

John Docherty, 1 June, 2014

“Being the church - - What church ??”

Last week during sharing time, Martha Lucia asked for prayers for Colombia as the country went to the polls for its presidential elections. While praying during the congregational prayer, I made the link to the Mennonite community in Colombia, and the impact this election might have on them. While I was praying in that vein, it occurred to me that many Mennonites have strong ties to the Ukraine, so I also included them in the prayer, given what has been happening in that country.

Following the service, and during the week as I’ve been working on this message, that prayer has come back to, not quite haunt me, but poke me a little bit from time to time. Rather than just praying for everyone in those countries affected by their respective situations, why would I think first and foremost of Mennonites in these two countries?

Well, one obvious reason for that is that the prayer was triggered by a request from someone with ties to the Mennonite church in Colombia. Martha Lucia was a part of that church, and has family in Colombia.

Maria Christina has family in Colombia.

Julie and Marcos have family in Colombia.

As far as the Ukraine is concerned, Vi Martens was born there. Dory, Pam and Dora have roots there. Probably others here at MFM have some roots or some family connections there, and many Mennonites in Canada were either born or have family there.

When we have a personal connection to the “larger” events that touch the world – political unrest, natural disasters, etc. – we feel more directly affected by things that otherwise don’t really touch our lives in any immediate way.

I remember a few years ago, when I was still on the governing council of the International Rehabilitation Council for victims of Torture (IRCT), one of our council members from the Congo was arrested by the military after a radio broadcast in which he denounced the use of torture in the eastern part of the country where he was living and working.

He was held incommunicado for about a week before he was finally located and eventually released, largely unharmed. I still remember my own sense of personal urgency as our network tried to mobilise resources to track him down and seek his

protection. Years earlier Mary-Lou and I had often written letters for Amnesty International in other “urgent action” cases, but I never felt the level of personal anxiety that I felt in this case, because I *knew* the man who had been arrested.

So it’s quite natural, and fitting, that when we are aware of situations that might affect someone close to us, that we express that concern and seek God’s blessing in some very specific, some very tangible, and perhaps some very insular, way.

That’s why we have our sharing time : we need a space where we can open up to each other, and seek, not only *God’s* blessing, but also the blessing and support of those geographically close to us, as we worry about those spiritually close to us but perhaps physically farther away. And we need that space because, somehow, our connection to God is tied up in our connection to each other.

The primary scripture that I’ve focussed this meditation on is the one from Peter’s first epistle. He’s writing to a number of churches that are suffering, and he draws their attention to the fact that they are not alone in this suffering.

It may be small comfort to know that everybody else is going through what you’re going through, especially when that difficulty may put your life in danger, but Peter tries to encourage the faithful by reminding them in chapter 5, verse 10, that “after you have suffered for a little while, the God of all grace, who has called you to his eternal glory in Christ, will himself restore, support, strengthen, and establish you.”

A little earlier, in verse 7, he assures them that God wants them to “Cast all your anxiety on him, because he cares for you.”

So this letter is, in part at least, an encouragement, and a gesture of reassurance, and a reminder that God *does* care for us, in spite of what might be happening around, and to, us.

But that’s not what I want to develop this morning.

I’m more drawn to his statement in verse 9 of chapter 5, where he says “... [you should be] steadfast in your faith, for you know that your brothers and sisters throughout the world are undergoing the same kinds of suffering.”

I’m intrigued by that statement. “... [Be] steadfast in your faith, for you know that your brothers and sisters throughout the world are undergoing the same kinds of suffering.”

I’m intrigued by this statement because, although it can be read on one level as simply a call to not be discouraged – or, “... don’t take it personally ...” – , it

strikes me that it also includes an implicit recognition that somehow, in some way, they / we are accountable to the other brothers and sisters who are suffering as they / we are. They / we have a responsibility to be steadfast in their / our faith, precisely *because* "... [our] brothers and sisters throughout the world are undergoing the same kinds of suffering."

"... [Be] steadfast in your faith, for you *know* that your brothers and sisters throughout the world are undergoing the same kinds of suffering."

And that accountability to, and responsibility for, other brothers and sisters around the world leaves me troubled. It's a call to "be the church"; a community of people who are "called out". That's what the word translated as "church" means : 'ekklesia' – the "called-out ones", or the "separate ones".

How very Mennonite ...

Peter's words aren't meant to include all our brothers and sisters in the human race; our neighbours, whoever they may be. He is specifically identifying our brothers and sisters in the community of faith. The "us" who are being persecuted by "them".

