

## UNIVERSITY MENNONITE CHURCH

**DATE:** September 19, 2021

**TITLE:** Getting Along: An Appeal for Unity in Diversity

**TEXTS:** Mark 9:30-37

### **Mark 9:30-37 Who is the Greatest? Serve and welcome the vulnerable.**

They went on from there and passed through Galilee. He did not want anyone to know it; for he was teaching his disciples, saying to them, ‘The Son of Man is to be betrayed into human hands, and they will kill him, and three days after being killed, he will rise again.’ But they did not understand what he was saying and were afraid to ask him.

Then they came to Capernaum; and when he was in the house he asked them, ‘What were you arguing about on the way?’ But they were silent, for on the way they had argued with one another about who was the greatest. He sat down, called the twelve, and said to them, ‘Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all.’ Then he took a little child and put it among them; and taking it in his arms, he said to them, ‘Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me.’

**FOCUS STATEMENT:** Our savior, lord, and example, Jesus called and gathered disciples around him to become the first Christian community. The group showed diversity in vocation, economics, and political views. Not surprisingly, disagreements and arguments emerged almost immediately. However, the conflicts were sometimes among those who had the most in common. Through his life and words, Jesus provided a model for how to get along and seek connections with those far from us and those close to us.

**INTRODUCTION:** Good morning; good to be with you here in the park; on Zoom; and those listening to a recording of the service.

The patient presented to the emergency department with stroke like symptoms. I stopped by to offer a visit from spiritual care. “Hi, my name is Ken and I am a chaplain, just stopping by to chat and see how you are doing.” She looked me in the eye and declared “I am an atheist.” Then she waited for my response. “I enjoy talking with atheists. Tell me about yourself.” And the conversation proceeded for over half an hour. Not surprisingly, she brought up the topic of God several times. And we ended with mutual blessings: “May you find wellness.” And “You have a great day.”

I recently completed a year of study, patient visitation, and emergency on calls at Geisinger Medical Center in Danville, PA. I was part of a four person residency group including a Catholic, an Orthodox, an Evangelical, and a Mennonite. We had plenty of opportunity to explore our points of connection and our points of divergence. We expected that we would have different perspectives so were not surprised by misunderstandings that arose from time to time.

And of course there were the inevitable “personality clashes”. We learned to negotiate these by getting in touch with our emotions; using “I language” rather than “you language”; and seeking to learn rather than to critique.

Here are some things I came to appreciate about the traditions of each of my colleagues:

**The Orthodox** practice unity around common traditions and liturgies, and holy days. They have a blessing and a prayer for every occasion.

One is reminded of the Rabbi in the musical Fiddler on the Roof. “Do you have a blessing for the Czar, Dear Rabbi?” Yes, “May the Lord bless the Czar and keep him far from us.”
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At the same time, the tolerance of the Orthodox churches for a diversity of personal views has allowed them to remain unified around language groups. There is one Greek Orthodox Church; one Russian Orthodox Church; one Ukrainian Orthodox Church; etc. Orthodox clergy can marry or be single; however, the matter needs to be “settled” before an Orthodox priest is ordained.

**Catholics** also have common traditions and liturgies which are available on a daily basis in person or through various media. A Catholic travelling anywhere in the world will know that all other Catholics are meditating on the same scriptures and themes on any given day. Like almost all other Christian groups, Catholics are struggling with how strict to be in applying church dogma to individuals and subgroups of the church. A current example is whether a political leader who supports access to abortion would be allowed to receive communion. In the hospital setting, Catholic patients often prefer to be visited and served by a Catholic priest rather than by a Protestant or other religious group. However, for emergency baptisms, the Catholic Church, perhaps out of necessity due to shortage of clergy, will recognize a baptism performed by any clergy as long as the rite is done in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

**Evangelicals** are more difficult to define as a group. My personal background includes significant evangelical influences including InterVarsity Christian Fellowship at the University of Illinois where I met Laura Dewey. I thought that as a Mennonite, I had much to learn and much to share within that particular evangelical organization. In recent years, the term “evangelical” has come to carry various political associations and I am wary of using that term to describe myself. In that regard, I found the expanded quotation from Menno Simons concerning “True evangelical faith” to be helpful. This quotation comes from a 30 page treatise entitled “Why I Do Not Cease Teaching and Writing” that Menno wrote to persons from various groups with which he was in conflict. Menno began by noting:

“True evangelical faith is of such a nature it cannot lie dormant, but spreads itself out in all kinds of righteousness and fruits of love”<sup>1</sup> Menno then listed seventeen characteristics of “True evangelical faith.” Subsets of that list have been used to support one or another approach to Anabaptist faith.

