

Peace Sunday
Ephesians 2:11-22

Thursday was the International Day of Peace, so designated by the United Nations. To mark the day, FB provided a frame that people could add to their profile pictures—a frame of flowers and a dove. While I appreciated the beauty of flowers and doves and the call to peace, it strikes me as a pretty superficial way to celebrate peace. Or to make an appeal for peace.

The Peace of Christ isn't superficial. It's painful. And difficult. It's slow. And it takes time, long time.

The materials that MWC provided for today, Peace Sunday, include stories from different parts of the planet, stories of long and difficult journeys toward peace. In a story about Columbia we hear: "Reconciliation and restoration of relations are not cheap processes. In Colombia, this will mean years – even decades – of healing wounds and correcting and transforming the causes of pain."ⁱ

Christ is our peace. And we know from the life of Jesus that the peace and reconciliation of the cross is costly.

I appreciate that we're sitting in a circle this morning as we participate in this Peace Sunday with our sisters and brothers from around the globe. It gives us a visual of who we are as the Body of Christ. Or to be consistent with one metaphor, our seating gives us a visual of who we are as the Circle of Christ. We are one. And the circle includes people we've never seen, people we'll never know. The circle includes people who have gone before...and people who will be here when we're gone. There is only one circle. The body of Christ is one.

With other Mennonite congregations around the globe, we too have heard the words from Ephesians this morning, where the writer is talking about two groups of people

becoming one group: Gentiles and Jews who are learning to live together as one, the one Body of Christ.

Now, a lot of years have passed since this letter was written. I say this so that we pause to appreciate the significance of this project the two groups of people had joined. If you were a descendent of Jacob, human beings were divided into two groups: the people of Israel; and everyone else. And everyone else, no matter what your race or ethnicity, everyone else was Gentile. From the text of the Ephesians letter, we get a sense of the exclusivity of being Jewish. V 11, “So then, remember that at one time you Gentiles... were at that time without Christ, being aliens from the citizenship of Israel, and foreigners to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world.”

First I need to argue with the writer who claims that before Jesus, Gentiles were without hope and without God. Even then, God wasn't contained to one people and one place. Gentiles *had God* and they had access to hope. But perhaps this letter writer was simply trying to make his point that two very different groups of people—people from completely different cults and cultures—were being made into one new cult and one new culture; that in and through Jesus, the Christ, a *new* people were being formed. And in the one Body of Christ, in the Kin-dom of God, everyone belongs. There are no foreigners or aliens. *Everyone* is a citizen. Everyone is documented. Similarly, everyone is related. There are no distant relatives or lost relatives. V 13, “But now in Christ Jesus you who formerly were far off have been born close relatives by the blood of Christ.”

When I was an adolescent, we talked about being *born again*. In my 20's and 30's I rejected that phrase. (Actually, I hated it.) I think it was, in part, because it represented my adolescence, which is always a difficult time of life! But also because it struck me as glib and easy. A superficial label one could grab and attach, like a FB frame. And it was used to

identify and sort people, dividing us into two groups: those born again and saved, and those who were sinners and lost.

But in giving ourselves to the one Body of Christ, we *are* being born again. We're being born into the Body of Christ. It isn't just that we're related to each other in this Body, it's that we're siblings. It isn't either that one group has joined the other. It wasn't Gentiles becoming Jews...it was a *new* people. "Christ Jesus has set aside the law with its commandments and ordinances, that he might create in himself one new humanity instead of two, one new humanity out of *us and them*, thus making peace."

A new humanity. A new human being. The circle that we're sitting in, the circle that spans the globe is a circle of new human beings. And in this one circle, in this single humanity that we're part of, Christ is our oneness. Christ is our peace. Christ is our peace because "in his flesh he has made both groups—us and them—into one and has broken down the dividing wall."

In the given way of being human, the "old" humanity—the way of being human that has us divide people into us and them, whatever the us and them of the day is!—in the given way of being human we're formed by all kinds of divisions. Instead of one circle, we see and experience the differences and divisions...of belonging and documentation and race and gender and politics and sexuality and religion...and on and on. The former humanity doesn't see the one circle that we're part of. So i function as though my chair and my placement are it; as though *i* am one. And rather than seeing and tending and participating in the circle that we're part of, we compete. And quarrel. And fight. Living as though we're separate from each other. Living as though we don't belong to each other.

But in the new way of being human, the way of being human that Jesus, the Son of Humanity lived, our identity is being given to us by the One who created us and calls us *good*.

And it is in the *goodness* of our identity that we experience our true humanity, seeing and living into our place in the circle that is the one Body of Christ. Our *goodness*, our identity is being shaped by God who is love. By God who is reconciling the world, all of creation, to love. The former way of being human is filled with endless distractions, including the distractions of difference and disagreement. To place ourselves in this single circle, to be part of a new humanity, we give ourselves to being at *one* with each other. We commit ourselves and we practice keeping our eyes and ears and living focused on the One God. And when we do, we begin to see the entire circle, and our place within the circle.

It takes a singular focus to being born into the one Body of Christ. It isn't *our* doing but something we give ourselves to God to do with us. And while it sounds impossible to live as *one flesh* with each other, Jesus...and the apostles, and Paul, and countless others through the ages...insist that it is possible. The new humanity is being formed into one flesh by sharing Bread and Wine. And we are being shaped into Bread...and being poured out as Wine.

Even as we are being formed into one flesh, one body, it needs to be said out loud that there will be and there are conflicts, in this circle and in the circle of gathered congregations around the world this morning. There are real disagreements in the one Body of Christ. There is very real pain in the Body of Christ. Disagreements and arguments and pain aren't failure; rather, it's how the body as an organism works. Living as one Body isn't living in a fantasyland of unicorns and endless bliss. Or flowers and doves. The new humanity isn't identified by some sort of perfection, by an absence of conflict and disagreements. It isn't marked by our ability to avoid or hide conflict. In this circle of human beings being shaped by the flesh and blood of Jesus, by the Bread and Wine of Christ, there will be times when we are *not* at peace with each other. To expect anything else is not telling the truth about Jesus or the Body of Christ.

The thing that characterizes and marks the gatherings around the world this morning isn't our agreement on all things, whether social or political or theological. Nor is it the absence of pain we're causing each other. The thing that lets us declare this Sunday as Peace Sunday—peace even when there is no peace—is that in this new way of being human we live by trusting that on the other side of our disagreements and our fighting and our pain, we trust that on the other side reconciliation is possible, that peace is possible. The new humanity is characterized by hope, the sturdy hope that God—who-is-love *is* forming and transforming us, through time. Is reconciling and transforming all creation and creatures through the long, slow dailiness of time.

César García, MWC general secretary, wrote a letter that was delivered to Mennonite Churches via email today, marking Peace Sunday. He writes:

The *how* is important. The peace of Christ cannot be attained, nor much less be forced, by human means. Christ's method requires a convinced community that voluntarily lives out the values of the Kingdom. Today, on Peace Sunday, in the midst of so much oppression, violence and hate caused by religion, we ask God to help us to be that alternative community that attracts. May the presence of God flood us with wisdom and power to be able to be that!

Today's passage ends: "In Jesus Christ the whole building is joined together and grows into a holy temple in the Lord; in whom you also are built together spiritually into a dwelling place, a home for God."

May we *be* home. May we live, a fellowship of sturdy hope, nourished and sustained by Bread and Wine...as we are being formed and transformed into one flesh, a holy temple.

ⁱ https://www.mwc-cmm.org/sites/default/files/website_files/peace_sunday_2017_-_en_final.pdf