

I understand that today is your Sunday School Picnic.....a celebration of the children, youth and adults here that have come together to learn. This role of teaching and learning is an important line of action in the church, something I very much agree that we need to celebrate, and strengthen. But, we also need to be clear about why we educate, and how we educate. I don't know you as a church so please don't take any of what I will say as statements directed at anyone or any of your dynamics. These are my own thoughts, based on reading the biblical text and reflecting on life experience, both in Canada and in Latin America.

When I think about Sunday School in the church where I grew up, I remember memorizing weekly bible verses, getting plaques if I memorized enough, learning Bible stories and identifying the life lesson, which was generally about what I should or shouldn't do.

Now, please understand that, I deeply value all that this Bible education gave me - a very solid grasp of the Bible's content, if not always a good understanding.

However, somehow in the whole experience I ended up thinking that church is made up of two kinds of people:

- a) Members like me, that were born and grew up in a Christian home, that behaved relatively well, within the explicit and implicit rules and norms – to not drink, to not dance, to go to church on Sunday, to memorize Bible verses, etc. Christian education clarified or emphasized what these rules and norms were, and how we could make sure we lived within these boundaries, or within this box.
- b) And then there were members that had lived through some kind of “scandalous” stage in their lives, repented and then committed to live within the box, generating a complete change in their lives.

Of course, my understanding was that Jesus was in the box, and that being with Christ meant learning how to stay in the box....that was the purpose of Christian education. This isn't how it was explained per se, but somehow this was the experience. Yet, over time, I realized that this isn't coherent with Jesus' teaching.

Let's take a look, for example, at Jesus' interaction with the “Young rich man” and with the “woman caught in adultery”.

Matthew 19:16-26

Good News Translation

The Rich Young Man

¹⁶ Once a man came to Jesus. “Teacher,” he asked, “what good thing must I do to receive eternal life?”

¹⁷ “Why do you ask me concerning what is good?” answered Jesus. “There is only One who is good. Keep the commandments if you want to enter life.”

¹⁸ “What commandments?” he asked.

Jesus answered, “Do not commit murder; do not commit adultery; do not steal; do not accuse anyone falsely; ¹⁹ respect your father and your mother; and love your neighbor as you love yourself.”

²⁰ “I have obeyed all these commandments,” the young man replied. “What else do I need to do?”

²¹ Jesus said to him, “If you want to be perfect, go and sell all you have and give the money to the poor, and you will have riches in heaven; then come and follow me.”

²² When the young man heard this, he went away sad, because he was very rich.

²³ Jesus then said to his disciples, “I assure you: it will be very hard for rich people to enter the Kingdom of heaven. ²⁴ I repeat: it is much harder for a rich person to enter the Kingdom of God than for a camel to go through the eye of a needle.”

²⁵ When the disciples heard this, they were completely amazed. “Who, then, can be saved?” they asked.

²⁶ Jesus looked straight at them and answered, “This is impossible for human beings, but for God everything is possible.”

The Woman Caught in Adultery

John 8.

² *At dawn he appeared again in the temple courts, where all the people gathered around him, and he sat down to teach them.* ³ *The teachers of the law and the Pharisees brought in a woman caught in adultery. They made her stand before the group* ⁴ *and said to Jesus, “Teacher, this woman was caught in the act of adultery.* ⁵ *In the Law Moses commanded us to stone such*

women. Now what do you say?"⁶ They were using this question as a trap, in order to have a basis for accusing him.

But Jesus bent down and started to write on the ground with his finger.⁷ When they kept on questioning him, he straightened up and said to them, "Let any one of you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her."⁸ Again he stooped down and wrote on the ground.

⁹ At this, those who heard began to go away one at a time, the older ones first, until only Jesus was left, with the woman still standing there.¹⁰ Jesus straightened up and asked her, "Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?"

¹¹ "No one, sir," she said.

"Then neither do I condemn you," Jesus declared. "Go now and leave your life of sin."

In the paradigm of the box, the young rich man is inside, and the woman is outside. This is obvious. People who do not use violence, who do not cheat on their spouses, who do not lie for personal gain, who care for their parents and who are generally nice to others are more likely to be "good Christians", right? The rich young man comes to Jesus precisely with the purpose of learning where to draw the box that he needs to stay inside of to have eternal life. Initially Jesus responds along those same lines....but then he challenges the young man to step outside of this logic. "Sell all you have and follow me" does not allow anyone to set any clear limits!

I doubt that anyone in this church has been explicitly teaching this box-like understanding of Christianity. But this doesn't mean we don't fall into the trap of thinking this way. Perhaps "good" and "bad" church members has other definitions here in this church. This a way of thinking that comes equally from outside of the church. There are certain common myths in society that also encourage us to think this way....

One of the deepest, strongest myths in many societies is the myth of "the good guys and the bad guys". The vast majority of books, movies, fairytales, political analysis and even general conversation takes for granted that the world can be divided between "good guys" and "bad guys". I live in Colombia....a country that has suffered armed conflict for decades...and that means that I face constant pressure to take sides with the "good guys carrying guns" instead of with the "bad guys carrying guns. But look at what Jesus says: "Why do you ask me concerning what is good? There is only One who is good." All that is good comes from the goodness of God.

If we look at Matthew chapters 5-6, we can see that Jesus breaks wide open the same commandments that the young rich man says that he has obeyed. Like this man, many of us find false comfort in teaching laws and drawing lines where Jesus opens up a path...

Matthew 5

¹⁷ “Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them.

