

HELD TOGETHER

COLOSSIANS 1:15-24; LUKE 10:38-42

LETHBRIDGE MENNONITE CHURCH

BY: RYAN DUECK

JULY 17, 2016/9TH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST

I want to do three things in this morning's sermon. I want to provide a brief report on the Mennonite Church Canada Assembly that I attended last week in Saskatoon. I then want to make a few comments about the two Scripture passages we've heard this morning. Last, I want to try to make some connections between the two.

So, first the Assembly. At the outset I should say that I can't possibly report on everything that happened in Saskatoon, and that if you want more information, there are numerous videos and documents online at the MC Canada website.

As most Assemblies are, this one was a time of reconnecting with old friends, of making new connections, of considering resolutions, of attending interesting workshops, and, most importantly, of worshiping together with sisters and brothers from across our national Mennonite family of faith.

These events only come around every two years, and they are highlights in many ways. It was good to be together.

But there was a bit more apprehension before this assembly. As many of you know, this year delegates had two big resolutions on their agenda.

1. Being a Faithful Church – end of a seven year process of discernment on human sexuality, same sex marriage, and how we read Scripture and *be* the church together
2. Future Directions Task Force – four year process of re-envisioning the future of how we structure ourselves as a family of faith; old programs and institutions are

proving unsustainable according to present giving patterns and congregation sizes and demographics

Both decisions have important implications for the future of our church. Both decisions deal with realities that are being faced by all Christian denominations in some form or another in the post-Christian western world.

And there *was* and *is* anxiety around both. How will we preserve unity when in the midst of disagreement about the most faithful way forward when it comes to sexuality? What will future structures of our church look like given that present structures are unsustainable?

There was passionate debate and conversation about both of these big issues. There were workshops and biblical expositions and question-and-answer sessions and open mic times where we heard a range of perspectives.

It was clear that in our broader church, like in *our* own church here in Lethbridge, we don't all agree.

The BFC resolution was a four part one:

- Confession of Faith remains unchanged
- Acknowledge that some individuals and congregations within our body interpret Scripture differently
- Create space/allow room for alternative interpretations to be tested by individuals and congregations
- Continue to listen to and engage with one another

The FDTF resolution was essentially a vote of trust in the work that the task force had done to this point and the transition team that will now begin the process of envisioning the streamlined institutional structures that will lead us into the future, while taking into account concerns raised about process, structure, international relations (Witness, specifically), and finance, and vulnerable area churches (like Alberta!).

In both cases, the resolutions before the delegate body passed with a comfortable majority.

In both cases, these decisions represented in large part a ratification of processes and trends that have been realities among us for some time.

In both cases, I can safely say based on conversation with others, people voted for a number of different reasons and often with heavy hearts.

In both cases, there were people who saw the outcomes as sources of grief and/or hope and excitement for the future.

But no matter which way people voted, there was and is much thought and some concern about what will hold us together going forward as a national family of faith.

This morning we heard two very different passages from Scripture.

Colossians 1 contains some of the most exalted language about Jesus you will find in the entire NT. Listen to some of the descriptions of Jesus.

- The image of the invisible God
- Firstborn of all creation
- The through whom and for whom *all things* have been created
- The one who is before all things
- The one in whom all things hold together
- Head of the church
- Firstborn from the dead (foretaste of resurrection!)
- This one in whom **all the fullness of God** was pleased to dwell (astonishing claim—Jesus doesn't show us part of God, but the fullness of God's character and intentions)
- The one through whom God reconciles *all things* to himself
- The one who made peace through the blood of his cross

It's an incredible passage.

It's a kind of a God's-eye view of the absolute centrality of Jesus Christ in the cosmos, in the church, and in our lives.

This is the big picture. This is the theological epicenter of the entire Christian story. So important was this passage in the early church's understanding of the role and nature of Christ that many believe that these words were the basis of a hymn. Right from the beginning, the centrality of Christ was part of the church's liturgy and worship.

