

All Are Welcome in This Place
Re-theologizing Christianity's Common Meal

Let us build a house where all are named
Their songs and visions heard
And loved and treasured,
Taught and claimed as words within the Word
Built of tears and laughter
Prayers of faith and songs of grace
Let this house proclaim from floor to rafter
All are welcome. All are welcome.
All are welcome in this place.

Marty Haugen¹

Introductory Comments

Recently I have been part of multiple cyber-space discussions about the Mennonite Church's unwillingness to recognize partnered sexual minorities as fully human and as sharing in God's divine image: created in God's image as male and female; as young and old, as straight and lesbian, etc. In particular, the questions regarding LBGTQ people and their essential human nature have coalesced. Is a homosexual orientation, for example, a state of disordered creation? Or, is it a healthy and statistically predictable variant of the human genome? In the words of Pope Benedict, are sexual minorities essentially and intrinsically disordered? Or, are they created in God's image?

These conversational partners have been located in the strongholds of Mennonite identity – in places such as Wichita, KS; Harrisonburg, VA; Philadelphia, PA; Goshen, IN; and Lancaster County, PA. To date, my colleagues, friends and correspondents have all cast their theological lot with the need for the Mennonite Church to move towards full inclusion for individuals who represent sexual minorities. Full inclusion means that LBGTQ individuals – partnered or un-partnered; married or single – would become eligible for membership in the Mennonite Church. They would also become eligible for all of the rights and privileges of membership including faculty positions in the Mennonite academy, ordination to ministry, and church-performed and recognized marriage ceremonies.

My correspondents see the correlations between twentieth-century civil rights movements for people of color, for women, for individuals from many different minorities such as ethnicity or national origin, aging people or handicapped people or children. All of my correspondents are dismayed by the homophobic and discriminatory language and choices being made by the current ruling patriarchs of the United States branch of the worldwide Mennonite Church.

My correspondents and informants all tell a similar story: they believe that the Mennonite Church-USA is so deeply divided on the topic of exclusion on the basis of sexual orientation and denied civil rights for LGBTQ people that it is likely schism will result after Kansas City, 2015.² The current trajectory of official denominational decisions currently being made regarding people of faith who dissent from the official church policies of exclusion for all LGBTQ individuals is likely to include exclusion, excommunication, and shunning.

In light of MCUSA Schiller Park (2014)³ decision to continue established patterns (or even create new and harsher exclusionary ones) vis-à-vis denominational practices of discipline (in opposition to same gender partnered couples, supportive pastors, welcoming congregations), I continue to think about liturgical wholeness in the presence of communal dissent and divisiveness. As the institutional Mennonite Church appears inexorably poised to move towards more and harsher disciplinary actions by excommunicating members, disciplining welcoming and supportive ministers by removing their ordination credentials, and cutting off from denominational fellowship entire congregations and perhaps even those entire geographical Mennonite conferences which accept and support full inclusiveness, I despair of finding or creating a pathway through this particularly noxious enchanted forest of heterosexism and hostile homophobia.

Whenever the historical church has used its authority to countermand emerging scientific understandings of human phenomena; when it has abandoned common sense; when it has chosen exclusion rather than inclusion; and when it has practiced excommunication and shunning, we find injustice and an absence of compassionate love. We find prejudice and hatred. We find social injustice. More wounds are created in the body of Christ and the exterior watching world finds little to admire and emulate.

I find very little evidence in Christian scriptures that Jesus preferred ritual purity to compassionate love. Instead, what we see is that he included those despised by his Jewish synagogue as the precise objects of his compassion. Scripture bears many witnesses to his willingness to include social outcasts among his disciples.⁴

At this moment the Mennonite Church seems committed to unscientific notions about the nature of human sexuality, inadequate understandings of the role of scripture in the life of a community 2000 years ago, and a truly oppressive theological opinion about the denominational way to move forward.

What one hears in the Mennonite Church underground is that individuals, congregations and conferences who disagree with full inclusion of all Jesus path believers and followers – including LGBTQ individuals - are issuing ultimatums: *discipline these welcoming congregations and conferences now or we are taking our financial marbles and leaving the denomination.*⁵ This kind of idolatrous spiritual blackmail creates no space for differences of interpretation and meaning.