And that leaves me troubled, not because I resist the idea that we have a particular duty, accountability, and responsibility to people who share our faith – as I said earlier, it seems to me that it's quite natural, and fitting, that we be more immediately concerned with the well-being of our family than with the well-being of our next-door neighbour; more concerned with the well-being of our next-door neighbour than with the well-being of a stranger on the other side of the city; more concerned with the well-being of someone who shares our life in some way than with the well-being of someone we've never met. It may not be totally morally defensible, but it is how we are built – it's normal to be more emotionally involved when we are more personally involved.

And when it comes to our community of faith, I suppose it's normal to feel an affinity with people who share our understanding of faithfulness, and to care more about them, and their context, than we do for others who don't share that understanding. We *are* called out to be the church, after all.

But what church?

When Peter writes about "your brothers and sisters throughout the world" he is literally referring to every single person on the planet who calls himself or herself Christian. At this point in the history of the church we may have people who prefer the teachings of Peter over against those of Paul, or vice-versa; we may have

people who are more Jewish in their practices and those who are from gentile backgrounds, but we have only one 'church', only one body of faith, only one group that is identified as the Body of Christ.

But that, of course, didn't last terribly long. By the end of the 4th century, the political administration of the Roman Empire was under different heads, and the Church was already starting to evolve differently in the East and the West.

With the collapse of the Roman Empire in the West at end of the 5th century, there were different historical developments around political power, etc. In the West, the bishops of Rome, now morphing into the principal heads of the church, were accumulating temporal power with the weakened political structures. In the East, things were more stable politically, and the patriarchs of this region gained less power.

In 1054, the church in Rome excommunicates the Patriarch of the Eastern Church in Constantinople, now Istanbul, along with the entire church in the East, and the church in the East anathematizes the Pope in Rome, along with the entire church in the West. Though there were multiple historical differences that led to this situation, this particular set of actions was triggered by a dispute over the fact that the West used unleavened bread in communion, and the East didn't.

So from this point on, as far as the Church in the East was concerned, everyone in the West was outside the faith.

And as far as the Church in the West was concerned, everyone in the East was outside the faith; no longer our brothers and sisters in Christ. And the circle of what constitutes the Body of Christ is enormously reduced.

In Europe, the development of various reform-minded movements during the 14th and 15th centuries starts to stir up the Church. Various monastic orders seek their own ways of being faithful within the Roman Catholic Church structure. Abuses within the Roman Catholic structure are addressed by various church councils and leaders.

Reformers such as Erasmus wanted to see the church change from within. Reformers such as Luther wanted to break completely with Rome and set up a new church.

And that's what he, and others, did. They broke away from Rome, and we now have two major expressions of the faith : the Catholic Church, for whom the Protestants are heretics and outside the faith, and the Protestants, for whom the

Catholics are hopelessly lost and outside the faith; no longer our brothers and sisters in Christ. And the Body of Christ is smaller yet.

The Anabaptist reformers – Menno Simons, Conrad Grebel, et. al. – aren't satisfied with the extent of the reforms achieved by the Protestants, and they push for a more radical restructuring of the church, and they, in their turn, are treated as heretics and troublemakers. As far as the Protestants are concerned, no longer brothers and sisters in Christ.

I'm not well-enough versed in the nuances of the early Anabaptist teachings to know whether they, for their part, ceased to view the Protestants and Catholics as being outside the faith, but it certainly seems likely, since they saw themselves as a separate people. Maybe some others here can enlighten us on that point. At any rate, the Body of Christ shrinks even further.

As the Mennonite family evolves, we sometimes decide that particular groups aren't faithful enough, and they are then regarded as no longer our brothers or sisters in Christ. And this ever-shrinking Body of Christ shrinks some more.

On a very personal level, the practice of 'shunning' by Mennonites was a way of defining who was, and who was not, a faithful brother or sister in Christ. And we slowly whittled away at this Body of Christ. And we refine, and we refine, and we refine a little more.

The risk with this pattern, of course, is that the Body of Christ ends up being reduced to a denomination; then to an independent collection of churches who share something in common; then to an independent congregation; then to whomever we decide is in or out; and finally we're left alone on a street corner preaching to whoever will listen ... but nobody does, because they each have a street corner of their own.

We are called to be the Church.

But what Church?

Who are we responsible for, and who are we accountable to?

Obviously, we are ultimately accountable to God.

