

3 October 2021, World
Communion Sunday
Philippians 2:1-13
A complex Unity
First Mennonite Church

Today, many Christians around the world, including Mennonites, are celebrating World Communion Sunday. It's a day set aside each year at the beginning of October to promote Christian unity and ecumenical cooperation. In essence, the day calls on you, me, and



Christians everywhere to celebrate the unity they find as followers of Jesus Christ, despite the many differences that exist in the ways that our faith gets lived out on a day-to-day basis.

Our scripture reading today is Paul's great hymn to Christ in his letter to the Philippians. We're not sure what problems in First Church Philippi occasioned the writing of this letter, but we can guess, reading between the lines, that the main problem is **unity**. Are you surprised? I doubt it. If you have been around the church a while, in any congregation, you know at least two things:

1. We are already united by Christ. I've been immersed in Ephesians these last few months so I can't help but reference it—Christ made peace between strangers and enemies, breaking down walls of hostility through giving his life on the cross, thereby creating a “new human.”
2. Even though Christ has united us, unity is always a work in progress for a church.

Now, of course, there are plenty of things that can get in the way of maintaining the unity Christ has already established. There are our different backgrounds and circumstances, be it economic differences, educational backgrounds, geographical

origins, age, language, gender, race, and culture. Other times there are deep theological differences: disagreements about how we read and interpret the Bible, ethics, gender identity and sexuality, congregational autonomy, and even Covid-19 protocols. The list of reasons for our divisions can be long.

And when issues arise that cause profound disagreement and division, our efforts to address our differences are often anything but peaceful. Sometimes what passes for “unity” is just a situation in which dissenting voices have been suppressed or disagreement has been papered over. Unity and peace seem possible only if those we disagree with are gone, or at least are silenced.

So Paul’s got a problem on his hands in speaking to the issue of disunity. Notice how Paul attempts to minister to the divisions and factions in a church. He doesn’t name and tackle the disagreements directly. He doesn’t try to position himself on one side or the other, mounting his arguments for and against. Paul doesn’t even attempt to find some elusive middle ground or moderating position.

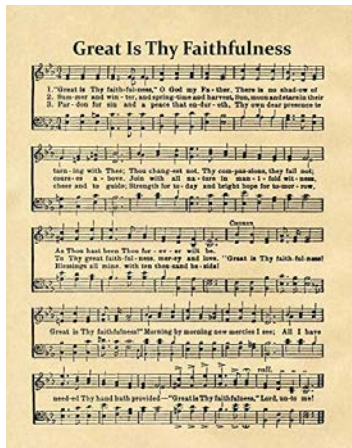
Rather, what Paul does is quote from what many biblical scholars believe to be a popular early Christian hymn. That’s our scripture reading for today.

*Though he was in the form of God,
did not regard equality with God
as something to be exploited,
but emptied himself,
taking the form of a slave,
being born in human likeness.
And being found in human form,
he humbled himself
and became obedient to the point of death—
even death on a cross.*

Paul doesn’t talk directly about the divisions; he quotes a song about the glory of Jesus Christ. We think this hymn was sung in the Philippian congregation, sung by heart in the deepest sense of the word. Don’t you find it interesting that Paul addresses unity by quoting a hymn about Christ?

The global pandemic, our public health crisis has been hard on the Church. For us it’s meant no choir, something many of us love and miss dearly. Not having it has left a real significant hole in the life of the church. For those participating in the

choir, the simple act of being with a group of people, having conversations during practice, and attempting to sing in four-part harmony, in the same rhythm, is a unifying experience.



Is Paul suggesting we sing our way towards unity?

Consider for a moment, what happens when we join our voices as one and sing a hymn here on Sunday? We are different people who have differing talents for singing, who have differing musical experiences and tastes, but we all submit ourselves to sing the same notes at the same time. And the harmony is wonderful!

Of course, it be wonderful if we didn't have to wear our masks while we do it!

There are at least two times in the church year where we sing more than usual in our worship service. One of those times is at Christmas and the other time is at Easter. On Christmas Eve, we light the Advent candles and the Christmas one, listen to the choir sing about the incarnation, hear the scriptures read about the coming Messiah and the birth of Jesus, and sing our favourite Christmas carols. Then at Easter we also sing about the mystery of the resurrection of Jesus from the dead. The reason we sing more on these special days is because there is some truth so deep, so glorious, mysterious, and wonderful, that only singing can do it justice. Rational words spoken in a sermon are directed at our heads—our intellect—while hymns and songs are directed at the heart—our emotions. Music has the power to unify.

And that's the sort of truth that Paul pushes toward the Philippians amid their divisions. He **doesn't** say, "Aren't you ashamed that you are picking sides and having a nasty church fight?" He doesn't say, "Come-on people, you ought to act more like Christians!"

Paul says to the pianist at the piano...of course, I don't know the name of the pianist at the Church in Philippi, but I imagine that the pianist's name was either Rod or Irene! Paul says, Let's sing one of our favourite hymns, All hail the power of Jesus' Name!"

