

Toronto United Mennonite Church  
That They All May Be One  
January, 18, 2015  
by Jeff Taylor

Well, it sounds like somebody is planning a party! A family reunion to which we're apparently all invited. A family re-union for those for whom the "re-" applies; and a family union for any and all of us. Actually we've been invited three times this morning to unite as a family.

The first invite was issued by the first of the biblical writers, Paul (or perhaps one of his proteges honouring him with the credit), begging us to "lead a life worthy of our calling . . . making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace since there is only one body . . . and one God and Father of all."

Sort of a "Workers unite!" from the shop steward of the fledgling mixed-culture church to coordinate, cooperate - to become family to one another. We can well imagine that call is to us as well, especially we of the new global village, we of that new globalism's most vibrant expression - the city of Toronto.

A good 40 or 50 years later we hear a similar invitation to the family union from the last of the biblical author, "the disciple whom Jesus loved," by tradition someone named John whose gospel we have been exploring for three Sundays with more to come.

Peter Haresnape began this series with a delicious triple-decker sermon layering John's unmasking of the three-part impotency of humans to reveal God as the divine word does, onto three examples of said impotency in the story of the eastern astrologers, culminating in an invitation:

"God's revelation comes in the form of a family. We are invited to be a part of that family."

Touché, Peter: that's exactly what this gospel is all about.

Then last week pastor Marilyn took us with her to a beach in Cuba where she found herself reflecting on large questions needing large epiphanies and asking in her prayers, "who is Jesus?" and "what does Jesus have to do with all of this?" She reported that, Jesus interrupted her prayer and dropped coconuts in the sand and in about 30 minutes showed her abundance, provision, hospitality, graciousness, generosity, community, a

family of strangers.” Stranger no more . . . Well done, Marilyn, that’s exactly what this gospel is all about.

We’ll come to this week’s main passage in a couple of minutes where we’ll see just how centrally John places Jesus’ deepest longing for our unity with him.

This isn’t always the most important thing to do when studying the bible, but it often is at least a little helpful to try to figure out what the words of the bible meant to the first audience to hear them. In this case I think it is crucial to understand the situation of the intended audiences. Audiences - John names two. We’ll come to the second later, you might be surprised.

The first is a group of Christians living somewhere or a variety of somewheres in the Roman empire in culturally and religiously mixed churches near the end of the first century. This gospel was probably finally crafted near the year 100 CE. That was 70 years after Jesus’ ascension. Paul has been dead for maybe 35 years; there has not been a temple in Jerusalem for 30 years; and Jews, including those who believe Jesus is their Messiah, have been dispersed in vast numbers from Jerusalem and Palestine to every part of the Roman Empire.

This gospel may have been completed during the reign of any one of three Roman emperors - Nero, or more likely Domitian or Trajan. Though there may not have been empire-wide persecution of Christians and/or Jews throughout the first century, persecutions near the end of the first century seemed to have increased. Both Christians and Jews could be imprisoned and even executed for refusing to practice proper Roman religious customs. This might be one reason why John reports, often enough to qualify it as a theme, Jesus telling the disciples, “the world hates you” - in chapters 7, 12, twice in 15, and here in chapter 17 as Jesus speaks his final prayer on the night of his betrayal:

“While I was with them, I protected them and kept them safe by that name you gave me . . . I am coming to you now . . . I have given them your word and the world has hated them, for they are not of the world any more than I am of the world.”

The Romans weren’t the only persecutors of John’s first readers. Many of these Christians were also Jewish. Yes, overall the world-wide church was becoming more Gentile; but perhaps for that reason some Jewish Christians were finding themselves mistrusted by fellow Jews, to the point that whole local communities were being expelled from the synagogue - the primary place of worship. Please understand: these believers were Jewish, like their Lord and all of his disciples and the apostles; and they had always worshipped their Messiah in the synagogue - a practice that had become all the more

important since the temple of sacrifice and forgiveness had been destroyed. These people were being thrown out of the house of grace and out of their family.

