is like a messy womb of creation**.

^{vi} Thanks to Meghan Larissa Good (teaching pastor at Trinity Mennonite Church, Glendale, Arizona, and author of *The Bible Unwrapped: Making Sense of Scripture Today*), who spoke this sentence (or something very like it) in a sermon at MennoCon19 on Friday morning 7/5/19.

^{vii} Another example: Ezekiel 37, the vision of the valley of dry bones, all those war dead (and perhaps a lifeline for us during our hardest times): ⁹Then he said to me, “Prophesy to the **breath**, prophesy, mortal, and say to the **breath**:^[6] (or **wind** or **spirit**) Thus says the Lord God: Come from the four winds, O **breath**, and breathe upon these slain, that they may live.” ¹³And you shall know that I am the Lord, when I open your graves, and bring you up from your graves, O my people. ¹⁴I will put **my spirit** within you, and you shall live...

^{viii} (Section I edited out, but I like it too much to throw away:) If you were building the temple of God, what kind of building materials would you use? If you want to impress the world with the greatness and importance of your god, you would make the most perfect impressive structure, right? What is God's building? Any artist knows, if you want to make art (whether painting or cooking or childbirth) it's messy, you have to be open to messy. The church is a place where God the artist is at work—an artist who takes pieces others have thrown away and makes works of art. We have a hard time following God out into the garbage dump to gather more junk that other people have thrown away for building materials. God loves it where we are struggling at making a place of radical hospitality and radical transformation. The church is a mess; the mess we should be in is the mess of transformation, of re-creation work.

^{ix} Good thinking on characteristics of a humble person: <http://craigfinnestad.com/?p=1738>

Or another: <https://www.success.com/6-attributes-of-healthy-humility/>

^x An aside, but good: <http://www.valuesandcapitalism.com/how-the-parable-of-the-prodigal-son-can-help-fix-america/>

^{xi} This sermon is meant to toss out lots of ideas, like firecrackers, incendiary devices, sparkly flares. I'm leaving so much edited out, can't take time to explore nuances; I'm well aware I've painted in broad strokes. But "test this, hold on to what seems good, let go of what doesn't" (Paul, I Thes 5)

^{xii} Galatians 1:8,9