In a July 9, 2009 article in *The Mennonite* magazine, Ted Lewis noted that, quoting:

“The seamlessness of Menno’s full text is impressive. Opportunities for sanctification (1-3, 12), nonretaliation (9-11) and evangelism (13, 16) go hand-in-hand with opportunities for helping the needy (4-8, 14-15). In contemporary language, personal formation, relational integrity, gospel proclamation all complement radical service to the poor.”

Perhaps both evangelicals and Anabaptists could benefit from embracing a “True Evangelical Faith”. My evangelical colleague at Danville was working at exactly that.

On the floors of Geisinger Medical Center, I encountered patients, families, and staff from many different faiths or non-faiths<sup>2</sup>. There were also those who identified in some way as “Spiritual but not religious (SBNR)” There were also those who found meaning in life elsewhere including through vocation or family.

Not surprisingly, there were also various types of Anabaptists in the hospital. In line with patients preferring someone from their own faith tradition, my colleagues and I suspected that I would make a good connection with these patients and families.

Here is where, I encountered my biggest surprise of the year. The patients and families who were sometimes the most challenging to visit were those with whom I thought I might have the most in common: Anabaptists and Evangelicals. I learned that there were some built in barriers. For some, my tie could be a caution sign. For others, my status as an ecumenical chaplain could raise red flags. I also learned that some of the barriers arose from within myself, where I could transfer conflicts that I had in other settings with other people onto the present visit and persons.

Case in point, I visited an Anabaptist couple in conservative dress whose infant was hospitalized. When I introduced myself as a chaplain, their first question was “What Bible do you use?”. Based on previous experiences, I jumped to the conclusion that the couple would be accepting of only one version which is not one that I often use. I became wary and defensive and did not directly answer their question. An opportunity for exploring their source of strength may have been lost.

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<sup>1</sup> Menno Simons, “Why I Do Not Cease Teaching and Writing”, 1539, The Netherlands.

<sup>2</sup> Catholic, Protestant, Orthodox Christian, Anabaptist, Mormons, Jehovah Witnesses, Jews, Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists, Atheists, Agnostics

This brings us to our biblical text for today from Mark 9.

Jesus had been building his ministry team. Moving quickly, as Mark does, already in the first chapter, he describes the calling of Simon, Andrew, James, and John.<sup>3</sup> So far so good; all four are fisherman; blue collar workers or small businessmen. They have much grounds for getting along.

Then in the second chapter, Mark presents us with a surprise. Jesus called Levi from his tax booth, then ate at his house.<sup>4</sup> Levi represented what the fishermen despise: a tax collector; a collaborator with an oppressive government; an exploiter of hard-working people. Finally in the third chapter, Mark presents a summary of the called and assembled disciples.<sup>5</sup>

There was some uniformity in the group. Yes, all were male although female disciples are described throughout the gospels. At least four were fishermen (Simon (Peter), Andrew, James, John); the vocation of five others was not specified, possibly some of them were also fishermen (Philip, Bartholomew, Thomas, Thaddaeus, James). But then things got upset with a tax collector, Matthew/Levi; a political activist, Simon the Zealot; and possibly a political activist or a financial worker, Judas Iscariot. As Megan Larissa Good has pointed out<sup>6</sup>, one would never have expected a tax collector (working the system and getting rich) and an anarchist Zealot (fighting the system) to see eye to eye.

Given the makeup of this ministry team, we would not be surprised that they had arguments; in fact, we would be surprised if they did not. However, they were called to a commitment to unity based on a focus on Jesus.

