

Dora-Marie Goulet, 29 June, 2014

“Antioch”

Today we are taking our first step on our summer exploration of the early Church. The first community we will be visiting, as we heard in the children’s time, is Antioch on the Orontes (the ruins are found today in Turkey). Christopher Loughheed told me that the city had street lights in 100 A.D. It also had a significant Jewish community and with a population of half a million people, was in fact the third most important city of the Roman Empire at the time, due to the trade routes that passed through it.

Acts tells us that Antioch was the first place that followers of Jesus were called “Christians” and our scripture passages today also show that it was the location of three pivotal shifts in the still Jewish early Church. These changes included evangelizing to Gentiles, eating with Gentiles, and approaching God through Grace rather than the Law.

For those of us separated by roughly 2000 years from the religious and cultural context of Jesus’ early followers, where for us keeping Kosher or circumcising our sons and converts are not pre-requisites to Believer’s baptism, what does Antioch’s story have to do with us? I would suggest that it gives significant insight into three questions. Firstly, should we have distinct groups or divisions in our church? Secondly, what we are looking for in leadership? And thirdly, how do we evaluate our community decisions?

Let’s start by going over what we know about the community in Antioch. The church there was divided along several fault lines in its early life, like slave and free, and man and woman, however the division which is most pertinent for the texts today was that between Jew and Gentile (or non-Jew). It was the very first Christian community to contain ethnically Greek believers, along with the founding ethnically Jewish ones. And not, as one commentary pointed out, Gentiles who were Jewish sympathizers, aka “God-fearing men” like the centurion or Cornelius, who we met earlier in the Gospels and Acts, just regular old Pagans. These were Gentiles who, thanks to the proselytizing initiative of some unnamed believers from Cyprus and Cyrene, skipped Judaism and jumped right into faith in Jesus.

This, we find out in Galatians, was a source of concern for the church hierarchy (of apostles and elders) that had already developed in Jerusalem. They sent Barnabas

(who has a glowing reference in Acts) to scope out the situation. He went to Antioch, gave thanks for the new things he saw happening there, and thought through his network and decided the leader that this new experiment needed was Paul. So Barnabas went and poked around Tarsus and dug up Paul, who had been living quietly for the nine years since his dramatic conversion.

Acts tells us that Barnabas and Paul spent a year with the young church, forming and encouraging them. In Galatians we learn a bit of the dirt that went down while they were there. New Testament sleuth-scholars have put together the pieces and hypothesize that Peter went to Antioch to lay-low after his dramatic escape from prison. While he was there, at first like in his vision earlier in Acts, and in keeping with his impulsive personality, he happily ate with the whole church in Antioch, Jew and Gentile, in what was then called the Love Feast, and has our sacred idea of communion behind it, but was probably more like a potluck in style.

However, when representatives came from Jerusalem and found out that the Jewish Christians weren't keeping kosher, they peer-pressured Peter, who not surprisingly given his track record, totally caved and refused to eat with the Gentile part of the church anymore, and then the other Jews followed his example, even including Barnabas. Some commentaries suggest that word of the Jewish-Christians not keeping to the Law had spread to the broader Jewish community in Judea and the Christians there were getting even more persecution as a result. In other words, maybe Peter was trying to do the right thing with the information he had at the time.

We don't know, because we just know Paul's side of the story. And Paul was royally mad. We learn in Galatians that Paul confronted Peter to his face (and reading between the lines, it sounds like it may have been a public confrontation), telling him that separating himself from the Gentile Christians was exactly contrary to the Spirit of God, and that for followers of Jesus what is important is God's Grace and not following the Law.

Given that we, as aforementioned, don't keep Kosher today, it is clear that in the end, Paul won that round. I can't help feeling sorry for Peter, though. Public confrontations are no fun, and as Paul writes later in Galatians, confrontations should be handled in a Spirit of gentleness. We can only hope that the confrontation had some of that gentle spirit and was not as harsh as it sounds in the English translation.

Whew! When I heard I'd be preaching on the church in Antioch, I had no idea there was such huge shifts in theology, as well as such strong personalities and conflict involved. As I said before, though, I think it is a story with a lot of meat for us to reflect on today.

First off, at its heart, it is the story of Jesus' message being opened to those beyond the Jewish tradition, and the whole community having to change to make room for the new converts. The first question, then is who are we opening ourselves for today? Who, by their inclusion in our community of faith, is changing our identity, and are we willing to let them?

Any ideas? (Don't be shy, shout it out! Who, by their inclusion in our community of faith, is changing our identity?)

I thought of two groups. First, and this is an ongoing process, non-ethnic Mennonites. Gary and Lydia have been leading us through a number of sessions looking at how the Mennonite church has been shifting through modernity and post-modernity. I would suggest that the inclusion of non-ethnic Mennonites has been and continues to be, a source of dynamic change in the broader church, including right here at MFM.

