

Week of Prayer for Christian Unity City-Wide Ecumenical service

January 21, 2024

Luke 10:25-37

Sermon by Deacon Michelle Collins, Assistant to the Bishop, MNO Synod (ELCIC)

Grace and peace to you in the name of the One who binds us together and forms us into the body of Christ. It's my privilege to be here this evening as a representative of the MNO Synod, as we intentionally mark a vision of the church that we continue to pray for and work towards—a vision where we sit, stand and work alongside one another with our various creeds, traditions, histories and structures but united in our desire to Love God and Love our Neighbour. I'm honoured to be here alongside colleagues who are faithfully seeking to guide their communities in faith and discipleship, and I give thanks for the various ways each person here reflects the presence and love of God in the world. The format of this service doesn't allow for us to celebrate the various ways each of our church bodies are actively participating in this shared mission in our contexts, but I know that we are here because we continue to believe that, despite our differences, God is calling us together and forming us into the body of Christ as we seek to reflect God's presence in our lives and in the world around us.

I don't know if you got a chance to go visit the recent flower exhibit at The Leaf over the last few weeks, but I hope you did. I was able to visit recently, and it was such a pleasure to walk through the exhibit and admire the work of local florists who were expressing the diversity of Manitoba's ethnic and cultural heritage by designing floral arrangements that were as striking as they were intricate. As I made my way past mannequins representing Scotland, Ethiopia, India, China, Japan, Iceland and more, I found myself caught up in the broader beauty of nature—not just the beauty of the flowers and plants that were used to create the displays, but the ways these plants were also celebrating the diversity and beauty of human identity and culture.

In some ways, the flower exhibit at The Leaf reminds me of this commitment we make as people of faith to take time every year to intentionally pray, celebrate and lift up a dream of Christian Unity. The goal is not that we all become one monolithic display of uniformity...but that in our uniqueness and particularity, we reflect the design and beauty of the Creator in a way that invites us and all who are drawn to us into a broader and more expansive sense of themselves and the world.

Which seems like a lofty vision when we read the headlines about the many ways we unfortunately gravitate towards division, individualism, prejudice and bias. It seems like a lofty vision when we think about the hours and energy spent preserving, maintaining, defending and justifying our various approaches to worship, faith formation, leadership development, community identity, and personal responsibility. It seems like a lofty vision when we evaluate our structures, review our governance models, and reflect on the various pressures facing each of our church bodies. It IS a lofty vision...but I believe it's a vision worth continuing to hold up, because it's a vision that Jesus continued to hold up.

Throughout his life and ministry, Jesus was faced with the divisions and boundaries people were already putting around themselves and others that were causing separation, oppression, prejudice and injustice. People were separating by ethnic identity, by physical ability, by geographic heritage, by political affiliation, and even by religious tradition. Doesn't sound anything like us today, does it? In fact, from the very first chapters of Genesis, we have stories of division and separation. But it is into this divided and separated humanity that God is made known through Jesus. And in Jesus, something changes. In Jesus, those who are on the outside are invited inside. In Jesus, those who are less than are lifted up, and those who think they are greater than are lowered down. Those who have been rejected experience acceptance, and those who anticipate condemnation are surprised by restoration and healing. In Jesus, humanity is invited into a different way of being in the world...not one that is defined by self-interest, survival of the fittest and might makes right, but one that is defined by humble confidence, servant leadership, and sacrificial generosity.

So how do we today participate in this vision that Jesus embodied? Our gospel reading makes it sound pretty easy: love God, love your neighbor as yourself, be the one in the story who shows mercy to those who are suffering. Just like that: Love God. Love your neighbor. Be the one in the story who shows mercy. Can you imagine if we stripped our programs, our priorities and our processes down to these things? Love God. Love your neighbor. Be the one in the story who shows mercy.

Interestingly, the lawyer who initially asks the question to trick Jesus doesn't ask for clarification about what it means to love God. He doesn't ask for clarification about worship styles or religious titles. He doesn't ask for clarification about biblical interpretation or rules and regulations. In fact, he doesn't even ask for clarification about the instruction to love. What he wants to know is **WHO qualifies** as neighbor.