From the macro, we move down to the micro. From the theological masterpiece of Colossians 1 we are dropped down into Jesus dwelling in an everyday story with ordinary people and homes and mundane activities

“A certain village...” “A certain home...” “A woman...” “Her sister...”

These could be scenes from anywhere at any time involving any one of us. It describes situations we’re all familiar with... sitting at tables, preparing food, listening, talking...

We know the story well, don’t we? Martha is scurrying about getting things done while Mary sits at Jesus’ feet listening to what he says.

Jesus commends Mary for choosing the one thing that can’t be taken away from her.

Many people have interpreted this passage as an affirmation of contemplation and prayer and listening to Jesus and a critique of busyness. And there is some small amount of truth to that.

But I don’t think Jesus is saying we shouldn’t busy ourselves with *doing* things in the life of faith.

He had a lot to say about loving our neighbour and making peace and casting out demons and proclaiming the kingdom of God.

These things, in their own way, require a kind of busyness. They certainly require activity. Jesus is not saying that we should all just sit around idly thinking deep spiritual thoughts or contemplating theological mysteries.

So, this is not a contrast between contemplation (good) vs. activism (bad).

Jesus *is* saying, I think, that our activity must proceed from the proper source if it is to have lasting value, if it is to form us well as human beings being conformed to the pattern of Christ.

So we have a liturgical proclamation of the theological center of the Christian faith and a story from the everyday life of Jesus in the first century world.

Both of these texts, in their own very different ways, invite us to center ourselves—as individuals and as a church—on Jesus.

Together, I think they provide a very timely reminder for us as we think not only about the future of the church but of the cultural moment in which we are seeking to be faithful to Christ and to represent him to the world around us.

Our national church that faces significant challenges to “hold together” going forward.

Our world also faces significant challenges. We read the news this week out of Nice, France and Turkey; we think of the many instances of gun violence of the past few years in the United States; we think of the racial tensions that are flaring up south of the border or our own here in Canada with respect to our indigenous neighbours; we see increasingly polarized political and social discourse; we see the normalization of radical forms of individualism that pay little attention to the well-being of the broader community.

And we wonder if things are at risk of coming apart in our world.

Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold...

These familiar words from Yeats’ famous poem written following World War II could well describe how many of us feel when we look out at the world today.

It’s easy to feel paralyzed, to feel helpless. It’s easy to look to the future with pessimism or anxiety.

As I read the texts this week, I heard a very simple call to, like Mary, attend to Jesus. To, as Colossians says, hold to the center. This is our task.

There are many things that we can busy ourselves with as a church. There are all kinds of ways we can do good in a world where good desperately needs to be done.

There were other resolutions that passed at the Assembly. One called on Mennonite Churches to actively pursue justice for Palestinians *and* Israelis and to avoid investing in Israeli companies that directly profit from or operate within illegally occupied Palestinian territory.

Another formally repudiated the “Doctrine of Discovery,” this early European legal and ideological framework that considered North America to be uncivilized and uninhabited, paying no attention to the indigenous peoples who had existed here long before them.

Both of these issues matter. You as a church have graciously allowed me to travel and to spend significant amounts of time learning more about indigenous issues in Canada as well as the painfully complex reality in Israel and Palestine. I am convinced that the gospel of peace *does* compel us to be active and engaged in these arenas.

But it’s far too easy for the church to get the order entirely wrong. It’s easy for us to allow our energies and anxieties and activities to be led around on a leash by the latest political controversy or social cause of the day rather than by a deep attending to the person and work of Jesus.

It’s easy to busy ourselves becoming attached to all kinds of worthy causes and kind of bringing Jesus in the back door to justify our own political or social preferences.

