

NOT SO WITH YOU

MATTHEW 20:20-28
LETHBRIDGE MENNONITE CHURCH
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After a three-week hiatus, today we're returning to our summer worship theme: "Bind Us Together."

It's been a few weeks, so I thought it might be good to rewind to July for a bit of a recap on where we've been so far.

1. July 2: We looked at our political identities and what it means to be bound together as citizens of our nation while maintaining primary allegiance to Jesus.
2. July 9: We looked at our shared humanity with people of other religions
3. July 16: We talked about our indigenous neighbours and how we can live well together in the context of a difficult history that the historical church has contributed to, and which continues to affect the present.
4. July 23: Kevin Koop from Medicine Hat spoke to us about learning about those who are differently abled.
5. July 30: Before I went on holidays we talked about being bound together as a church across ages and generations

Today, I'm going to be talking about being bound together in the church, despite the different views that we hold.

Next week, I'll wrap things up with a sermon called, "Living With Diversity: How to Love Your Neighbour Without Turning Them Into an Idol."

Our summer series has been all about coming together in the midst of difference.

Many commentators have said that this is the defining question of our cultural moment: “How will we live with difference?”

As we look out at the world and read new news, as we look at the global church, as we scroll through social media or interact with our neighbours, it often feels like the overwhelming answer is, “not very well.”

A lot depends on where you look, I know, but it seems to me that we live in a world that isn’t “doing difference” well.

But it seems like our world is really struggling to cope with diversity of every kind.

These last few years have been punctuated with racial violence south of the border. Shootings, protests, profound mistrust. The racial tension south of the border seems to be reaching a breaking point.

We have the growing phenomenon of people using vehicles as weapons on public streets. Nice, Barcelona, Berlin, London, Stockholm, and now Charlottesville.

No too far in the rearview mirror, the Brexit vote still looms large. Many of us fear a world where tribalistic loyalties are so easily inflamed, where scapegoats are so readily identified, where public opinion seems to be yanked around by anger and ignorance that so often defines our popular discourse.

We have a Donald Trump presidency, a man who obtained power by stoking divisions between people, scapegoating minority groups, and promising a return to a vision of America that probably never existed and certainly doesn’t seem possible today.

But beyond the headlines, I think many of us see signs of a world that is struggling to cope with massive trends of human movement across borders, of a media culture where anger and misunderstanding can be easily inflamed, and where violence is increasingly the chosen course of action for desperate people.

This week I came across an image from a rally somewhere in America. Two people, face to face, each holding a sign with large angry letters on it, screaming at each other. This seemed to me to be a snapshot of our cultural moment.

Reactionary. Angry. Loud. Resorting to slogans and name-calling. Unwilling to even make an attempt to understand the other.

Difference is not something to live with. It is something to eliminate.

It's not quite as bad in the church, thank God. Or at least not as violent.

But of course the trends and dispositions we see in the broader culture are also present among the global community of Christians. The fears and anxieties "out there" can easily trickle into our assumptions and reactions "in here."

The church, like the broader culture, doesn't always—or even often—do "difference" well.

In October, we will be coming together as Mennonite Church Canada to talk about how we will restructure in light of decreased giving and shrinking congregations and, in some cases, departing congregations. We know all about this in Alberta. Over the last two decades, no fewer than four congregations have chosen to leave our provincial church.

It's not at all difficult to interpret these trends as an inability to live well with difference. Very often, disagreement about human sexuality is one of the driving forces behind people leaving, whether just leaving local congregations, or entire congregations walking away from the larger body.

But of course it's not just Mennonites who don't always "do difference" as well as we could or should. Other denominations are facing the same struggles, often about the same issues.

And aside from the big issues, my conversations with pastors and churchgoers, locally, and on my travels, makes it very plain that every church is familiar with the phenomenon of, "I don't like this or that, so I'm leaving."

The music. The preaching. The programs. The lack of programs. The pastor doesn't dress like he's supposed to. The pastor talks too long. The church doesn't have a clear enough position on theological issue x or y. The church has a very clear position on x or y, I just don't like it or agree with it. I had a disagreement with so and so and I don't want to see

them again. I told the church to say something to so and so about something they said, but leadership ignored me...

I could go on and on and on. If I were to have been keeping a list over the last decade or so, it would be a very long one by now. And not a very inspiring one.

The church can quite easily degenerate into consumeristic individualism. If the church doesn't meet my needs, I'm gone.

We choose churches like we choose products, selecting those that best reflect our own self-understanding and that speak to our own personal hopes and ambitions for ourselves and for the world.

I'd like a double-shot of certainty with some political conservatism, please...

I'll have a low-doctrine, eco-friendly, peace and justice church, please. And go light on the evangelism.

We are conditioned in so many ways to treat everything in our lives as a product. Church is no exception. And so, when we encounter a product that forces us to negotiate difference and discomfort, it's easy to say, I'll find another product, thank you very much.

Even in the church, we don't always do difference very well.

This seems to be our human default. Whether it's different theology or different politics or different musical preferences or different worship styles or different *anything*.

Difference is threatening. So we either eliminate it or we go somewhere else.

Our Scripture passage this morning is not about dealing with diversity in the church. On the face of it, it has very little to do with what I've just been talking about at all.

Let's set the scene. Jesus' crucifixion is looming. In the verses immediately preceding today's text, Jesus has, for the third time, predicted his death.

The Son of Man will be delivered over to the chief priests and the teachers of the law. They will condemn him to death and will hand him over to the Gentiles to be mocked and flogged and crucified... (Mat 20:18-19).

In a quite spectacular exercise in missing the point, the mother of James and John asks Jesus if her sons can have positions of power and authority in Jesus' coming kingdom.

