

THE ROOT OF THE MATTER

COLOSSIANS 2:6-19

LETHBRIDGE MENNONITE CHURCH

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This morning will be part delegate report, part sermon.

I want to give you a sense of what took place at our Mennonite Church Canada National Assembly in Winnipeg last week.

I also want to link some of the themes from the Assembly with our summer series on “The Early Church, Our Church” and some reflections based on Colossians 2. I think that the Apostle Paul’s words to the first century church in Colossae have much to say to our own Mennonite church, here in twenty-first century Canada.

The theme of the Assembly this year was “Wild Hope: Faith for an Unknown Season.” I want to read you the opening paragraphs of our program book at the Assembly:

The western world is rapidly moving beyond Christendom. The church must take Christian faith into a new cultural and civic landscape—one that is already well entrenched in Europe and Australia. There is disorientation for God’s church in this new wilderness, but also a strong sense of hope that this represents a tremendous opportunity to hear God’s call anew and shape a new kind of church for the future—a future that may be more like witness planting than church planting. The beliefs and convictions of individuals will be influenced in ways we have not yet imagined nor discovered.

In Canada, we are well acquainted with the four seasons: will we be able to embrace an entirely new and, to us, possibly foreign season? What role will there be for the institutional church at all levels: congregational, area church, and national church? **How we choose to face this new season, and how we experience Christ in this new season, will influence how it concludes.**

The Scripture passage we focused on throughout our time in Winnipeg was Mark 4:35-41, Jesus calming the storm. Each plenary speaker chose a different angle into this text.

- Brian Quan from Toronto Chinese Mennonite Church talked about the disciples' fear of the storm, about how this fear was transferred to Jesus when they realized that he, like the storm, could not be managed and controlled, and about how Jesus invites us into a future free of fear.
- David Driedger, Associate Pastor of First Mennonite in Winnipeg, challenged us to consider whether we, as the church, are often guilty of standing comfortably at the shore line, causing waves for those on the margins who navigate the storms of life, refusing to enter into the storm and live with ambiguity and uncertainty
- Betty Pries, a church conflict consultant who teaches about conflict and mediation at Conrad Grebel University College, talked about how being the church in an unknown season... Challenged us to heed Jesus' words to the storm: Peace. Be still. Trust. Especially in a cultural context where the church is far from the centre of society. Pries said, "In the face of threat, people of faith can choose from three responses; fight back, give up altogether, or rediscover who we are meant to be as children of God."

These were all good reminders, good challenges for us as a national church, as local churches who seek to follow Jesus in this strange new post-Christian, postmodern world.

These were reminders that delegates sought to heed as we discussed the Being a Faithful Church Process which seeks to discern issues of sexuality. After discussion at tables and in the broader group, delegates approved three questions to bring back to our churches in the next round of discussion (see MC Canada website, if you would like to have a look at these questions).

Delegates also sought to keep Mark 4 in mind as we discussed the Future Directions Task Force, which is seeking to look to the future of Mennonite Church Canada. This group reported that "a more integrated, simpler, yet sounder structure is needed for the wider church." According to one member of the task force, "we need to discern what this means. What does this look like?"

Each day there were numerous afternoon workshops to choose from.

- One led by our own Joanne Moyer on creation care!
- Others focused on film and faith, Indigenous relations, spiritual disciplines, faith formation in children, Mennonite Church Canada Witness workers, Christian Peacemaker Teams, and many others that I couldn't get to ☺

I very much enjoyed the workshop that I was able to lead on Friday afternoon. We reflected a bit on our cultural context of religious pluralism, and what *exclusive* allegiance to Jesus might look like in a culture where inclusivity and tolerance are held up as among our highest ideals.

There was the usual inspiring worship and meal and break times filled with stimulating conversation, meeting new friends and old.

There was even a live Twitter feed on the back wall throughout, so that you could read what people were thinking about the conference or the speaker or whatever (what they were typing out when they should have been paying attention ☺).

[If you want more information on any of this and more, go to the Mennonite Church Canada website. They have newsletters from each day of the Assembly, along with many other documents related to issues discussed in Winnipeg.]

All in all, I walked away from the Assembly with a message of both challenge and hope.

There is no doubt about the fact that the church is living in challenging times. Many churches are shrinking, giving to Conferences is declining, there are deep divisions among us about how we interpret Scripture, particularly when it comes to hot-button issues like sexuality, peace and justice, religious pluralism, creation care, indigenous relations, etc.

At the same time, there is hope because wherever people gather around the person and work of Jesus, there is *always* hope.

And when I turned to the Scripture passage from Colossians for this Sunday, I was reminded that neither the cultural context that we find ourselves nor the response to it are as unique as we sometimes are tempted to think.

Let's shift our attention to Colossae, city in present day Western Turkey (see map).

Paul's letter to the Colossian church—indeed to *all* of the churches he founded—was written in the first century after Jesus' death and resurrection.

It was written to a small church without much power or influence, that found itself, in many ways, on the margins of the broader culture, and was having to wrestle with all

kinds of ethical issues that came about as the (at first, primarily Jewish) church began to welcome Gentiles.

Like our twenty-first century Mennonite church (and the Christian church, in general), the churches Paul founded faced temptations and diversions and distractions that sought to pull them away from their central commitment to Jesus Christ.

