

Getting it wrong, imagining it better

Jubilee Mennonite Church
November 26, 2017

Purpose: to remind us that despite the humanness of the church, God's kingdom continues.

Message (the big idea): We fail as a church to live up to our best intentions, time again. Yet we are called to imagine and work still toward a future of hope and promise.

Synopsis: It is not hard to identify the place where we feel the tensions of living out an ancient faith in modern life. We see the many failings of the church, both inside our own congregation and in the world at large. We are quick to qualify who we are, least we be confused for someone or something we do not wish to be. It is easy to become discouraged with what we are faced with in this time and place. Yet, even in the midst of our failings, we are invited to be part of what God is doing. When we start with basic core principles, we can open ourselves to the broad imagination of the spirit to lead us forward to new life.

Scripture: Acts 15:1-12

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Sometimes it is our jokes that tell some of the deepest truths about how we are as persons. There's an old religious joke that goes something like this: *Once I saw this guy on a bridge about to jump. I said, "Don't do it!" He said, "Nobody loves me." I said, "God loves you. Do you believe in God?" He said, "Yes." I said, "Are you a Christian or a Jew?" He said, "A Christian." I said, "Me, too! Protestant or Catholic?" He said, "Protestant." I said, "Me, too! What franchise?" He said, "Baptist." I said, "Me, too! Northern Baptist or Southern Baptist?" He said, "Northern Baptist." I said, "Me, too! Northern Conservative Baptist or Northern Liberal Baptist?" He said, "Northern Conservative Baptist." I said, "Me, too! Northern Conservative Baptist Great Lakes Region, or Northern Conservative Baptist Eastern Region?" He said, "Northern Conservative Baptist Great Lakes Region." I said, "Me, too!" Northern Conservative†Baptist Great Lakes Region Council of 1879, or Northern Conservative Baptist Great Lakes Region Council of 1912?" He said, "Northern Conservative Baptist Great Lakes Region Council of 1912." I said, "Die, heretic!" And I pushed him over.¹* This was voted the best religious joke in the UK a while back, in case you are wondering. We cringe to hear it; I know that I do. Because as absurd as it really is, we understand the fundamental point it is making far too well. Faith, for all its beauties and benefits brings out the best in us but also the worst.

Over the last several weeks we have been sitting with some of the fundamental concepts of what it means to be an Anabaptist Christian: we put Christ at the centre of our faith and that changes how we read the text understanding the work of faithful is the work of discipleship. We value Community as the centre of our lives, acknowledging the profound ways in which we need each other in order to realize the work of discipleship. We hold reconciliation, the bringing together of God's Kingdom and the world as it is as the centre of our work. These thumbnails are the notional principles that describe who we are and what we try to be. Yet, as we know all too well that the church of Jesus Christ is a profoundly human institution—always has been, always will be. And because it is human, we disappoint ourselves time again with what we say we want to be on one hand, and what we actually are on the other. We say we want to have discipleship, but we know we get hung up on the problems of who Jesus is and what it means to be saved, let alone to follow him. We want community but we know far too well how destructive any close community can be, especially if you find yourself on the edges. We want

¹ Emo Phillips wrote this Joke

to be about the work of reconciliation, but we often can see ourselves with a fruitless task with the way of faith sometimes being used for harm as much as good. We know well the failings of the church and we try our best to avoid the stickier bits of the broader church, our own church. We have become footnote Christians, attempting to out-define the dominate images of what it means to be a disciple, least we be confused with someone we would not want to be who also is a Christian, just like the joke. The premise is that if we have a sufficiently specific pedigree and know adequately who **we are**, we won't be confused with them, whoever our particular they might be. It's like what Mark Twain once quipped: any club that would have me for a member, I want no part of.

The fact that the church is broken is hardly news. This text from Acts, often held up as the model for how the church ought to solve arguments reminds us of something else: that the fact of the church's brokenness goes back as far as anyone can recall. To our ears this argument over circumcision sounds insane. We often assume that the church of that period was automatically pure and unspoiled. We also assume that it looked a lot like our church today, namely not having a lot to do with its Jewish roots. In reality it is only centuries of fairly hard anti-semitism that has created the gulf between the faith of the Messiah and those who still wait. At that time, Christians were just a weird subset of Jews, frequently meeting in the same synagogues as they always had. Hence, this question of who is in and who is out (read who is clean and who is unclean). This is at least as critical as any debate we have going today, if not more so.