It creates no space to examine what medical science is learning about the human genome. Absolute truth is held, therefore, in the minds of these back-door and under-the-table lobbyists. When they assert the primacy of their understandings of human nature, they see themselves as God's infallible human interpreters on earth in the present moment. Their opinion is, therefore, equated with God's opinion – a form of self-idolatry. In that opinion sexual minorities do not belong in the church because they are not now – and can never become, the beloved people of God....unless they deny their creation as sexual minorities. Period!

In addition, what one hears in the background is that the institutional church's ruling hierarchy has decided to pit the issue of inclusion for LBGTQ individuals against ongoing issues of inclusion for people of color and for people of different national and ethnic origins. Thus, at the very moment we see the mood of denominational church leaders to exclude and un-welcome LBGTQ individuals; we see pushes for the church to work towards full inclusion for Central American immigrants without proper papers to live in the USA legally.

This is a typical patriarchal move: divide and conquer by excluding and including in arbitrary ways. In such moves, the dominating forces of power, money and political connectedness gain even more ascendancy. When power panders to money, spiritual atrocities happen. In such a situation, devalued individuals and their rights to belong are discarded in attempts to keep the political base of authority and power in the controlling position. It is impossible not to see a false theology of money and institutional power as the underlying cause of refusing to include LBGTQ individuals in the full life of the church.

Here the devil is in the details. According to divide and conquer strategies, if I decide to push for immigration reform, I cannot, de facto, also work for reform of my church's hostile treatment of its LBGTQ children. My work, in such a model, to urge my church to include LBGTQ individuals as full members is seen as detracting from the higher priority of integrating illegal immigrants into the church's sheltering arms. Such a polarization is false. It is like saying that black rights must take precedence over women's rights or that women's rights must take precedence over black rights.

It is clear when one looks closely at Christian scriptures that the Jesus movement originated with his followers. Whoever decided to follow Jesus as a spiritual seeker did so. None were excluded – not even the wealthy and young ruler who was offered the option of divesting himself of worldly power and wealth in order to enter the kingdom of God. What we see, therefore, in scripture is that while many individuals excluded themselves from following the Jesus path; Jesus did not deny any who followed him from doing so.

I personally do not agree with the national denomination's leadership's insistence that sexually partnered LBGTQ individuals are in some way or another

intrinsically disordered or intrinsically evil and were not, therefore, in their conception and birth, fully, completely and joyfully created in God's image. If, as scripture teaches us, God knit us together in the womb, then God is responsible for our creation as sexual beings with a variety of sexual orientations.⁶ I do not agree with the current formulation of official Anabaptist-Mennonite identity as it relates to the LGBTQ community. I do not agree with the proposed processes of heterosexist exclusion, self-righteous excommunication and self-congratulatory processes of de-credentialing. The civil and religious rights of individuals are not a competition sport – with winners and losers.

I have never seen institutional religious life as an either/or proposition – in which it is this highway alone which brings individual and communal salvation while all other highways bring instantaneous damnation. I think communal threats of taking one's theological, doctrinal, financial, and institutional marbles and going home are under-the-table and behind-the-back efforts at extortion – ways of influencing decisions without being identified and, therefore, accountable to the whole for these mean-spirited behaviors.

To my way of understanding Christian faith, these forms of communal and institutional blackmail are just as unattractive and nasty as acts of financial extortion among the mafia. Perhaps, because they are being done in Christ's name they are even more heinous.

Many years ago, I concluded that if my LGBTQ brothers and sisters do not belong as full and equal participants at Christ's welcoming table,⁷ then I do not belong there either.

Ever since Germantown Mennonite Church – the oldest Mennonite Church in America - was shamefully excommunicated from Franconia Conference of the Mennonite Church (1997) for its ordination of a gay hospital chaplain, I have been appalled at the insistent, culturally-influenced and politically-influenced conservative rhetoric of heterosexist exclusion inside the Mennonite community – all done, of course, in God's name.

