

## Church

Jubilee Mennonite Church  
March 17, 2019

**Purpose:** To recall the supportive body of Christ in the church.

**Message:** As those hewn to the true vine, we are called to growth out of and through Christ.

**Scriptures:** Romans 12:1-18 [I will read]; Please read: John 15:1-15

**Synopsis:** The church (The ecclesia—the gathering) comes in many shapes. There is the sense of the church as the institution—the organization in which people gather, function, and worship together; the stuff of organization and governance. Then there is the Body of Christ, the mystical working of the Spirit that brings people together in common nurture and common care across boundaries to make us one. The former is a working of human ingenuity and has all the problems that this involves. The latter—the breathing organism of the Spirit—is that which is vested with the way of Christ and the empathy of the Spirit.

Yet, despite our best efforts to make this difference really and effective, and an eagerness to, on occasion say “well, yeah; but that is not us.”, the division between the two is neither neat nor tidy. We do well to address the paradox in the same way we encounter our own different and often contradictory behaviors: with grace, and, hopefully humility. We are invited to know that the work of the Church is only and always the working of God’s connecting Spirit, inviting us into community and healing.

[How And Why The Future Church Can Thrive - ChristianWeek  
coventanting meditation rom 12\\_1-16 1-12-2014.docx](#)  
[Discerning our Gifts romans 12\\_1-13.doc](#)

## **Romans 12:1-18**

I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters,  
by the mercies of God,  
to present your bodies as a living sacrifice,  
holy and acceptable to God,  
which is your spiritual worship.

<sup>2</sup> Do not be conformed to this world,  
but be transformed by the renewing of your minds,  
so that you may discern what is the will of God  
—what is good and acceptable and perfect.

<sup>3</sup> For by the grace given to me  
I say to everyone among you  
not to think of yourself more highly than you ought to think,  
but to think with sober judgment,  
each according to the measure of faith that God has assigned.

<sup>4</sup> For as in one body we have many members,  
and not all the members have the same function,  
<sup>5</sup> so we, who are many, are one body in Christ,  
and individually we are members one of another.

<sup>6</sup> We have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us:  
prophecy, in proportion to faith;  
<sup>7</sup> ministry, in ministering;  
the teacher, in teaching;  
<sup>8</sup> the exhorter, in exhortation;  
the giver, in generosity;  
the leader, in diligence;  
the compassionate, in cheerfulness.

<sup>9</sup> Let love be genuine;  
hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good;  
<sup>10</sup> love one another with mutual affection;  
outdo one another in showing honor.

<sup>11</sup> Do not lag in zeal, be ardent in spirit, serve the Lord.

<sup>12</sup> Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer.

<sup>13</sup> Contribute to the needs of the saints; extend hospitality to strangers.

<sup>14</sup> Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them.

<sup>15</sup> Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep.

<sup>16</sup> Live in harmony with one another;

do not be haughty,

but associate with the lowly;

do not claim to be wiser than you are.

<sup>17</sup> Do not repay anyone evil for evil,

but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all.

<sup>18</sup> If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all.

Similarly, in today's passage from Romans, the different words for love amplify and clarify each other. "Let *agape* be genuine," recognizing that it can be faked. Let your *agape* be sincere, like love for brothers or sisters (*philadelphia*) or like love you have for your best friends (*philostorgos*). Love them warmly, with devotion, with sincere concern for their well-being. If asked if members of their church are their friends, these Romans are not expected to say, "Well, not 'friend friends,' more like just 'Facebook friends.'"

Congratulations. By sitting in you seats this morning, you should realize that you have achieved minority status. Right around 25% percent of the people of Canada attend a religious service at least monthly, meaning naturally, at least 75% do not.<sup>1</sup> By definition, doing church, coming and gathering together as a body around a religious ideal is an uncommon thing (and bear in mind that this 25% is accounting for all faiths, not just Christians, so we have to expect that our numbers are lower yet). 30% or more of people born after the year 1987 (22 years and younger) declare no religious faith what so ever. And this is a relatively only survey from 2012 (the latest well thought of survey I could locate) so we can assume the numbers are different now, and likely higher. So there is congratulations in order—we are doing church and that is a rare thing.