But, as I said earlier, I believe that somehow, in some way, our connection to God is tied up in our connection to each other. It's difficult to be authentically accountable to God if we are not authentically accountable to each other.

I suppose, though, that we have different levels of accountability.

I am more directly accountable to Mary-Lou than I am to the Mennonite Fellowship of Montreal.

I am more directly accountable to MFM than I am to Mennonite Church Eastern Canada.

I am more directly accountable to MCEC than I am to Mennonite Church Canada.

Am I accountable at all to the broader Mennonite family – the Mennonite Brethren, the Amish, Mennonite World Conference?

Am I accountable at all to other Christian denominations?

To the World Council of Churches?

Does being accountable mean giving others power or authority over me?

Perhaps, in some cases.

But perhaps being accountable sometimes means giving others the right to question, and perhaps challenge, my actions – and to then take seriously those questions or challenges.

Perhaps being accountable sometimes means being willing to engage with my brothers and sisters in Christ in ways that will help heal the old hurts that have left the Church fractured and broken.

Perhaps being accountable sometimes means simply being willing to even view members of other Christian Churches as members of the Body of Christ, to whom, and for whom, I have some responsibility, even if I am also profoundly in disagreement with them with regards to what constitutes faithful discipleship.

Maybe accountability isn't quite the right word to use in this context. Maybe I should be talking more about my responsibility to be in right relationship with other Christians.

To be in dialogue with them in a more intense way than I am in dialogue with people who aren't in my community of faith.

Which isn't to say that I can't, or shouldn't, be in dialogue with people of other communities of faith – it's more to wonder how that dialogue might differ, when it is with someone who believes, as I do, that Jesus has a message worth paying attention to, and sharing, even if we don't entirely agree on what that message is, exactly, or how it's to be lived out.

Even if we're sometimes embarrassed, or even outraged, by how our fellow Christians interpret Jesus' message.

And it makes me wonder to what extent any of us has the full picture of what that message is.

I left the Catholic Church and made my way into the Mennonite Church because I was drawn to a community of faith that understood faithful discipleship in a way that resonated with me. There's a lot about this community that I love, and I admit I'm a little surprised to meet Mennonites who are drawn to the Catholic Church. I don't have any problem with that, I'm just a little surprised by it.

But I'm beginning to see that those who are drawn to the Catholic Church are typically not drawn to the hierarchy, or to Catholic ecclesiastical theology, but to a certain kind of spirituality, or spiritual experience, that they feel is lacking in the Mennonite Church, at least for them. They want to experience God in a way they haven't in the Mennonite Church.

I know other Mennonites, and Catholics, who are drawn to a very charismatic, Pentecostal-type, experience of God.

So that makes me wonder how God is present in these other communities of faith, and how that presence complements God's presence here in the Mennonite community.

By way of illustration of what I mean, I'd like to draw your attention to the two lamps on the worship table.

One is our Peace lamp, the other is the "dancing flame lamp" that was given to me last week at my licensing service.

You'll notice that we finally seem to have gotten the hang of the Peace lamp flame. It's modest, but stable, not smoking at all.

The other lamp is a little more rambunctious. The flame is all over the place, and much bigger and brighter than our Peace lamp.

Both lamps are burning the same oil.

The two lamps are pretty similar in design.

The Peace lamp has a wick that looks a little bit like this.

It's tidy, contained, controlled. And it has a flame that's tidy, contained, controlled. It's encased in a very defined space on the lamp – that ball you see on top.

The “dancing flame lamp”, on the other hand, has a wick that looks a little bit like this. Multiple strands; a free-moving wick in an open neck on the lamp. Not very controlled. And the flame is the same. Sometimes it flares up in one area as one of the strands feeds it. Sometimes it moves around and flares up elsewhere as another strand feeds it more pronouncedly.

If I take these notes and try to fan the flames, our little Mennonite Peace lamp is easily extinguished. But our ecumenical, untidy, “dancing flame” lamp just shifts the flame around to accommodate the moving air currents as they eddy about and threaten it. The flame draws on this strand, then another, and shifts back again, resisting the winds that took out our Menno light.

It’s a simple illustration that could be applied many ways, I suppose.

I’ve applied it to the broader Christian Church; a church that is surely stronger and healthier when each strand has its place in the whole, than it is when each strand insists on going it alone.

It could be applied to the Mennonite Church of Eastern Canada as we try to understand how to integrate and make room for the multiple “ethnic churches” that are joining their light to ours.

And it could be applied here in MFM as we try to make room for the multiple personalities and gifts that define *us*.