Jesus, son of a woman who was not married, who hung out with prostitutes, women who studied, tax collectors, crazy men in caves, Samaritan women at wells, rugged fishermen, as well as family friends at whose weddings he performed miracles of water and wine – this human man and Jewish spiritual prophet, in my opinion, never excluded anyone from his community of spiritual seekers and disciples because of their sexual orientation, their gender, their skin color, their economic status, their enrollment in the temple, or any other socio-cultural marker of human diversity. Instead, he provided food (fish, loaves of bread, wine) for his followers and disciples on multiple occasions.

Table fellowship is one way that we include others in our most intimate friendship networks. It was not the Pharisees and ruling elites of the temple that Jesus

welcomed to his table; it was ordinary people from many different walks of life. It was men and women of many different social identities. His rag-tag band of disciples and followers included social outcasts – lepers, prostitutes, women with menstrual disorders, people possessed by spirits, and spiritual doubters (in short, the lame, the sick, and the blind). It included ordinary people – women who cooked, smelly fishermen who tended their nets, men who were wine-drinkers, a gentile Roman Centurion – a soldier, and an uncompromising prophet who challenged political injustice and baptized his followers in river water.

Many years ago, when I was not yet forty, I had a long conversation with J. B. Shenk. We were driving home from some meeting or another and got into an extended conversation about the ecclesiological nature of the human church. He was Mennonite-seminary educated and a gifted, natural mentor of younger people. Even though I was technically his work supervisor, he taught me so much about practical leadership, *and personal-professional survival*, inside church institutions. On this evening, maybe to be conversationally provocative, he suggested that institutional churches were unfaithful to the Jesus path because they excluded people from belonging. He suggested that a revolution in Mennonite ecclesial theology would occur when *whoever showed up, belonged*. In short, in this conversation at least, he advocated dismantling institutional church structures with membership requirements.

There was an immediate connect inside me that evening. I don't remember any other aspects of this hour long conversation as we moved from geographic point a to geographic point b in the car. I don't even remember who was driving whom home. I just remember thinking: *he is right. Whoever shows up on Sunday morning belongs just because she or he has showed up*. In such a model, there are no preferred insiders and no disdained outsiders. Everyone is on an even footing – seeking to find spiritual nurture and care inside the community gathered in worship and faith.

I have thought about this model of Christian worship and Christian community for many years. In those years I have worshipped inside many denominations and inside many very large and very small faith communities. In some, I felt welcomed; in others I did not. In some, my spiritual wounds were excoriated; in others they were healed. In some, I just wanted to go back to bed while in others my spirit and my psyche were rejuvenated. In some, I found no evidence of any concern for social justice and for healing the wounds of the world while in others I found individuals and entire communities engaged in social justice and healing work.

Watching communities practice various forms of closed Eucharistic meals and various forms of required liturgical hoop-jumping, I gradually came to the position that we must, as followers of the Jesus path, re-conceptualize the Eucharistic banquet. For too many years, this sacred meal of Christianity has been used to exclude people. I am convinced that it needs to be an open table and all (who are

physically present) need to be included as full and totally acceptable communicants. People may choose to exclude themselves but the community should never exclude anyone – no matter how known or unknown this person is to the community; no matter how honorable or disreputable this person may seem.

When I take communion with someone who is totally different than I am in some social construct of identity, I acknowledge them as having an equal share of God's care and love. I acknowledge them as being made in God's image. I acknowledge them as fully human – deserving every right that I have experienced inside the Jesus movement.

I am convinced, therefore, that the social judgment of anyone as unworthy is not mine to make. This judgment is not the faith community's to make. It is not one for the feast's presider to make. The only one who can make such a judgment about herself or himself is the individual who makes the choice to participate or not to participate.

Using, therefore, the sacred meal as a barrier to membership or as a sign of membership in the Jesus community is an idolatrous action. It equates human judgment with God's judgment. It is a pernicious form of exclusion and it forms a foundation for hatred and exclusion to be seen as God's will for his community.

A Proposal

Since Mennonites do not have a sacramental view of the communal meal at Christ's table, ordinary lay people can offer the bread and grape juice to each other. I have been present in Mennonite services when a loaf of bread was passed hand-to-hand and each person served his or her neighbor; where the communal container of grape juice was also passed and each person drank and then offered the juice to his or her neighbor. In these services many different loaves of bread were used and many different containers of juice. In a sense, each person became a ministering person to his or her neighbor. Each small community, therefore, was approximately 8 or 10 people. The smallness of scale replicated, therefore Christ's intimate meal with his disciples.