In our text from Mark 9, we find Jesus and his disciples traveling through Galilee, familiar territory for many of them. Jesus has been teaching and healing; his glory has been revealed in the transfiguration. Now Jesus predicted his betrayal, arrest, crucifixion, burial, and resurrection. His disciples did not understand this on at least several levels. First, even though John the Baptist had been executed, they did not seem to accept that this could happen to the powerful and glorified Jesus. And second, they did not understand that the path to glory passed through servanthood and suffering.

The disciples demonstrated their lack of understanding by engaging in an argument. This was not an argument along different views of politics or economics. They were arguing from their common desire for recognition and authority. “who was the greatest?” Jesus called them to have a servant’s heart, to care for the weak and vulnerable, symbolized by a child.

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<sup>3</sup> Mark 1:16-20

<sup>4</sup> Mark 2:13-17

<sup>5</sup> Mark 3:13-19

<sup>6</sup> Sermon, Trinity Mennonite Church, Arizona, August 8, 2021.

In his first extended teaching session, Jesus called on his followers to love their enemies.<sup>7</sup>

Whether in the work place; within our extended families; or within the church, there may be people who rub us the wrong way. A temptation is to seek to be right; to pursue control; to compete and win. To seek to be the greatest.

Megan Larissa Good notes that there are at least two types of enemies. There are the ones out there who are much different than us. In the case of the disciples, that would have been the Romans. However, there are also the enemies within; our brothers and sisters who should know better. Our greatest challenge can be loving other Christians, and as I described earlier, other Anabaptists. The truth is self-evident to me; why can't he or she see it?

Megan has presented Four Keys to Connecting with the Enemy<sup>8</sup>.

**Key #1: Let go of Disgust and Contempt; Affirm that Core identity of our adversary as “chosen and loved by God”**

From time to time, we may encounter persons who hold views that we consider to be unreasonable. We become aware that we regard them with disgust or contempt: our noses twitch up and our lips curl. Megan suggests that these feelings and symptoms are like “a check engine warning light”. We need to stop and take notice and reevaluate. We recognize that our feelings are not God's feelings. The worth of a troublesome person is not determined by our feelings toward them at the moment; they have infinite worth to someone else. God's work in other people is much bigger and deeper than we can imagine. Emotions of disgust and contempt do not lead to healthy outcomes; they drive us apart; they can be dehumanizing, dismissing emotions. May we see the other as God sees them: chosen and loved.

**Key #2: Let go of the fear of “contamination by association”; interact freely with people; enter their worlds**

Jesus had no fear of contamination by association with anyone. Perhaps early in his ministry, we may have expected Jesus to be working on his reputation. However, he called a despised tax collector and immediately went to eat at his home. At once the tongues started wagging. The rumor mill can be powerful.

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<sup>7</sup> Matthew 5:43-48

<sup>8</sup> Sermon, Trinity Mennonite Church, Phoenix, AZ, August 8, 2021

When I was a pastor, a member of the congregation mentioned that they knew that I got my sermons off of the internet. I noted that was interesting because I had never taken a sermon off the internet in my life. Whatever people thought of the quality of my sermons, I did write them myself! The member declared “Well, I heard that from three different people!” I found myself wishing that they gave as much attention to my sermons as they did to the rumor mill.

Jesus encouraged face to face conversation about perceptions and disagreements; he worked at bringing conflict out into the open.

When faced with criticism of his choices in association, Jesus noted that: “Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick ...”<sup>9</sup>

Of course we need to be in control of our words and actions. Let us not allow fear of contamination to stop us from breaking bread with people. Show up at the table together and get changed.

### **Key #3: Work side by side on common projects**

We do not always need to take sides in confrontation. What God is doing is bigger than our dividing lines. Jesus did call a diverse group of disciples; the opportunity for internal conflict was great. Jesus gave them work to do with shared actions, sacrifices, and risks. Let us seek ways of standing side by side doing something Jesus asked us to do. We can answer the call of Jesus to do something together. We can seek common projects which call us to the priorities of Jesus.

