

The King and His Kingdom

Matthew 21:23-32

Lethbridge Mennonite Church

By: Ryan Dueck

October 1, 2023/Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost/World Communion Sunday

So, today is World Communion Sunday.

I'm not sure when we started marking this day here at Lethbridge Mennonite Church. It certainly preceded my time here. But I'm very glad that we do it.

We are part of a big and a broad global family of faith, and this is worth celebrating.

I was thinking of how I might approach this topic this morning in the relatively short time I have. I decided that I would simply reflect upon my own story of growing to appreciate the depth and breadth of various Christian traditions.

As you likely know, I grew up in an MB church. It was never really explicitly stated, but the general impression I picked up was that our church was the rightest of the right and that other denominations, while probably still Christians, were somehow *less* right than us.

It probably wouldn't hurt to be a tiny bit suspicious of them. Especially those "other Mennonites" (this suspicion ran in both directions; I have since learned 😊).

I hasten to add that I don't think my church was terribly unique in this. I think this was a fairly common attitude for one to take about one's church or denomination back then. And it wasn't an attitude confined to a specific kind of church. Heaven knows I've encountered plenty of suspicion from "progressive" Christians about "those evangelicals" or "those conservatives" over the years. But I digress.

This general "we're right and everyone else is wrong (or at least less right)" has never been a perspective that I found particularly compelling or persuasive.

How could the God of the universe confine himself to this or that parochial and limited interpretation or tradition, I often wondered?

And if everything I was taught (and everything I observed) about human sin and limitation was true, how could these flawed and fallen human beings somehow have all the right doctrines and theologies about God?

No, if God was God and if human beings were human beings, the lines would have to be considerably blurrier than so many often seemed to think.

God's grace, not human understanding, would have to be the main thing!

So, I fairly deliberately chose to widen my circles a bit. After university, I decided not to attend an Anabaptist seminary. I went to Regent College in Vancouver, a Christian graduate school with students coming from many different denominations.

It wasn't exactly a huge jump into the diversity pool, but I found myself studying with Anglicans and Christian Reformed folks and Pentecostals and Baptists and non-denominational types.

And it was good for me to learn how other Christians understood things, to experience different ways of doing things (like communion). It was good to be challenged, to broaden my categories a bit.

In my pastoral work, particularly here in Lethbridge, I have rubbed shoulders with Christians from a variety of different denominations and perspectives.

I inherited a membership in the "Downtown churches ministerial group," so I was regularly meeting with, serving with, and occasionally worshipping with Roman Catholics and Anglicans and United Church clergy and representatives from the Salvation Army, Presbyterians, etc.

Our annual Scripture readers exchange and Lenten lunches with these churches is a highlight that I hear about often (inside and outside of our church). I regularly bump into people around town from other churches who recognize me from these contexts and speak warmly of them.

In my work in the jail, I encounter inmates and volunteers from across the Christian spectrum, from very conservative Mennonite groups to charismatic non-denominational groups to Reformed churches to all kinds of things in between.

As you may know, I serve as a pastoral advisor for the Lethbridge Pregnancy Care Centre, where I rub shoulders with folks from more conservative evangelical churches who, I have discovered, are far more than the caricature often portrayed in the media of one-dimensional anti-abortion activists. I have encountered women and men of deep love and compassion who provide a wide range of services for young women in desperate circumstances.

And then there is our refugee work. On Thursday after work, I dropped by the house where this beautiful family that just arrived will be living. I saw a hive of activity and good will and energy busily preparing a home for a young family coming from across the planet in search of a more hopeful future.

I counted no fewer than five different Christian denominations represented in the house and in our sponsorship group. Christian Reformed, United, Lutheran, Mennonite, non-denominational.

I marveled at how this group has come to be and what it has come to mean for those who participated. This group took shape as our church was serving as a kind of catalyst during the Syrian refugee crisis of 2015-17.

So many groups came to our church looking for some way to contribute. And so, we just helped people find each other and get to work.

Now, aside from the rewards of refugee sponsorship work itself, I often hear something like, "One of the best things about this group is working with other people from other churches."