I don't tread here to speak to the well worn topic of church decline, or to declare the end of the institution of the church. Many have done so, and more are waiting in line to do the same. I am not one of them. While I would, of course, love to see a higher general interest in the world and the faith that I love, I am not given to either despair that all is lost without broad social sanction, nor inclined to spend a great deal of time trying to find out why. For that, I can turn just about anywhere on line and get input as to why people may or may not be showing up on any given Sunday. Instead, I would rather ask a question that doesn't get asked very often. Once past the usual responses of habit and expectation (and yes, if you happen to be under the age of 18 or so, I hear you already—my parents are making me be here; I hope that you in time might find your own reasons, so you might want to listen for next couple of minutes for some suggestions). Outside of Sunday just not quite feeling right without joining in worship, why are you here? Why do you keep coming here? What draws you into the body? What keeps you doing the hard work of doing Body together? In short, why church? [take some answers]

Let me answer this one as well: short and sweet—I need you. For me to be a person of faith I need you. Not just to flood me with Casserole when I am sick. I need the body to push me, to support me, to make me who I am. I have known the church to be the group of people most given to laughing with me when I laugh and crying when I cry, and all the time calling me to keep considering what it means when I say Jesus Christ is Lord: what does that mean in what I

---

<sup>1</sup> Pew Research Center (2012 Data) as found at <http://www.pewforum.org/2013/06/27/canadas-changing-religious-landscape/> Accessed: 3/16/2019

say, in who I am, in how I live out the calling of the Lord in my life. I say this knowing quite well that being body together, walking together and being faithful together is hard work. The fact of the matter is that we step on each other's toes at least as often as we ever stoop to wash each other's feet. We have different ideas about how to follow, where the Spirit is to be found, and how to walk within the Spirit is leading in the first place. Church is hard work. Church can be messy at times. Church is where can be healed and helped, but it is also where we can be hurt in almost equal measure. We know that the institution of the church can be inalienably human, in all that this can mean. But that does not mean that I don't still need you to help me rehearse my faith, and to connect with me in growing into that which God wants me to be. I say this for me personally, as your pastor, every bit as much as I say this as Bryce the seeking, growing person of faith.

I think we get ourselves in trouble many times because we mean so much by using the same word. When we say "Church" we mean everything from the building in which we meet, the institution in which we work together, the conferences and all the rest and the universal body of Christ. What's more, being the people we are, we are far more compelled by and confronted with the realities of the institutional reality of the church and its many failures to live in to the laundry list of idealisms that Paul is laying out here, then we are to connect to the church as the Body of Christ, the beloved children of God who are each members of the same vine invited to abide in the love and work of Jesus Christ. Add to this the notion that Christianity is primarily a personal religion (a personal relationship with Christ, a personal piety that would call us into ourselves, a personal spirituality that is of said to be out of bounds to the prying eyes of others) and the general disaffection for the institution that can seem like just too much work, and there is little wonder that the surveys say what they happen to say.

But I wonder whether we miss something when we do this. Perhaps we miss the best illustration of spiritual growth and God's generous mercy that we could ever ask for. First, we must begin here: the church is human. And therefore it will always fall short of all that it is supposed to be. It will sin. We as persons following after Christ fall short of all that we would be at our best. If this were not so, we would not be in need of saving, we would not be in need of grace from a loving God. Yet we know that we do. I know that I do. And I am reminded of that reality and the need in the form of the church that gets it wrong as much as it gets it right. As

frustrating as it is, and as impatiently as I can sometimes wait for the church to be the body I wish it could be and am convicted it ought to be, my demanding perfection of the church lest I write it off as a hopeless collection of hypocrites is to imply that I expect the same of myself—a perfection of thought and a consistency of action that leaves me somehow blameless before the God. All this stuff that Paul rattles off so fast he can hardly get everything written down fast enough are things around which and toward which I strive, and the church strives and reminds us that we are here to share grace with one another to the best way we can.

Does this mean that we don't call out bad behavior when it is there, or fail to confess that which we have done or left undone to the destruction of others? Absolutely not. We confess as we must because we can only be the incarnational body of the living God if we are willing to look at our pain and correct our mistakes. But always with grace. Always with the assurance of the great God who comes to us and makes us better even in spite of the worst of our human nature. Even as I say this, I do so in full consciousness that church is not a safe place for all people, and I claim a grace filled church advisedly as a person of relative power. I hold these realities in tension, even as I attempt to hold up the ideal and the reality of the church at the same time.