On the Anabaptist church-wide level, seeking common ground in service has been precisely the role of the Mennonite Central Committee (MCC) for over 100 years. MCC was established in 1920 as various Mennonite groups came together to respond to hunger and suffering of fellow Mennonites in the Ukraine after WW1. This alliance has always been tenuous and dependent on various groups putting aside their disagreements and distinctives to unite in serving human need in the name of Christ. The constituency of MCC continues to be diverse with the various groups calling for the organization to take a stand on one issue or another. MCC’s stand is with those in need wherever and whoever they are. MCC continues to be a grand common project which aligns us with the passion of Jesus.

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<sup>9</sup> Mark 2:17 NRSV

#### Key #4: Practice Enlightened self-interest

A familiar passage from the Sermon on the Mount reads: “Do not judge or you will be judged”. Familiar, but difficult to practice. How can they believe what they believe; how can they act the way they act? We need to be careful not to tip the table of mercy that we need to eat from. We could also be in need of growth.

None of the disciples had figured out who Jesus was; none of them were living up to their ideals. All of them, Andrew and Levi, needed confrontation and healing

I do not claim to be skilled at building bridges between persons or groups in conflict. I admire people who have those gifts and demonstrate them in real situations. In today’s polarized world there are many opportunities for bridge-building.

In August 2021, the Mifflin County School District (MCSD) Board of Directors voted 6-3 to refrain from mandating wearing of masks at Mifflin County Schools. On Saturday, September 4, the MCSD interim Superintendent Vance Varner, in a letter to parents, noted that the MCSD would comply with the PA Department of Health (DOH) mask wearing mandate for schools announced by Governor Tom Wolf.

In his letter, Varner explained the rationale for compliance: “As a commissioned officer of the state, I must comply with all federal and state laws, including state orders. Administrators and teachers are at risk of losing their professional certificates if they do not comply with the Order. The Order by the Acting PA Secretary of Health on August 31, 2021, is a legal order under the Disease Prevention and Control Law.”

[Varner] concluded by acknowledging his awareness of varying views on mask wearing while reiterating that his goals and parents goals are one in the same. “We all have a common goal in educating our students and remaining (open) for in-person learning. I ask that you have conversations with your child about mask wearing, the PA DOH Order, and understanding the different views we all have on this issue. While we may disagree at times on a particular topic, we should not let those disagreements divide us in our community.”

Varner’s challenging situation is shared by many administrators around the country and around the world at this time. This is also true of church leaders with many pastors moving on to other vocations. A recent survey of Protestant pastors by the research firm Barna Group found that 29% said they had given “real, serious consideration to quitting being in full-time ministry within the last year.” David Kinnaman, president of Barna, said the past year has been a “crucible” for pastors. Churches have become fragmented by political and social divides. They have also become frayed, as “people’s connectedness to local congregations is waning.”<sup>10</sup>

<sup>1010</sup> “For Some Pastors, the Past Year Was Too Much to Bear” [Associated Press](#), May 7, 2021.

The administrators and church leaders in our midst deserve our support.

Our Savior, Lord, and example, Jesus called and gathered disciples around him to become the first Christian community. The group showed diversity in vocation, economics, and political views. Not surprisingly, disagreements and arguments emerged almost immediately. However, the conflicts were sometimes among those who had the most in common. Through his life and words, Jesus provided a model for how to get along and seek connections with those far from us and those close to us.

Let us continue to seek connections where they are most difficult.  
Let us continue to build the community of faith created by Jesus Christ.  
Let us continue to honor those who work so hard to connect us.

C'mon people now, Smile on your brother  
Ev'rybody get together, Try to love one another right now<sup>11</sup>

As a prayer of response, I would welcome us to recite the confession together as written in the bulletin. The confession is written by Megan Larissa Good and reflects her four keys to making connections with our enemies near and far.

**Let us read the Confession together:**

We confess that we have not seen others as you see them, both broken and beloved.  
We confess that we have sought a false righteousness based on who we avoid or despise.  
We confess that we have neglected your call to service and sacrifice.  
We confess that we have judged with a harshness we would not wish for ourselves.  
We confess we have not behaved like children of God, whose kindness leads to repentance.  
Lord, forgive us  
[Megan Larissa Good, August 8, 2021]

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<sup>11</sup> Chester "Chet" Powers © Irving Music Inc., 1963(?)