Speaking of the Syrian refugee crisis, on Thursday as I was preparing to leave, Essa showed up at the church to do a few of his janitorial duties.

He was very concerned about his nephew Carlos who is having some heart issues (who we prayed for earlier). I asked if we could pray for Carlos. His eyes welled up with tears, and he said:

"I know we don't come to your church much anymore. We are comfortable with the Catholic worship. Many of us work several jobs to pay the bills and we are busy on Sunday. But we never forget you or what you have done for our family."

It reminded me that even though we are very different—Syrian Orthodox and Canadian Mennonite could hardly be farther apart on the Christian spectrum—we are family.

It brought to mind a story that I have told here before, but I can't resist telling it again.

One night a few months after the Syrians first arrived, Naomi and I were over at their house. They showed us pictures of their church in Syria, before and after it was bombed. They showed us the place they got married. They showed us other famous Orthodox churches in Syria, some nestled into spectacular mountains, some elaborate complexes filled with ornate icons and lavish rooms.

Around their house were numerous statues and icons and pictures of patron saints for this or that church from this or that region.

At one point, I tried to explain to them where and when Mennonites arrived on the scene (some 1500 years after their church began!). I think they understood. I

I looked at the pictures of the saints on their wall and said, "Mennonites don't really have any saints." They smiled. And then Lana (who is now the assistant manager at the MCC Thrift Store), said, "It doesn't matter, we are family. Same Jesus."

Same Jesus. Those two words could sum up everything I have learned from working with and studying with and learning with Christians of all kinds over the years.

None of this means that I don't disagree with my fellow Christians about this or that doctrine or perspective on a social issue or whatever. I do. Sometimes quite strongly. I'm sure they would say the same.

But my sisters and brothers in Christ we remain.

Our unity is not borne out of whatever agreement we can conjure up on our own. It is a gift of grace from Jesus Christ who transcends all our differences and errors, all the things we see inadequately and partially.

We have one King, and we are stretching out toward one kingdom.

We are united by the finished work of the life, the cross, the empty tomb, and the promised return of Jesus Christ.

This is what we celebrate on World Communion Sunday.

Well, what does *any* of this have to do with a parable about two sons with differing responses to their father's command to go and work in the vineyard?

You may be rightly wondering about this by now. My remarks will be very brief here. There's a lot going on in this passage that I do not have time to address. I want to skip right to the punchline.

Jesus is responding to a challenge about his authority. And all of a sudden, he's talking about two sons.

One says he'll do what his father wants but doesn't. One says he won't do what his father wants but does.

The punchline of the parable comes at the end:

Truly I tell you, the tax collectors and the prostitutes are going into the kingdom of God ahead of you. For John came to you in the way of righteousness and you did not believe him, but the tax collectors and the prostitutes believed him; and even after you saw it, you did not change your minds and believe him.

What does John the Baptist have to do with anything? Why is Jesus talking about him or the "way of righteousness" in a challenge to Jesus' own authority?

Why is he talking about tax collectors and prostitutes entering the kingdom of God ahead of the learned and esteemed guardians of law and tradition?

Quite simply it is this: John preached repentance. Sinners believed him, while the religious authorities tended not to.

This is the task of faith. To believe in Jesus Christ. To trust that he is greater than our sin. To believe that he is greater than the categories we so often construct.

And I think Jesus' challenge is put to us, too.

Any time that we spend more time and energy on policing the boundaries, on zealously guarding our own interpretations and traditions as if these were the point of it all, and forgetting the posture of repentance and humility that is basic to *all* Christians, we risk hearing Jesus' words being spoken in our direction, too.

You're missing the point. And the least likely who recognize their need, who acknowledge their sin, and who turn to me for healing and salvation are entering the kingdom ahead of you.

On World Communion Sunday, we point once again to this most basic and simple truth of the Christian faith.

Sinners and saints from every tribe and tongue, across all our differences, are forgiven, healed, saved, and brought together by one King who will usher in one kingdom.

Same Jesus. It is all about him. It always has been, and it always will be.

Thanks be to God.

Amen.