Second, we must always remember that the church is a Spirit container, and is not entirely up to us. It is also the mystical incarnation of the Spirit. Richard Rohr points out that during Paul's lifetime, the Christian church was not yet an institution or a centrally organized set of common practices and beliefs. It was a living organism that communicated the Gospel primarily through relationships. Churches were the incarnational realities of the Spirit the demonstrated in real lives, changed lives and a changing world. The church was different from the world at large precisely because it was doing all the stuff he just lists here. And just an aside: have you noticed that the commandment of Paul to "Bless those who persecute you" in verse 14 comes in the midst of advice on how to be the church? I wonder, might this advice be for enemies both inside and out? It never how we read this, but yet here it is. Paul's brilliant metaphor for this living, organic, concrete embodiment is "the Body of Christ": "Just as a human body, though it is made up of many parts, is a single unit, because all those parts make up a single body, so it is with Christ" (1 Corinthians 12:12—as also here in Romans 12). At the heart of this body, providing the energy that enlivens the whole community, although each in different

ways, is “the love of God that has been poured out into our hearts through the Holy Spirit” (Romans 5:5). Union is not just spiritual poetry, but the very concrete work of God. It is how God makes love to what God created.

The church needs work; there is no denying that. But just as our personal self improvement is simultaneously driven by our personal wills, it is directed by the Spirit, so too is that of the church. We abide in Christ and Christ in us, in spite of us, and accomplishes that which God is doing in the world. So the church is us, yes, but is the binding of the Spirit and the working of God’s will in us, come what may. Our work is to abide in the vine, being led and nourished to bear the fruit God has for us to bring into the world the God loves. To do this, we listen together, discern together, messy though it may be where God is calling us to a new story to live out.

May we abide in God’s love, be united one to the next by God’s Spirit, and be led by God’s guidance each and every day as we do church together. Amen.

## Lent 2

### Confession and reconciliation

Leader:

*(reading John 15:9,11 (selections))*

Jesus said: As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love. I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete

Abiding invites us to seek out God

*(reading Psalm 27:7-9)*

The Psalmist Seeks God: "Hear, O Lord, when I cry aloud, be gracious to me and answer me! 'Come,' my heart says, 'seek God's face!' Your face, Lord, do I seek. Do not hide your face from me. Do not turn your servant away in anger, you who have eyes

Who will seek the Lord today?

**Confessional response:** *(one or more persons in the congregation stand and say)*

**I (or we) will seek the Lord today.**

Here we are God; your body.

Hands, feet, organs all.

Jesus your body is what you left as an outpost of your love,

The incarnation of your peace,

To demonstrate that which you are up to in the world.

Yet, like a mirror splintered, we do not always reflect you, your love

With the clarity, the intensity, or the completion it invites us to.

We argue over wrong and right,

We struggle to understand the balances of purity and acceptance,

We struggle with each other,

We cause each other pain.

Sometimes, we would rather stand alone than together.

Forgive us Lord when we fall short of your grace,

When we do not live fully the promise of your love,

When your body is used to demonize and shame,

In deeds done and deeds left undone,

Rather than to fully know each one you created,

Is your beloved child.

Help us to graciously live, as you have been gracious to us,

We confess that you are the one true vine,

In you none are to be made afraid,

Through you, all hatred must cease,

By race, colour, creed.

Remind us that try though we might, it is the vine that gives life

The vineyard that nurtures,

The pruning of that which has been that gives new life.

May this be our hope, our promise, now and always. Amen.

Leader: We are all invited to seek the Lord today. Let us bring ourselves to God in prayer.  
(*Worship leader leads in prayer.*)

**All:** *Sheltering God, we seek you, for you alone are our light and salvation.  
When darkness moves into our lives, we seek your face.*

Leader: When fears overcome us and paralyze us (*pause*), we seek your face.  
When our souls hunger for your shelter (*pause*), we seek your face.

**All:** *In the morning and in the evening, we will seek the face of our God.*

Leader: Our generous God provides for us. (*Leader moves to the worship center and fills the bowls with bread while speaking these words of assurance.*)

**Sending** (from Philippians 3 and 4)

As we go forth from this place, be assured that our citizenship is in heaven, and that the Lord Jesus Christ heals the wounds of our world by his transforming power.