In this context where some Christians are persecuted by Romans for being Jewish, or Christian, or both, and others are being expelled from their home faith community, do you understand why John so emphatically declares that the Christian community must unite as one family? There was nowhere else to go. But more importantly, it was where they belonged. Indeed, they belonged to Jesus, as he prayed on the night he was preparing himself to be the passover sacrifice:

“I have made your name known to those whom you gave me from the world. They were yours, and you gave them to me, and they have kept your word. I am asking on their behalf; I am not asking on behalf of the world, but on behalf of those whom you gave me, because they are yours.”

Asking what? It's coming.

I said before that John has two audiences. The first are those we've been talking about whom the author knows who are suffering and being expelled. But unlike Paul of two generations earlier, John no longer expects Jesus to return imminently. That's why he says in chapter 14:

“I will ask the Father, and he will give you another advocate to help you and be with you forever — I will not leave you as orphans.”

It is why the same author writes an entire other book (The Revelation) to reveal who Jesus is: not merely one who will return as King of Israel, but who has always been the Lord of the universe who will create a new heaven and a new earth, ruling from a new Jerusalem.

So knowing that Jesus may not return soon, John turns directly to a second audience that's also going to need direction for the long and sometimes treacherous road ahead: you. Verse 20:

“I ask not only on behalf of these, but also on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word, that they may all be one. As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me.”

This was Jesus' very last prayer of his life, that those God had given to him, and would give to him - that we all would be one in him.

John writes a gospel in which he shapes the Jesus story in such a way as to urge believers to turn towards each other and hang on to each other for the long haul. It's been nearly two thousand years: are you still hanging on? Who are you hanging on to?

It's a big world and the Master of the Universe loves and will receive every inhabitant of it. But human beings need communities of various of sizes and levels of intensity of commitment. So which community is at the centre of your world, providing a centre of gravity to keep you staid in a sometimes unstable and even hostile world?

I began to be grafted into this family, the Mennonite family, 40 years ago as a young person very much at loose ends - in some respects rather orphaned. The good people of Grantham Mennonite Church in St. Catharines took me into their arms and did their best for me. There are things they might have done even better I suppose, but many of them went far beyond the call of duty, and their love for me and each other was never in doubt. And so, by their love for the family, I came to know that God loved me, and wanted me in that family. It worked just like John said,

"As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me."

So here I am with you today, who also took me into your arms and haven't let go of me, even when I wasn't sure I wanted to be here. All of us are here by choice, we could go elsewhere, or nowhere; but we are here. Why? Because you want to hang with people who are all like you and are never annoying in any way - I'm afraid you've come to the wrong place. But if you are here hoping to find family ready to forgive and be forgiven, to cling to when you can't find a way to be in control, or to laugh and celebrate with - then you are in a place that I believe is ready, and with God's help often enough able, to be a good family for you. This certainly has become my family.

So let us keep moving into the centre, clinging more closely to one another; for we don't know how long this journey will last or what joys or trials it will yet bring our way. We're going to need each other. And much more than that, we were created for this purpose, to move towards of the universe which gave us birth which is Christ who is and had always been and ever will be the divine one; whose deepest longing is to hold us close, and close to each other.

Just as we who are close at hand can and ought to be family for each other, so the world-wide Mennonite fellowship can be family to us all. An important part my journey towards the centre has been to move closer to family that is farther away - my global

Mennonite family - a thing of great beauty, a pearl of great price. Each of the Mennonite World Conferences I have attended has transformed me in some way. And so the third invitation to become one in the Christ: to attend the Mennonite World Conference this July in Pennsylvania. It only happens every six years. Knowing that, our youth and their leaders are gathering today to make plans for their attendance at this year's conference. Young adults: I cannot believe you will regret that choice and I and your family here want to support you on this journey. Whether at this year's MWC, or in other places and times, let us all follow the example of our young people who have the courage to get to know the family.

And let us in every way we know how, allow ourselves to be pulled into the centre of God's love and protection in Christ, holding on to one another as our first family.