Jesus has just talked about his coming death and resurrection – the very hinge of history and the decisive moment in God's salvation narrative. And the people around him are saying in effect, "Interesting... What's in it for me?"

Isn't that just like us?

Jesus responds by saying, "You don't know what you are asking."

And they don't, of course. They still don't get that this kingdom is different. And *because* this kingdom is different, everything about how it comes, how it operates, and how it is ruled are different.

The other ten disciples hear about what James and John have been up to and they are, understandably, angry.

I think it would be a stretch to assume that their anger is particularly righteous or that it comes out of any deep understanding of the nature of Jesus' kingdom. They're probably just annoyed that James and John are doing some advanced lobbying for positions that they have their eye on, too.

So, Jesus sits them all down for a talk. Listen, he says, you know how things work out there where people are greedy for power and influence and status. But among you, things are supposed to be different.

You want to be first? Great. Then learn how to serve, because that's what "first" looks like in this kingdom.

So, what does this have to do with living together with difference in the church?

It is the disposition at the heart of the disciples' request. This is what drew my attention this week when I read it and as I thought about the many issues that divide and plague our world and the twenty-first century church.

At the heart of the request from James and John is something quite simple and predictable, something that bleeds into everything we do as human beings, everything we prioritize, everything we want, every response and reaction we are inclined toward.

Me.

My status. My power. My vindication. My rightness. My honour. My recognition.

This is what James and John were after, right? They were looking for positions of privilege and power and influence. They wanted to be seen, honoured, respected. They wanted people to know that they were winners and that they were on the winning team. They wanted to be there when their enemies got what was coming to them.

After all that they had been through with Jesus, they wanted people to know that they had backed the right horse.

I think I would have been the same.

And in response to these very natural sentiments, Jesus offers four very important words.

Four words that I want us to leave this building with today. Four words that I want us to have ringing around in our ears whenever we encounter those who aren't like us or people who are clearly wrong and are tempted to put them in their place.

Not so with you.

Look around, Jesus says. You see how things work all around you. You see how power games are played inside and outside the church. You see how rhetoric is employed to assume positions of superiority. You see how eager human beings are to try to claim the moral high ground, how desperately they love power, how greedy they are for status and admiration. You see all the ways in which people manipulate others and situations to make attempt to gain security. You see how things work.

Not so with you.

Instead....

Whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be your slave.

Not because this is necessarily the most pragmatic way forward, although I think if we were to consistently put this into practice we would be stunned at how our lives, relationships, churches, and world would be transformed.

We do so because we are called to imitate Jesus. Who came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many, thereby demonstrating that the greatest among us really was and is our servant.”

And so we are to “render service to each other.”

- To those we do agree with and to those we don't agree with.
- To those whose theology lines up nicely with ours, and to those whose does not.
- To those who like the same kind of music we do, and to those who do not.
- To those who treat us with charity and kindness, and to those who treat us thoughtlessly.
- To those who honour us as dearly-loved children of God, and to those who seek to use us to bolster their own reputations and influence.
- To those who are selfless and worthy of emulation, and to those who are selfish.
- To those we like, and to those we don't like.

Look around. Even in our little church, I guarantee you that there is someone in this room who has a different view than yours on human sexuality. Or politics. Or theology. Or what the pastor should be wearing. 😊

These are the people we are to render service to. This is what greatness looks like in the kingdom of God.

This is not some abstract issue that affects people “out there.” It's all of us. The church is supposed to do things differently than what we see out there.

The church is supposed to be the place where being right takes a back seat to loving and serving our neighbours.

The church is supposed to be a place where difference doesn't need to be eliminated or feared, but where all people can come together in the example of our Servant King, and love and serve each other in the midst of difference.

I want to be clear. I'm not saying that difference doesn't matter. I'm not saying that at times some people really are right and other people really are wrong. I'm not saying that theological correctness isn't worth striving toward.

I'm not saying that we shouldn't speak with conviction about what we believe in the church or that we should ignore divisive issues.

I'm not saying that the church should be a place where everyone can just believe whatever they want as long as we are mostly nice to each other. Not at all.

What I am saying, is that as followers of Jesus, all of our speaking and conviction, all of our dialogue and discernment, all of our disagreement and difference *must* proceed from a primary conviction that every one of our neighbour's bears the image of God, and that our posture toward them is to be like that of Christ's posture to us.

A servant.

Three concluding points

1. Difference is inevitable: get used to it.

As human beings, we are fragile, finite, and fallen. We don't know everything and we will never know everything. Every person in this room, right now, is wrong about something. Even something important. No group of human beings is ever going to think 100% the same about everything. In this context, loving and serving one another well comes first. Right thinking comes second.

2. Rethink the nature of the church.

Is it a religious product to be consumed? If it is, then, the customer is always right, then the customer will keep migrating around to where they can get the best product, the most bang for their buck.

Or is the church a community within which to be trained in love, to encounter God, and to be given the opportunity to serve one another in love and to be properly formed as human beings.

Not surprisingly, I think it is the latter.

3. It's hard to be afraid and suspicious of someone when you're serving them.

Maybe it's not impossible. But it's really hard.

In Matthew 20, Jesus exposes a tendency at the very heart of our souls. He looks out at how things work out there and sees the same world we do.

We want to be important. We want to be right. We want to be "over" others. We want control and power and influence and status.

I know this, Jesus says.

You know how things work out there in the world. You know how difference is negotiated among human beings who are hungry for a scapegoat, who easily revert to self-serving approaches to church, who are easily frightened and confused, who find it way easier to label people so as not to have to try to understand them, much less love them.

Not so with you. Not so with us.

Because we have been brought together by the One who came not to be served, but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many.

Amen.