The lawyer asks two questions in this passage. The first one we're told is to test Jesus. The second one is to justify himself. What questions do we as Christians ask Jesus, to either test him or to justify ourselves? The first question: what must I do to inherit eternal life? Christian history tells us that many of us are still asking this question, and that we have built systems and structures that seek to defend our response to this question. But did you notice...Jesus doesn't answer it! Maybe he knows the motivation of the lawyer is to test him, and refuses to play that game. Maybe he knows that what the lawyer really needs to wrestle with is something different. Jesus responds to the question about eternal life by telling the lawyer that **he already knows what he needs to know to LIVE**. He actually doesn't directly address the question about eternal life.

Are we asking questions as Christian communities that are distracting us from the questions we really need to wrestle with as we seek to understand Jesus' teaching for us today? Are we asking questions that, if we were honest, are intended to test God more than to seek transformation? Do we already know what we need to know about how God wants us to live today?

The second question the lawyer asks is to justify himself. Who is my neighbor? And, as Jesus tends to do, he side-steps the question by telling a story that brings the lawyer to his own conclusion. The question isn't WHO is my neighbor, the better question is, "what does it look like to BE a neighbour?" In some sense, Jesus does what I learned how to do as a preschool teacher, and that I know a lot of parents learn how to do when helping their children regulate their behavior. As a preschool teacher I was frequently asked to take sides and make a judgment about someone else. But instead, what I tried to do was help children reflect on their own behaviour. When I helped kids realize that they were in charge of their own bodies, that they could control how they responded to a classmate who poked them, that they could choose how to engage with someone who was different than them or mean to them, maybe I was doing what Jesus is trying to demonstrate through the story of the Samaritan. The question about how to "love your neighbour" is not about itemizing and classifying who qualifies as worthy of love. Loving our neighbour is as much about reflecting on our own biases, prejudices and priorities that show up when we are faced with someone who is suffering.

So what does this mean for us today? As we reflect on the various ways we share the message of Christianity in our communities, what is it that unifies and unites us? Is it that we all understand the answer to the question about eternal life the same? I don't think so. Is it that we all interpret Jesus' teaching exactly the same? I don't think so. But as we pray for Christian unity, could we encourage and support each other as we all seek to love God, love our neighbour and be the one in the story who shows mercy? I sure hope so! What might it look like to extend one another grace as we faithfully discern what it means to love God, to live in to how we are being invited to love our neighbour, and to ponder what it would mean for us to be the one in the story who shows mercy?

Throughout Jesus' ministry, the religious folk try to trip Jesus up by asking questions to justify or defend their perspectives. Throughout Jesus' ministry, he sidesteps these debates and redirects the conversation to relationships and community that is restorative and healing. In our own churches, as we seek to be witnesses to the Light of Christ in our lives and in our world, perhaps we need to hold some of our questions about who and what is 'right' more lightly, and instead to reflect on how we can be the ones in the story who are showing mercy and invest in relationships and community that is restorative and healing.

There are all kinds of ways to read and interpret the story of the Good Samaritan. And there are all kinds of ways to think and talk about what Christian Unity means and looks like. But I imagine one day in eternity when creation is ultimately restored--whatever that means and however that might look. I imagine an exhibit created to celebrate the beautiful diversity and variety within the Body of Christ. What a breathtaking vision that will be, as the fullness of God's love is demonstrated through the particularity and uniqueness of each part.

So as we again take some time to come together in our diversity of traditions, histories, structures and expressions, I pray that we can move closer together in our commitment to support one another in the mission we share and the work God is doing in and through us for

the sake of the world: love God. love neighbour, and be the ones in the story who show mercy. If, with God's help, we can do that with a bit more intention today than yesterday, and if tomorrow we have one more story of putting our questions meant to test God and justify ourselves aside for the sake of showing mercy to those who are suffering, perhaps we can continue to see how the Holy Spirit continues to form us more visibly into who we are already and who we believe we will be again in the fullness of time...the body of Christ, the beloved of God, and the witnesses to the Light.

Thanks be to God. Amen.