

Sermon: Charleswood Mennonite Church

Affirmation Sunday - September 22, 2019

By Julia Thiessen

I was invited to share an exploration of the Scriptural understanding and theology that animates what we're doing here this morning. I spent considerable time re-reading the Being a Faithful Church process documents, finding Mennonite sermons for similar Sundays, and looking far beyond our community to more radical Christian ally groups, and I felt a lot of it did not necessarily need repeating here. In particular, I don't feel the need to spend time with the Scripture texts that have been used extensively in this church conversation, as if we're so sure which those should be: the letters of Paul, the creation stories found in Genesis. What I want to do instead is much more like what I aim to do in any sermon – tell the good news of Christ by looking at the story of God's inbreaking, of God's incarnation. This story is beautiful and familiar; I imagine we will all recognize our own faith and convictions in these words. But as with any story of God's call to humanity, it is also difficult and ever new, and I hope I can hear the challenge alongside you this morning.

Our challenge begins with David and Jonathan. The few pieces of their story that we hear are deep with emotion. Whatever we want to make of their relationship, these two men loved one another intimately, and it was to the glory of God.

A whole range of human relationships can be to the glory of God. Frankly, if we think that the Scriptures provide a narrowly prescriptive view of human relationship, we have not read very carefully.

Did you know that the Law of the people of Israel included prohibitions against marrying foreigners? And yet most of us are familiar with the story of Ruth. Boaz takes the foreigner Ruth to be his wife and it is Ruth, the foreign spouse, who is most faithful to God's covenant. "Where you go I will go, and where you stay I will stay. Your people will be my people and your God my God." I've heard this promise read from the Book of Ruth at countless church-sanctioned weddings, but this was originally the statement of a foreign woman, outside the Law. And she did not declare it to her male spouse, but to Naomi, the mother-in-law she took as her family. This relationship was to the glory of God.

Did you know that the Law of the people of Israel excluded eunuchs from Temple worship? Men who were castrated were not allowed into the fullness of the covenant. But in Isaiah 56 we read “And let no eunuch complain, “I am only a dry tree.” For this is what the Lord says: “To the eunuchs who keep my Sabbaths, who choose what pleases me and hold fast to my covenant—to them I will give within my temple and its walls a memorial and a name better than sons and daughters.”” And Isaiah’s words are borne out among the early followers of Christ, when Philip meets and baptizes the foreign eunuch, and he goes away rejoicing. This man’s life was *fully* to the glory of God.

I think we *do* know that Jesus speaks strongly about which sorts of relationships are to the glory of God. When a woman from the crowd shouts out to Jesus, “Blessed is the womb that bore you and the breasts that nursed you!” Jesus replies, “Blessed rather are those who hear the word of God and obey it.” Family heritage, determined through a particular kind of marriage and procreation, are *not* the way in which one receives God’s blessing. Rather, proclaim the kingdom of God, and you become a *new* family.

The Anabaptist tradition has placed great emphasis on the kingdom family, and I’ve always been grateful for this. While we acknowledge the importance of relational roles like ‘mother’ or ‘spouse’, we hear a lot more sermons from this pulpit about being a member of the Kingdom of God, about being a friend to the marginalized and a part of the body of Christ. We at Charleswood have long acknowledged that *all* have a role in this Kingdom, regardless of sexuality, gender, marital status, fruitfulness of wombs, etc. Praise the Lord.

All have a role in the Kingdom, the Kingdom in which the wolf will live with the lamb, the leopard lie down with the goat, and the calf, lion, and yearling together. The Kingdom that Jesus announces and incarnates breaks down a whole myriad of barriers, to allow for a communion based on the love of God and one another. This is good news.

We are celebrating this morning, and I’m so glad that we can celebrate the radical generosity of God’s love, and celebrate some of the ways our community is changing. We have also shared a lament, and we could have shared many more, for we know that we do not always embrace the Kingdom of God. We have fallen short of this communion in the Spirit of Love in so many ways: we participate in a racist society; we live in such a way that the poor are nearly invisible in our daily lives; we are not at peace with our water systems; we even have a hard time creating friendships across differences of age and culture. Our repentance is ongoing; we are still being shaped, and

we still need to allow for the radical Spirit of Love, God's Spirit among us, to work on us and mold us into people who see the true worth of all things and all people.

But let our lament and repentance this morning be specific, for we need to repent of the way in which we've used the Law around matters of gender and sexuality. We need to repent of the way in which we have tried to justify ourselves, and thus excluded others. And this is not, I believe, a unique problem of the church. The church, alongside much of the rest of the society, and people of other faiths, have held very tightly to rules and expectations around sex, marriage, and family. These rules may come from a sincere desire to organize and limit our broken and messy world. They, like the law Israel held about not marrying foreigners, may even be fueled by a desire for faithfulness. And yet I believe it is time to let Jesus' grace interrupt our rules and expectations.

