

Brought Together

Menno Mennonite Church

August 25, 2024

Purpose: To celebrate the life giving challenges of being body together.

Message: As church we are brought together as a witness to what God is up to in the world and intends for God's good creation.

Scripture: Isaiah 55:1-13 (I will read); Acts 2:41-47 (Please read)

Synopsis: Community is one of those touchstones of idealism for many people. The notion is that within it, commonality (a root of community) takes the fore and that there is a shared way of being where differences are overcome or minimized all together. Yet we know that when we are in community we are far more likely to know it as work as much as joy and peace. As church and as kingdom people, we are drawn into community not as extraordinary means of being together, but as an incarnational means of demonstrating the kingdom coming. As such we are invited into practicing both accountability and grace at the same time. We know its work; yet can we celebrate the reality it represents as a foretaste of our mutual hope of all that God is doing?

Isaiah 55:1-13

55 Ho, everyone who thirsts,
come to the waters;

and you that have no money,
come, buy and eat!

Come, buy wine and milk
without money and without price.

² Why do you spend your money
for that which is not bread,
and your labor for that which does not satisfy?

Listen carefully to me, and eat what is good,
and delight yourselves in rich food.

Incline your ear, and come to me;
listen, so that you may live.

I will make with you an everlasting covenant,
my steadfast, sure love for David.

See, I made him a witness to the peoples,
a leader and commander for the peoples.

See, you shall call nations that you do not know,
and nations that do not know you shall run to you,
because of the Lord your God, the Holy One of Israel,
for he has glorified you.

Seek the Lord while God may be found,
call upon him while YHWH is near;
let the wicked forsake their way,
and the unrighteous their thoughts;
let them return to the Lord, that he may have mercy on them,
and to our God, for he will abundantly pardon.

For my thoughts are not your thoughts,
nor are your ways my ways, says the Lord.

For as the heavens are higher than the earth,
so are my ways higher than your ways
and my thoughts than your thoughts.

For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven,
and do not return there until they have watered the earth,
making it bring forth and sprout,
giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater,
so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth;
it shall not return to me empty,
but it shall accomplish that which I purpose,
and succeed in the thing for which I sent it.

For you shall go out in joy,
and be led back in peace;
the mountains and the hills before you
shall burst into song,
and all the trees of the field shall clap their hands.

Instead of the thorn shall come up the cypress;
instead of the brier shall come up the myrtle;
and it shall be to the Lord for a memorial,
for an everlasting sign that shall not be cut off.

We take a lot about church for granted. As well we should. Many of us have been born, raised and embraced within the circle of the church we have come to expect a great deal about what that then means. We are accustomed to the workings of how things get done: that when we have a loss consolation will be offered. Hard times or near celebrations will bring support and casseroles in somewhat equal measure. That there is a place that we can go that we are known as we are for who we are from where we are. That we have a community through which we live our lives together. It is part of the deal. Sure; there are any number of ways and stories that we each can tell about times where community has failed us, when church has not fulfilled our best hopes. The church will remind you of its human nature at least as often as it points you to the divine. We must be realistic about that, always. But that is not my primary agenda, at least not for today. Instead, I think we owe it to ourselves to consider what a near miracle it is that such a thing exists at all.

Because it is so rare. A community—a group of people whose place and purpose is to share the world and its challenges together—is something that we strongly desire, but find increasingly hard to find. We live in an age of connectivity. We live in an age of isolation. We have more connections than ever before, we also know that we as a people, in church, out of church, wherever—it doesn't matter—are more fragmented, isolated, and siloed. I could give you a whole social media/online society rant to prove my point, but I think that this is something we fundamentally know. We have contact but not continuity, and it can often be hard to figure out why.

Side note: Loneliness as a concept, a word, does not appear with any frequency in literature until the 17th century when it was used to describe places too far from town and other people to be in contact. Life was so necessarily connected back then that it took some doing to disconnect, and doing so was not terribly possible back in the day. Our more independent existence by the ways and means that we have built to insulate us from the world has allowed us to do more by ourselves, eroding our sense of community. Many people look at the Amish, our Anabaptist cousins as being merely phobic around technology, insisting that anything with electricity is of the devil. But if you have hung out around Amish, you quickly learn they are just as gadget driven as the next guy. I remember the buggies that cruised past my grandmother's house with enough bass pumping out that I am amazed the horse isn't deafened—and that was the 90's. Far from fearful, their rubric of technology is rather simple: Does it help us maintain

connection within our group such that we continue to relate to each other or be carried so fast and so far by our ambitions we have no time to be about being community together.