In Colossae, the challenges came from what Paul calls “philosophy and empty deceit according to human tradition and not to Christ.” (v. 8). There were many beliefs floating about in the culture.

There were beliefs in “elemental spirits” or demigods from the Greek/Roman pantheon in some quarters.

There was also a reemphasis on aspects of the Jewish law from the other side, all of which members of the church found attractive for various reasons.

In our day, the challenges are different. There are other religions and philosophies, of course, but I suspect that these are not as tempting to us as the kind of bland, quasi-agnostic secularism (or, what Regent College professor Craig Gay calls, “practical atheism”) that floats about in the air in Canada.

Or, we are tempted to resort to what Eastern Orthodox theologian David Bentley Hart has referred to as “religion as interior decorating.” Faith becomes something like an accessory that we can tailor to meet the needs of the individual self, rather than the core conviction that guides all of who we are and what we do.

Whatever our temptations, whether in Colossae or Canada, the response, for Paul, is the same.

Cling to Christ. Cling to the one who was nailed to a cross to free us from guilt, who triumphed over those who sought to make a public spectacle of him by defeating death and the forces of evil.

This is a word that we must never grow tired of hearing.

Whatever the future might look like for Mennonite Church Canada or for us here at Lethbridge Mennonite Church, **we must never cease to speak about Jesus as the centre of who we are and what we do.**

It is easy to become *issue* focused rather than *Jesus* focused. This is true across the Christian world, not just for Mennonites.

It is easy to allow issues to determine how and when we will listen to Jesus rather than allowing Jesus to determine how we will become engaged in issues.

There are many examples.

If we speak about peace, but are hesitant to speak of the *Prince of Peace*, the one who came to proclaim peace, the one who died to bring peace between God and human beings and between human beings, then we cut ourselves off from the ultimate source of lasting peace... we are no different than any of the other countless secular peace organizations out there.

If we speak about and work toward social justice, but don't speak the one who promises to one day beat swords into plowshares and usher in God's final kingdom of peace, we are no different than any other human-centred advocacy group.

If we speak about evangelism but mainly a "church growth strategy" or a way to increase the budget, or with a really narrow and individualistic conception of "saving souls" as the totality of the good news—then we are doing a disservice to the centrality and supremacy of Jesus over *all things*, and are not much different than a slick marketing agency.

If we speak about human sexuality in a way that uncritically accepts cultural assumptions about human desire as one of the main aspects of our identity and adopts extremely individualistic notions of freedom and choice... if are drawn in by the dehumanizing lies about human personhood in a culture of hypersexualized advertising and entertainment, in its understanding and presentation of what it means to be a human being, rather than looking to Jesus' understanding and approach to these things, then we will be sinking our roots into soil that cannot support the way we are intended to grow and flourish

If we speak about creation care divorced from God's redemptive purposes for a groaning creation made known in Jesus Christ, then our horizons begin to shrink and we begin to think that everything depends upon us and our fragile and inconsistent efforts, rather than the promise of God who works in and among us, and who will one day do for us and for the planet what we cannot do for ourselves.

If we treat any of these important things as *ends* in and of themselves and we separate them from the life, death, resurrection, ascension, and future return of Jesus, then we

have ceased to be the church of Jesus and have become indistinguishable from a political organization or a social club. We have nothing unique to say.

This is not to say that organizations that pursue these ends apart from faith in Jesus Christ are *illegitimate* or are doing *bad work*; it simply is to say that *for us*, as the people of the way, as *the church*, whether Mennonite Church Canada or Lethbridge Mennonite Church... we must speak about these things from with our roots firmly in place.

Yes, we live in uncertain times.

Yes, the church does look and feel different for many of us than it has at many points in the past.

Yes, discernment of difficult issues and the future of the church is demanding and fraught with many perils.

But some things never change, whether in first century Colossae or twenty-first century Canada.

As the church of Jesus Christ, we are to live our lives in and through and because of the power of the crucified Jesus, rooted, established, and built up in him.

We are to be attentive to empty teachings and philosophies that would seek to place anything else at the centre of who we are and what we do.

We are to hold fast to the head, Christ, from whom everything else grows.

Whatever else we might do, we must never lose sight of the fact that the church exists for Jesus Christ and no one else.

One final word.

In Colossians 2:6, Paul says,

As you therefore have received Christ Jesus the Lord, continue to live your lives in him, rooted and built up in him and established in the faith, just as you were taught, abounding in thanksgiving.

Why does Paul include that last part about thanksgiving?

It doesn't seem to obviously fit. The rest of the verse (and the passage) is about being established in the faith, correct teaching, rooting ourselves well, etc. What's gratitude doing in there?

I think it's no accident that Paul included this.

People of gratitude are rarely people who are anxious and fearful about the future.

People of gratitude, in my experience, are able to receive the wisdom of others humbly and to share their convictions with honesty and integrity.

People of gratitude do not typically cling to influence and privilege, they are not typically reactionary and negative, they do not typically use the truth they have become convinced of as weapons against others who don't share their views.

They know that they have been given much and seek simply to share this with others.

May God help us to be people who abound in thanksgiving.

May God help us to sink our roots down deep in Christ, and to never be embarrassed to place him at the centre of all that we do and all that we are.

Amen.