We know what Christ did to the Law. Christ did not discard it, but fulfilled it by challenging the way it was used. Jesus challenged the Pharisees: instead of using the Law to affirm their own holiness and uprightness, these religious people should use it to root out their own sin and understand their need for grace. Jesus' followers challenged the boundary between Jew and Gentile: instead of using the Law to draw a firm line between who could and could not be part of the Body, the Law was now summarized in a love that extended to all nations. Jesus, in his own life and death, demonstrated that the laws of society and even the laws of beloved religious institutions create innocent victims. In Jesus, the violence of the legal system is wrought upon God's own body.

For a long time, society and the church have created victims based on sexuality and gender identity. We have looked at groups we know little about, that we consider strange, whose behaviours its easy to assume are damaging, and have placed all our shame on them. We have placed it on our own people, on those who worshiped God alongside us. Our shame, yes. We speak so little about shame, and insist that our ethical decisions are consciously made, based on convictions. But I think our othering has quite a bit to do with shame, and the shame-based messaging so many of us have received both within and outside the church about our own bodies and desires. We cannot pass off this exclusion as merely an attempt at faithfulness, when we see time and time again people's defensiveness and fear when faced with the reality of different sexual orientations or gender identities.

I won't try to speak to the experience of being on the receiving end of this defensiveness, but there are people here (and people who aren't here) who have been minimized and dehumanized. To those people, I admit that I'm not sure what to say to you as I speak about repentance. All I will offer right now is a sincere prayer that the rest

of us can not just include, but listen – listen to both your difficult stories and joyful stories.

And after listening, perhaps the rest of us can learn to speak, for I think all of us have kept quiet about the true messiness of desire and relationship. We have not spoken about our intimate understanding of ourselves, as gendered or sexual beings. This silence has allowed a set of boundaries and rules to stay in place for too long, while all kinds of real brokenness remains hidden. As one source wrote: “In this cultural moment of #metoo and #churchtoo, it would seem clear that traditional systems of maintaining sexual controls within faith communities aren’t working.” I think that’s what so many in our communities have been afraid of: that if we talk about sex and gender, I mean really talk about it, we’ll have to acknowledge that straight-married people aren’t magically on the right track, that if we examine our actual lived lives instead of relying on easy signifiers like ‘heterosexual’, then we’ll realize that a lot of the behaviour we’ve accepted might actually be damaging, and a lot of the behaviour we’ve condemned might actually be to the glory of God.

So let’s repent of our shame, and face our fear, and allow for grace to break through. And then do it again, and do it again.

How did we get here? How did we get to a place where I, a woman (admittedly a straight-married woman) can stand at the pulpit of a Mennonite church, and suggest that our traditional sexual mores might be deeply problematic, and I won’t be excommunicated? Mennonites have some real and understandable anxiety that we’ve gotten here simply by allowing the ‘world’ too much influence, by allowing the voices of individualism to triumph over the church body, by living within a culture that has sexualized everything. I value this worry, and encourage it in many contexts. We can still ask: is the church becoming too worldly? But we need to remind ourselves that it is also *deeply* Anabaptist to believe in the power of the Holy Spirit, to insist that the Spirit is both real and active, and not within our control. Anabaptism was founded on the conviction that the true church might not be where we have traditionally believed it to be, that spiritual truths may come from individual study and communion with God. More recently, I think we have been willing to say that spiritual truths can be learned from scientists or even from political movements. This is a tension Charleswood Mennonite Church has lived in for some time. We are a congregation that places a *lot* of emphasis on the institutions of the church, that supports them with our labour, our emotional investment, and our financial resources. But most of us are also keenly aware

that the wisdom of God, the wisdom of Christ, is not confined to the church, that in fact, the church has been blind to parts of that wisdom for generations.

And so it may be a mix of secular political activism, new medical technologies, capitalist individualism but also social programs that got us here as a society, but as for how Charleswood Mennonite Church got here? I would include decades worth of exploring the diversity of the Scriptures, several generations of sitting together with one another in discernment guided by the Spirit, and an ongoing commitment to the Word made flesh, who demanded our presence with the marginalized.

And yet I acknowledge that we – Charleswood Mennonite – are not all in the same place, and that we have visitors among us who may be in a very different place still. Wherever you are this morning, and however you got there, may you rejoice in a God who values relationship more than rules, through whom we are redeemed whether we are queer or straight, in whom we become one kingdom family whatever our familial status. And may we be convicted to become ever better at sharing that grace, at loving boldly, and at building relationships that, like David and Jonathan, are to the glory of God. Amen.