Paul reminds this diverse congregation, "Adopt the attitude that was in Christ Jesus." Paul tells them that he wants them to embody, inculcate the spirit of

Christ, to think like Christ thinks, do what Christ did and does. In other words, to so embody the Spirit of Jesus so that you see the face of Christ in everyone you meet, and everyone who sees you sees the face of Christ in you.

It is an affirmation of faith that Jesus Christ makes possible that which the world considers impossible. Christ has called us not only to believe in him but also to follow him, even more, to emulate, imitate him, to engage in the same moves in our lives that characterized his life. To sing the notes that he sung. It is a claim of our faith that Christ not only commands us to live together, minister together as one, but also enables us to do what he commands. God's Holy Spirit heals our wounds, bridges our boundaries, closes our gaps, and forges us into a new humanity.

Our church is called to be a showcase, a light on the hill, a beacon of hope in City Park, for what God can do. The world is quite right to look at us and see an organization that is markedly different from the world. John's gospel lays out our challenge this way: *By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another*' (John 13:35).

The pagan Roman world looked at the early church and marveled that here was a group of people that wasn't organized as the world organized itself—on the basis of family, gender, power, class, and money. The surrounding Roman culture said, "See how they love each other!" Alas, too often the world looks at the church today and exclaim, "Look how they hate with each other."

How is it possible for a diverse congregation like ours to sing with one voice, to believe with one heart? It's impossible—unless Jesus Christ really is the true "form of God." We are many, but we have been gathered here, congregated, by one Lord. We are divided by many different political, social, gendered points of view, but we are all here to focus more intently and singularly on the one Christ. We have come from many different places, but we are all attempting to walk in the same direction—toward the one Saviour who has come toward us.

Following the defeat of Germany in WWII, the Germans left Greece and the Island of Crete. The Greek Orthodox Church invited MCC into the country to help rural areas of Greece suffering economic depression from the effects of the war. Peter



Peter and Elfrieda Dyck, 1994

Dyck, whom some of you know, went there to get the work underway. He went and had some tea with the person who was to oversee the work, an Orthodox priest. The priest said to Peter Dyck. "How can we possibly work together. You don't have smoke or incense in your worship and we do. You don't have a high view of Mary and we do. You don't have an elaborate liturgy like we do." We're totally different from each other. How can we possibly work together?"

Peter Dyck responded, instead of discussing the reasons why we are so different from each other, why don't we spend our time talking about Jesus. And when we run out of things to talk about here, then we'll move on to something else. The Orthodox priest agreed, "Okay, even though we are so different, lets accept one another as Christian and go from there."

As you know, MCC has a diverse constituency. Here in SK MCC is supported by diverse individuals, congregations, and conferences of many different Mennonite and Brethren in Christ churches in the province. Hutterites, Old Colony, Bergthaler, MBs, and MC Church Saskatchewan all support the work of MCC. If every MCC supporter would gather in one room to nail down in detail exactly what we believe, I'd venture to say that there would be no agreement.



marginalized, while others serve others in the name of Christ domestically.

You see, "in the name of Christ" means different things to different people. For some it means **volunteering** internationally with MCC to serve the global poor and



For some, in the name of Christ means making quilts, packing relief, medical, or education kits for the poor.



Kathi Suderman by MCC
United Nations office in
New York, 2008

For others it is **advocating** governments on behalf of the poor.

For some, in the name of Christ means doing things at the secondhand furniture, appliances, and thrift shops to help the poor, while others see in the name of Christ to be a focus on **peace and justice**, including reconciliation work with Indigenous people.



This is just an aside but listen to what Chief Weenie of the Young Chippewayan nation said of the Mennonite and Lutheran efforts at Stoney Knoll, which is just north of Laird: He said, **“They’ve been practicing reconciliation way before it became the buzzword (of) truth and reconciliation.”**¹



Young Chippewayan Chief, Ben Weenie

That should put a bit of pride in our humble Mennonite hearts! Of course, there is still much more work that needs to be done.

Though MCC constituents and supporters may not agree on everything, they are unified in serving in the name of Christ.

With much more eloquent words, Philippians 2 encourages the church to sing that our focus, our originating cause, our great mission is Jesus Christ. Jesus was God, but God in a certain form, God drawing all sorts of people into the realm of God. And Paul urges these Philippians to maintain their focus on Jesus, the carpenter from Nazareth, even if they are suffer, in whatever circumstances of disunity they found themselves:

Complete my joy by thinking the same way, having the same love, being united, and agreeing with each other. Don’t do anything for selfish purposes, but with humility think of others as better than yourselves. Instead of each person watching

¹ <https://saskatoon.ctvnews.ca/sask-first-nation-continues-spirit-of-reconciliation-with-mennonite-lutheran-communities-1.5560092>

out for their own good, watch out for what is better for others. Adopt the attitude that was in Christ Jesus (Philippians 2:2-5). Amen.