It also makes me think of the ongoing discussion in the broader Mennonite church about human sexuality. Understanding and accepting participation by people in the LGBTQ community at all levels of church will require significant change in how we of the status quo understand gender, identity, and family. I would hazard to say that the changes are no more dramatic than what was required to allow women in leadership, a change for which I am profoundly thankful. We can open ourselves!

The long and short of the message in Acts and Galatians today is that the Christian community should, as far as it is possible, reject the idea of separate groups of Christian. My first point that I want you to take away today is that we are equal in our sin (no matter how "serious" our failing, for example, whether it is in buying unethically produced goods at Dollarama or shop-lifting the same). At the same time, we are equal in our justification through God's Grace. We are one body in Christ. Whoever we are, wherever we come from, whatever we've done or left undone, we can eat together.

Secondly, the story of Antioch is a story of leadership. Leadership happens at a number of levels. There is the grassroots change, the unnamed believers from Cyprus and Cyrene who take leadership by starting to share the Good News with

non-Jewish Greeks. Then there is the structural leadership, represented by James in Jerusalem, who look-out for the fledgling community by sending Barnabas, and other representatives. Then there is Barnabas' mentoring leadership, as he brings Paul into the project. And then there is Peter's leadership fail, as he succumbs to peer-pressure, and draws other Jews away from their Gentile co-believers.

Thinking of leadership makes me think of MFM. When I read about Barnabas going and hunting down Paul, it reminded me of one Search Committee member's quiet suggestion that maybe it would be worth contacting Gary and Lydia Harder, even though they were supposed to (finally) be retiring. And another committee member who thought of John Docherty's gifts, as we struggled with another draft of a challenging job description. We have Barnabases and Pauls in our midst.

Barnabas, Peter and Paul model two aspects of leadership. One, How does a leader lead? And two, where does the leader lead? Barnabas led in an exemplary manner. His "how" was full of faith and encouragement. He was gifted in drawing out other leaders. However when push came to shove, he also had a leadership fail, and following Peter, led the community away from the truth of God's inclusive grace. Peter had a different "how" of leadership. He seems to have been impulsive, and perhaps very charismatic. But though he started in the right direction, he also had a fail in the "where of leadership." Paul's "how" of leadership seems to have been slightly more didactic. Yet, he was able to take the community to a new place and stay there. So Paul's 'where' of leadership was in this situation, stronger than his colleagues. To wrap up my second point, in leadership, it is important both "how" we are led and "where" we are led.

I would suggest that at MFM we are currently in a space where the "how" of leadership is more obvious than the "where." Meaning, we are being led (dare I say, exceptionally) well, but we don't know our destination yet. We are still feeling our way forward as a community. Which leads me to my third question, which I think is particularly important at this point in our journey together; how can we determine if where we are going is indeed the will of God?

Can you think of a decision in your life where you were unsure at the time, but looking back you are confident you followed God's will? What were the signs that you were right? Please turn to the person beside you and share about a time when, looking back, you were sure you made the right decision. How did you know?

Well, Antioch has about 2000 years of 20/20 hindsight on us when it comes to determining the outcome of a conflict. I greatly suspect that the trials and

tribulations of one, Mennonite Fellowship of Montreal will be no more than quiet dust in 2000 years (which should be a bit liberating, right?) But still, it would be helpful for our mental and emotional and community well-being to sense that we are following God's will and direction for our life together on a slightly sooner scale. Once again, Paul has a helpful perspective. In Galatians 5:16 to 26 he outlines the fruits of the spirit and their opposites. Where the fruits of the spirit live, that is the direction God calls us in. Are there enmities? Is there strife, anger, quarrels, and factions? If so, we may be missing the mark. On the other hand, is their patience and kindness? Is there generosity and self-control? Is there joy and love? If so, then we can trust that we are on the right track. Which is my third and final point this morning, the presence of the gifts of the spirit are the signs that we are making the right decisions.

I really enjoyed getting to know Barnabas, the encourager, Paul, the open-minded and Peter, the enthusiastic but fallible, a bit better this week. And I was really pleased to learn about the unnamed believers from Cyprus and Cyrene who I'd never considered before, but who took it upon themselves to start spreading Jesus' message to non-Jews. A huge thank-you to them that I can be standing here today thinking about these questions.

As we leave Antioch behind us and head over to Colossae next week, I hope we will remember firstly that all Christians are one body and equal in Christ. Secondly, as the Church comes to major decisions and cross-roads, we need to consider both how and where our leaders are leading us. And thirdly, when we are attempting to follow God's will in our life together, we need to look for the gifts of the Spirit, love, joy, patience, generosity, kindness, self-control, and then we can know that we are making the right decisions.