If who we are and what we do—as Mennonites, as followers of Jesus more generally—does not begin and end with Jesus, if it is not sustained and animated by a deep devotion to him and his way in the world, if it is not guided by his teaching, if it does not depend on his finished work, if it does not cling to his grace and mercy and seek to extend this outward.... if Jesus is not the *center* of all we do and all we say and all we are as a people, then we will be little more than a social club or political organization that lines up with all the other social clubs and political organizations in the world, scurrying about, busying ourselves with many things while neglecting the one thing that is needed most.

The world does not need another one of these.

The world needs the church to be the church for the reasons that the church has always been the church.

This does not mean that we will always agree. The church has *never* agreed about everything.

But it does mean that we refuse to stray from the one thing that has always held us together—the one thing that is stronger than our ability or even willingness to understand and agree about everything.

Christ, the center. The one in whom all things are held together.

We cling to Christ. We attend to Christ. Of all the things we *could* do, this one thing we *must* do.

Attending to Christ of necessity requires attending to one another.

And attending to one another well requires listening. It requires being open to the experiences and ideas of those we disagree with.

To take just the BFC issue, I know that there are some in Mennonite Church Canada, some in our own church here in Lethbridge who will be deeply disappointed with the outcome from Saskatoon.

Some will think the resolution went way too far. We should not be “creating space” to “test” alternate understandings, but standing on the “obvious” truth of Scripture, calling sin, “sin.”

Some will think the resolution didn’t go nearly far enough. We should be opening up our Confession of Faith and changing our official theology on sexuality and marriage in order to reflect the trajectory of equality and justice for all people that God calls his church to live into.

Both views are present in our national church and in our local church. I know this.

And so in light of these differences, we *must* learn to attend properly and hear one another well.

There was an amendment to the final BFC resolution that was accepted and passed. The amendment called us to develop ways of “hearing” one another on this issue.

I think it’s interesting and important that the word “hear” was used instead of “listen to.” It’s easy to listen while formulating a rebuttal to preserve our own ideas and identity.

It's much harder to really *hear*, to really *understand* another human being's perspective. But this is what is most needed.

Those who think that a verse from Leviticus settles the question of same sex marriage in the twenty-first century can and *must* listen generously and openly to the stories of those who walk with same-sex attraction or those who have painful stories of rejection and even abuse from the church.

Those who think that "culture has moved on and so should we" is a sufficient argument for changing the church's historical position can and *must* listen generously and openly to those who have deep reservations about how human sexuality in our culture is profoundly dis-ordered and is being unmoored from familiar contexts of family and procreation and located almost exclusively within the realm of individual desire and identity politics.

We can—and *must!*—adopt the same approach with pretty much any other issue that so easily divides us as Mennonites or as Christians more broadly.

The easy thing to do in the light of difference is to walk away from one another. This is something that has happened at the national and provincial levels of our church in the past, and it is something that could easily happen again.

This is something that Christians have always been very good at.

God has given the church a much harder and holier task than coming together in unanimity.

God has given us a much harder and holier task than coming together and exulting in the sameness of agreement.

God has given us a much harder and holier task than being with people who are like us, who think like us, who reinforce our ideas at every turn.

God has given us the much harder and holier task of loving one another. Loving each other in the midst of difference, even *painful* difference.

This is a task that has been entrusted to no one but the church of Jesus Christ.

This task will be a defining one, I think, for many years to come.

And we cannot do this without centering ourselves on and attending to Jesus.

Christ is the one who holds all things together—in the church, in the broader world, in our families, in our own conflicted souls.

This doesn't mean that there won't be disagreement. This doesn't mean that there won't be struggle or sorrow or uncertainty.

But it *does* mean that we can move through the challenges of the future secure in the conviction that the love Christ has manifested to us in his life, teaching, death, and resurrection is the love that will ultimately judge and healer of this grand cosmic story that we are part of.

This is what holds the world together.

This is what has always held the world together.

This is what the church must joyfully proclaim—that we are held. Together.

Thanks be to God.

Amen.