²⁷ “You have heard that it was said, ‘Do not commit adultery.’ ²⁸ But now I tell you: anyone who looks at a woman and wants to possess her is guilty of committing adultery with her in his heart.

³³ “You have also heard that people were told in the past, ‘Do not break your promise, but do what you have vowed to the Lord to do.’ ³⁴ But now I tell you: do not use any vow when you make a promise. Do not swear by heaven, for it is God's throne; ³⁵ nor by earth, for it is the resting place for his feet; nor by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the great King. ³⁶ Do not even swear by your head, because you cannot make a single hair white or black. ³⁷ Just say ‘Yes’ or ‘No’—anything else you say comes from the Evil One.

⁴³ “You have heard that it was said, ‘Love your friends, hate your enemies.’ ⁴⁴ But now I tell you: love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, ⁴⁵ so that you may become the children of your Father in heaven. For he makes his sun to shine on bad and good people alike, and gives rain to those who do good and to those who do evil. ⁴⁶ Why should God reward you if you love only the people who love you? Even the tax collectors do that! ⁴⁷ And if you speak only to your friends, have you done anything out of the ordinary? Even the pagans do that! ⁴⁸ You must be perfect—just as your Father in heaven is perfect.

We see clearly that Jesus’ teachings do not focus just focus on what is visible, or what is easily tested by the outside observer. He is not educating to see if we pass the test and fit in the box. It is always transformative education...education that seeks continual transformation, such that we can’t graduate and be done with Christian education.

Perhaps another myth is that we categorically divide people into Christians or non-Christians. Now, I am not meaning to say that these distinctions don’t matter. It just seems that sometimes we can deceive ourselves with these labels. Christian means “little Christ” or “like Christ”. Obviously, at some point in our lives we can make more definitive decisions about following Christ, or not. But it might be more honest to think about the difference between Christians (like Christ) or not Christians (not like Christ) in terms of our daily words, thoughts and actions. Its not a label or a certificate we achieve...it’s a constant process that we either cultivate, or block.

We can’t be satisfied with learning the basics, or with being “good enough”. Jesus says “Be perfect....sin no more” It seems impossible, like an unfair or unrealistic expectation. But with God, everything is possible.

It means stepping outside of the box, and to stop measuring ourselves based on what we have achieved, but rather what direction we are moving in.

¹² Not that I have already obtained all this, or have already arrived at my goal, but I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me. ¹³ Brothers and sisters, I do not consider myself yet to have taken hold of it. But one thing I do: Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead,

Now, you might think that all of this has been a criticism of my church background. But that would be drawing new lines, saying that certain positions are 100% wrong, rather than considering the potential and the need for movement towards Jesus from any position.

In the last two years as regional Director for MCC in South America and Mexico, I have had the opportunity to learn a lot more about Low German Mennonite colonies in Bolivia and Mexico. The colonies come from the same part of the Anabaptist movements that I have come from. Our stories separated only about 140 years ago. Low German Mennonite colonies are often known for being very rule oriented and closed, placing little value on education. It probably seems very strange, but paradoxically I have learned a great deal about transformation from these conservative groups. If we have ears to hear, we might learn where we least expect it.

I remember visiting Durango Colony in Bolivia. Bolivian Low German Mennonite colonies are considered the most conservative in the world, and Durango Colony is the most conservative colony in Bolivia. They live in a very dry region of the country and MCC works together with groups of families to develop water systems for their homes. While traveling through the area with one of the colony leaders, he pointed out a young couple who he said were really struggling in their relationship. He then reflected, "It's not enough to teach that divorce is wrong. As a colony, we are all trying to help them improve their whole life situation so that there is less stress on their relationship. We are saved together." Transformative education always takes into account our whole lives, and also takes into account our whole community. This is not a competition of who knows more or who lives better. It's not about MY transformation. It's about OUR transformation. In the passage we read earlier, Jesus says "be perfect"in English, we can think that Jesus is talking to individuals....but in other languages like Spanish, the verb structure allows us to see clearly that Jesus is talking to the collective group.

During that same visit to Durango, one of the MCC workers asked the bishop whether he had to wear certain clothes and not drive a car or use electricity in order to be saved, and the bishop said yes. Then the MCCer asked whether we have to do these things in order to be saved. The bishop said, "No, you need to do what you have been taught, because you are responsible for what you have learned". I thought it was an interesting response. Although the bishop was

very convinced about his position, he had no need to impose it on others. At the same time, he was not lax about responsibility. When we teach, do we also manage to share our convictions without imposing them? Do we recognize that not everyone needs to learn the same thing at the same time? When we learn, do we realize that we become responsible for what we have learned? If we go back to the rich young man and the woman, we see that Jesus taught them differently, and called them to very different “next steps”. Each became responsible for not just hearing Jesus, but for living out the next step that had been placed before them.

In the Old Colony communities in Mexico, the colony schools have historically limited education to memorizing the Bible, the primer and the hymn book. In more recent years, a few colony leaders have begun to revolutionize the education system, expanding the amount of time children spend in school, but also changing the methods and the content of education. The difference is stark..... Wondering what all of this means, I asked one of the main leaders of this education revolution, Peter Enns, whether he thinks the colony needs to put limits on education. After a momentary pause, he replied, “No....no limits....As long as we keep looking towards Jesus, there are no limits....there is only freedom to always keep learning and growing”. Christian Education....that is to say, education that cultivates our transformation towards Christ....is permanent....it is not so much a repetition of what we have already learned but rather, it is education that allows us to always see that we always have more to learn, that we aren’t bound in by limits. It is the hope of freedom.

May God strengthen us and always give us ears to hear and hearts open to learn.