Our texts for this morning, both the Acts (that we know and love as a defining moment of the newly launched church with the coming of Pentecost) and from Isaiah which points to the restored community of YHWH and the mountain of God, paint us a beautiful picture. People are there. They have come to the mountain of God and they are sharing their stuff in an image of the way of being people of Spirit together. Note here that in neither of these examples are there exalted notions of right belief, right practice, or righteous living that are being practiced; just the basic sharing of goods in the name of the YHWH God. Amongst all the texts we can turn to get a sense of “how to do” community throughout the Epistles and elsewhere, I wanted to come back here not to hold out the impossible task of the idealized reality either in the post-Pentecost high or the end-times healing of the nations, but to remind us of the basic function for doing community in the first place: to demonstrate clearly the gospel that is being preached. Richard Rohr suggests: “Building such communities in contrast to the surrounding society of emperor-worship was precisely Paul’s missionary strategy. Small communities of Jesus’ followers would make the message believable: Jesus is Lord (rather than Caesar is Lord); sharing abundance and living in simplicity (rather than hoarding wealth); nonviolence and suffering (rather than aligning with power). Paul was not just a mystic, but also very practical.”¹ Who wouldn’t want to imagine a way such as this were it possible? Who wouldn’t want to live such a way if there was a community in which to do so?

What’s more, I don’t think we need to aspire to the high-level ideals of the Pentecost or Isaiah’s vision of the Kingdom realized to know something of what is being held out here. Long past are the days of thousands being welcomed into the church on a daily basis, and even for us with some communal heritage in our blood, the life of the church of Acts 2 seems like an over-idealized dream. But that doesn’t mean that our more modest incarnations of care and commonality do not have a place or fail to be known as good. The fact that there is someplace where you are known and welcomed means something. The we strive to concentrate on that which unites us—our common discipleship to Jesus Christ and following his way—than the ways we differ and disagree. Is it always comfortable, easy and compatible? No it is not. Laying aside differences never is. We need to find better ways of talking to each other about

¹ <https://cac.org/church-was-supposed-to-be-an-alternative-society-2018-05-09/> As recorded 2018-05-10

what is of real concern to us across that which divides us. Disagreeing in love does not mean that we all simply agree that there are whole menus of conversation that cannot and should not be broached. It doesn't mean that we pass resolutions by majority and let the chips fall where they may without concern for those for whom this spells disappointment. Instead, we need to work on our capacity to build God's true peace in finding ways to pursue peace together by speaking to each other, knowing that in some ways we disagree, but when God brings the body together, we are invited each and every time to come to the table and find common ground. If this is what the church can become known for—seeking peace together—and a unity of community that proves actually resilient even when outside pressures would demand our loyalty above all else, then our future can be bright indeed.

This is and should be our aspiration. This is our aspiration, even though we are so prone to failing that promise. But even in telling that truth we set out the contrast of community. We can tell the truth. We can confess that community hurts people. We miss people's loneliness. We concentrate on preserving the church without spot or wrinkle and miss opportunity for radical incarnation. We rely far more extensively on our human understanding of constraint and protection that would say that we dare not spend too much lest we not have enough for ourselves then to entrust the work of our sharing to the abundance of the God who authors it. We make the question one about us versus them, whoever we happen to make them be right now, forgetting that there is only us. Community is not supposed to be an insulation from the world but an illustration, and, more importantly, an invitation to the world. It is universally hard work. It is work made possible solely by a healthy does of the Holy Spirit. But it is possible even if we are not always good at spotting it. It is viable, even as it pushes us to move church from something that is defined primarily by last names and is known far more as the working of the Spirit. But for all of these challenges and more, it is what we are, who we are called to be and what we can celebrate even as we commit ourselves to building it ever stronger and still braver. We need to be willing to trust each other take risks with each other—the risks of conversation, the risks of being together, the risks of disagreeing with each other and still coming out the other side with a sense of respect and love.

If you happen to remember we began this summer with a big question: what does it mean to seek peace together? We asked this question because we wanted to bring what is so often a high-minded impracticality down to the realistic level: the work and the stuff that we do

and we are about not as a notion of our own idealism, but as a function of what God is doing in the world. We have worked with notions of peace with ourselves, with God, with each other, and with our creation. You will note—we have offered you few how to manuals and easy steps to yield more peace. I don't think that is so much how peace works and you know that just isn't who I am when it comes down to it. But it is important. It is obtainable. It is our work. It is God's work.

So let me offer a few select general ideals of how we might seek peace together. First, know that it is not only God's intention for the world, but also the working revelation of God's kingdom. We get to parteciple, but the whole project need not rest only on our shoulders. Second: in order to seek peace, you need to know peace. I think we can approach the shaping of the world out of our own anxious insitences more time than not, wanting to replace what we most dislike with our own way without considering the way of restoration that brings everyone along. By knowing peace ourselves, we are better than at inviting true peace in our midst. Third: Peace is the way of the Kingdom of God. As such it may not always be the way of power, success and policy. Peace will not come from legislation or just fixing what we deem to be wrong with the world. Instead, God's peace calls us to bravely see that which is of God in all people and to hold to that, build on it, and grow within it. Community—the working breathing and growing body—is where we can work at just that, seeking to live what we know to be true: that God's love encompasses all that would divide us.

The images of God's good and providing kingdom are coming and they are real. We begin to live them and know them as we do the hard work of being together and seeking all that God is doing. May that be our purpose and our challenge as we live and incarnate God's peace to a waiting world. Amen.