But just as the conflict is overly familiar, so is the cause of their constriction. What is going on here is that the folks wrapped up in the way things are, the way things have been for generations on end, fail to see what comes next. They fail the cause of imagination. They fail to look beyond what they know, what they have known for the movement of the imaginative spirit, and all they can see is a lump of law which must be maintained. For those who were arguing with Peter and away from the experience of Pentecost and its spread thereafter, it was impossible to conceive that the Lord might be doing something that didn't look like what they had been familiar with previously. They needed Peter's voice, the experience of the first hand to crack open their imaginations to the ways that this new thing of the church might take shape, even in spite of all that they knew of what came before.

Henry David Thoreau writes, “It matters less at what you look than what you see.” When we look at the church, it is easy to see the brokenness that abounds. It is easy to see the conflicts, it is easy to see the messiness. It is easy to see the ways in which we fail. It is easy to see the histories of pain that the church has been explicitly culpable for from the crusades to the shadows of the residential schools to present day abuses. We can quickly resign ourselves to the way things are—broken—and despair of their hope of repair. We struggle to see how the church, awash in a sea of change in all sorts of ways, shapes, and forces would ever survive the present troubles. We struggle to see how things changing will ever bring about the way of the kingdom on earth as it is in heaven. Most of all, and most importantly, we forget that the church is not, ultimately, about us and how we get it wrong. Instead it is about God in Christ, and how God is working even through this insane body to bring all things new. Does that mean we take a back seat to and forget about all the stuff that is broken around here and let God take care of it? No. We must look at the world and at our selves for what it is and who we are, the good and the bad. We need to make the wrong things right to the best of our ability. But we can never do so at the cost of forgetting that this church does not live or die with us or our failings, because it is not about us. We need to have enough conviction about our pain to be part of the healing, but also enough grace to know fully who we are in God’s grace.

So, if we are talking new and improved, you ask, why are we mucking about with core principles? If we get to re-invent church, why do we hold onto the core principles that got us this far; or got us into this mess in the first place? Have you ever noticed how in the bible, God never throws things away? Throughout the whole narrative, God does not abandon Israel, the one who fights with God, despite the fact that Israel is always bucking the trend. God is always doing a new thing within what has come before. I think we must look within to what lies at our center in order to discover our growing edges. We are always being called to re-invention, to re-imagination, to re-creation before the one who created us in the first and is shaping us still. It is kind of like improvisation. You can’t really just go out and play your own line without knowing the key of the song in which you are playing (unless you are an avant-garde composer who can write a symphony out of ringtones). You need to know the core, the basics, the foundational principles in order to find the new tune, to play along and to be inspired. The point here is not so much to re-iterate the central core to be defended, but to re-connect with that which makes us

who we are so we can be shaped within that toward what God is calling us to be. We know we get it wrong. But can we imagine it better?

As we gather at the table today, I invite you to consider the body gathered. Think of this body of Jubilee with all its beauty and all its brokenness. Think of our broader bodies of churches gathered. Each are in the midst of a changing world and wrestling with troubling things, sometimes with painful results. But keep going bigger than that: consider the whole body of Christ, something that defies imagination itself. Note its breadth and width of people we like and people we don't, those who we embrace and those who we are just as soon to call heretics. We don't issue the invitations to this table. This is Christ's table, and as such we may ultimately be surprised who we find ourselves eating beside. Take a moment and consider that as we eat together, remember the Lord together, and follow Jesus together, that Christ is at the head, and calls each one of us to come and meet him in imagination of what is yet to be as the Kingdom continue to come on Earth as it is in heaven.

This is the feast that comforts and disturbs,
The feast of the people whom God welcomes.
Here at this table, ordinary and holy,
We come hungry and are filled,
We come fractured and become whole.
When the disciples gathered that last night in Jerusalem,
Anxious, broken, and at odds with one another,
Jesus poured out all for all of them.

This is the table of the Lord,
And all who have publically declared their
desire to follow Jesus are invited.
Those younger one whose faith is still developing are welcome to participate with
pretzels and grapes.

Here he becomes known to us,
Here he beckons us out in to the deep,
Here we stand witness.
The broken and blessed Healer is among us.
Let us eat and drink in his presence.