I suggest that outside the 2015⁸ convention centers which will host large gatherings of Mennonites - on a given and well-publicized day - that concerned lay people – set up a welcoming table in order to offer the Eucharistic meal of bread and grape juice to all who come – with absolutely no questions asked about membership, sexual orientation, or doctrinal belief structures. Everyone who chooses to participate would be free to participate just because they showed up.

Small commercial bottles or aluminum cans of grape juice could be provided to everyone who showed up along with a small bun. I am influenced here by Brian

Wren's courses on Christian liturgy in which he urged his students to use satisfying portions of the consecrated elements so that no one ever leaves the communal table hungry. If we can use, as Mennonites, tiny little cups to take communion, there is no reason we cannot use small containers of grape juice and individual buns. This way no food would be wasted and whatever was left over could be shared with genuinely hungry and thirsty people – on the street or in shelters for the homeless and the dispossessed.

There would be no coercion. People who chose not to participate would not be demonized. There would be an implicit recognition that there is a deep divide in the Mennonite Church USA on this issue of full inclusion for LBTGQ individuals. But those who did choose to participate would be witnessing to their belief that all who claim Christ's name as their spiritual path belong inside the communicating community of faith. They would be issuing a powerful witness to the church that the Jesus message is one of inclusion and not one of exclusion.⁹

¹Endnotes

To hear this song, visit <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Sba9cHv9TG8>

² For a very useful discussion see Schirch, V and Schirch, L. (*The Mennonite*, August 1, 2014) News Analysis: Peacebuilding in a divided Pacifist Church: One family's story reflects the story of many Mennonite families. See http://www.themennonite.org/issues/17-8/articles/NEWS_ANALYSIS_Peacebuilding_in_a_divided_pacifist_church

³ For denominational information about this meeting and its findings, visit http://www.mennoniteusa.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/07/EBReport_June30_2014.pdf

⁴ See Luke 19:1-10

⁵ See Proverbs 6: 15-19 – no where is sexual identity or sexual purity mentioned in this list of divisive things inside the community of faith.

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See Genesis 1:27; Psalm 103:3; Psalm 139; 12-13; Isaiah 44:24; Jeremiah 4: 1-6; Job 33:4.

⁷ For a concise history: (1) that includes the early de-frocking of ordained Mennonite minister Keith Schrag at Ames [Iowa] Mennonite Church and the subsequent excommunication of Ames Mennonite Church from the Iowa/Nebraska Conference of the Mennonite Church as well as (2) the 1997 excommunication of Germantown Mennonite Church by Franconia Conference, see Loren John's concise summary of issues. Johns concludes this history with details of the merger of two Mennonite denominations – the Mennonite Church and the General Conference Church into the Mennonite Church USA, a process that began at the Bethlehem, PA, 1983 biennial gathering and concluded at the merger biennial gathering (Nashville, 2001). <http://ljohns.ambs.edu/H&MC.htm>

For information about the ordination of Theda Good, a partnered lesbian woman see <http://christiannews.net/2014/01/02/mennonite-church-usa-ordains-first-openly-homosexual-pastor/>; For commentary on Good's ordination, see http://www.themennonite.org/issues/17-4/articles/Do_women_cause_the_church_anxiety.

For recent (2014) decisions of the post-merger Mennonite church (2014) now known as the Mennonite Church USA see http://www.mennoniteusa.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/03/MovingForward_Feb17_2014_EBStatement.pdf.

Also see <http://www.mennoniteusa.org/call-to-prayer-from-ervin-stutzman/> and <http://www.mennoniteusa.org/executive-board-releases-statement-on-mountain-states-decision-approves-resolution-on-immigration/>

⁸ Mennonite Church USA, 2015, Kansas City and Mennonite World Conference (2015) Harrisburg

⁹ This sermon has been taken from a forthcoming book, *Letters to a Younger Colleague*. This chapter is copyright protected. © 2014, Ruth Elizabeth Krall