

Because Jesus we are one
Meno Mennonite Church
June 14, 2020

Purpose: To declare the unity of the body founded in Christ

Message: As members of the body that is far larger than any of us, we are invited into the work of building the body

Scripture: Ephesians 4:1-16

Synopsis: As passe as it may now sound we are one body. As churchy folk, this is not a big deal to us—it is well worn language that Paul uses as a primary notion of what it means to be church. But consider it in light of the cultural world. We identify ourselves by our uniqueness far more than our essential commonality—the teams for whom we cheer, our music preferences, where we live—on and on it goes. It is no better in the church with church splitting from church, and bodies being ripped apart. Yet, despite this, because we love Jesus we are one. We are part of the larger whole, and for that we give thanks. How can we lean harder on the only meaningful identifier there is—that of being followers of Christ—to build up the body?

Ephesians 4:1-16

4 As a prisoner for the Lord, then,
I urge you to live a life
worthy of the calling you have received.

2 Be completely humble and gentle;
be patient, bearing with one another in love.

3 Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace.

4 There is one body and one Spirit,
just as you were called to one hope when you were called;

5 one Lord, one faith, one baptism;

6 one God and Father of all,
who is over all and through all and in all.

7 But to each one of us grace has been given as Christ apportioned it.

8 This is why it says:

“When he ascended on high,
he took many captives
and gave gifts to his people.”

9 (What does “he ascended” mean
except that he also descended to the lower, earthly regions?

10 He who descended is the very one
who ascended higher than all the heavens,
in order to fill the whole universe.)

11 So Christ himself gave the apostles,
the prophets, the evangelists, the pastors and teachers,

12 to equip his people for works of service,
so that the body of Christ may be built up

13 until we all reach unity in the faith
and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature,
attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ.

14 Then we will no longer be infants,
tossed back and forth by the waves,
and blown here and there by every wind of teaching
and by the cunning and craftiness of people in their deceitful scheming.

15 Instead,
speaking the truth in love,
we will grow to become in every respect
the mature body of him who is the head,
that is, Christ.

16 From him the whole body,
joined and held together by every supporting ligament,
grows and builds itself up in love,
as each part does its work.

Luke has reached the why stage. May the Lord have mercy on us all. On one hand I love it—his natural curiosity blooms and flows so naturally as he is curious to know about just about everything. Just the other night we happened to see an image of a nuclear explosion, and that launched a line of questioning I am not at all convinced anyone is really ready for. How do you explain the implicit insanity of global war to a 4 year old. But then again, it just. never. Stops. About everything everyone everywhere he goes. It is always why and what, and some how “just because never REALLY suffices as an explanation of really anything. It has left me to wonder when I stopped doing that—wondering why or asking that quite so much. I mean sure most of the basics are in my head by now, but there is something motivating by the fundamental curiosity that we just seem to pack away with our toys as a memory of yesteryear. We just stop asking either out of our own conclusion that the answers are not necessarily there, or that we just have something better to do. But there is something fundamentally refreshing about the project of learning the world for what it is.

There can be another reason why this stops. The complexity of the answer can get in the way. Sometimes, what you want to know is the basic facts, not the full history of the ways and means of the thing (Luke and Anna have been warned and apologized to in advance; your dad is a geek). Complexity can be the downfall of any good question. This is especially true in matters of faith. We become so accustomed to the whys and wherefores of the movements of faith that our churchly duties become old hat, or we have allowed years of complexity and nuance to cloud the basic reasons for why we do what we do, and are who we are. We layer on reason and theology and history and we are not always going back to the crucial nub: we do X because Jesus invites us to. It can be a fruitful way of answering the questions.

Remember Easter back in April (yes we are all in a time warp right now). It is one of those holidays that we approach in a fairly consistent fashion year in and year out. Christ has died, Christ is risen, Christ will come again is something we chant when we recite the creeds of the church, telling again the story. But what goes unsaid is that it is because Christ is with us that the world has changed, and we change with it. It is because Jesus that the world is different, and it is because Jesus that we are different. At the end of all our arguments and clever logic theological treatises and all the rest, we are who we are, do what we do, say what we say and believe what we believe because Jesus is alive and moving in our midst. That is the fundamental answer to all the why questions that we could ever encounter. We are Jesus people, following

as faithfully as we know how the way set out for us in Jesus' example of what it means to be people of the kingdom. We are little Christ's—what Christian really means—emulating all that the master has done with endless resounding repercussions from this most simple reality of who and what Jesus was and is.

I think we do well to come here from time to time because our simplest assertions can get out of hand. With thousands of years to think and refine our answers, we can put on a pretty good show when it comes to explaining ourselves to each other, and, God help us, other people. I got a call a week or so ago from a student at a catholic college in Minnesota. She came to know Menno through the Auction, and event she has attended regularly with appreciation. So when she was faced with a paper about believers baptism, she came right the to the horses mouth (along with some good research in preparing). She wanted to know why we did not baptize at infancy and how the details of that work themselves out. It was a fascinating conversation where I tried to be honest about the highs and lows of our ideals, and that which they represent. It can often be interesting to answer a church telephone.

What I tried to say to her was this—we want to be Jesus followers first and foremost, and that is of a character that must be chosen as opposed to chosen for us. But it got stickier than that when history, identity, and inclination became involved, as they must. It got me wondering about identity and how we wear our team colors, what ever that team happens to be. Clan and group identity are intensely important, and have driven our world for good and for ill for time out of mind. These are days where identity and the pitfalls of it are being unwrapped and we are seeing the deep wounds of our past, often quite infected and causing us great pain. It is necessary work to find healing. Our identities shape who we are, how the world is for us, and how the world sees us. When we are part of church, when we participate in baptism we are self-identifying with Jesus because we follow Jesus. From that, everything else flows out in clear and complex ways.

All of which sounds swell and happy. Until we start to consider what exactly that might mean. It is, after all a radical thing to claim this identity above all others. If we say because Jesus we are one we are saying all those who are part of Jesus are part of the we—it is our us, come what may. That's a challenging thing to say, and harder still to live in the context of community. But when we broaden this it is a tougher thing still to embrace the implications of what that can mean. we might just be placed on a team that makes us somewhat

uncomfortable about who we are aligning ourselves to—we don't get to pick and choose on behalf of Christ who got it right and who doesn't. Yet we know how broad a field that can be. Including some people who claim Christ but behave in ways we find hard to deal with, if not downright offensive, who don't function the way that we do, who don't believe entirely as I might.

Even within the exceedingly narrow category of Anabaptist Christians in the broad scheme of things, we know that there are gulfs and divides of churches and denominations over practice and belief that divide, sometimes, brother from brother, family from family. We make the statement “Because Jesus we are one” as a theological truth only to apply a good deal of footnoting to the meaning of we: applying tests of theology, belief, practice, inclination and just plain comfort to define who is part of we and us, and who is not. Indeed, it is this simplest of all statements that has caused us the most challenge throughout the centuries and right down to this very day as we try to balance this radical notion of Jesus binding all together into one body and one reality under one head with the need to understand what it means to be part of a church that welcomes all yet still holds accountability, ethics, and standards as primary virtues as well. Why? Well, because Jesus did too.

My point is this: we think that our foundational statements will simplify everything for us. On a certain degree they do—we must always come back to the fundamental truth that our body exists solely and exclusively because Jesus wills it. Because Jesus binds us together, we are given the work of understanding who US happens to be on a day in day out basis, however we understand the body—a cell group, a congregation, conference, denomination, tradition. As it is written: where two or three are gathered, the spirit is there”, to which I generally add “and conflict follows shortly thereafter.” Paul's advice to the church at Ephesus rings true today—do what you can to maintain unity, acknowledge where we can the fundamental truth of the oneness of Christ, and always disagree in love. It can be difficult to hold both the fundamental assertion of the oneness of Christ on one hand and the reality of church division on the other. We needn't fear this. As much as we want a neat and tidy church of easy definitions, and agreeable bodies, we are given the true work of the church—of being body together across all that would break fellowship—big or small—and bring us low. This is a strength of Menno's—binding together the many into the one. It is gift to us here, and it is an exercise that we do well to lend to ourselves now, and our world in general in these days where history seems to be hiccupping.

The body remains because Jesus, and because Jesus, the work of that body is to display the hands and feet of the savior to all who might see. The good news in this; Try as I might to figure all of this messy business out to the best of my ability of how to make this consequence of Jesus work, I must always hold this out in front of me: the body is not mine, ultimately. It is Jesus' body. It is Jesus' church. As such the "we", however it might be defined for us particularly, has a larger meaning than what we might know: the one that Christ himself holds. Jesus died to save everyone, and because of that reality we are one. The body exists to be Christ in the world, and we can stand amazed as it can shape itself in ways even we might not expect.

Because Jesus we are one. It is just that simple. It is just that hard. It is just that wonderful that it is God's working in Christ who Saves us, always, a truth that can cross every line, group, division and wall we could ever erect. Thanks be to God; for it is God's work, not our imperfect attempts, and it is marvelous in our sight.