

How to Heal a Schism

Romans 12:9-21

Lethbridge Mennonite Church

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This morning's sermon is going to be autobiographical and it's going to spend a bit of time on denominational squabbles.

I know one or both of these might not be everyone's thing.

I'm going to ask for your patience at the outset because I think that the issues that I want to talk about transcend both my story and the Mennonite story, and get at the heart of what it means to live faithfully as a follower of Jesus in our time and place.

On Wednesday, I was preparing to drive up to Vulcan to have lunch with a colleague from Calgary.

As I was looking for a podcast to listen to on my travels, I came across one via the *Canadian Mennonite*. It was part of an initiative called MennoCreative which is trying to use various forms of media to tell stories that spark conversation.

The podcast that caught my eye was called "The Schism Between Us."¹ Here's how it is described:

What's going on between the Mennonites and the Mennonite Brethren in Canada? How did we get here? What happened in 1860 to cause this divide? Can we ever work together again? This podcast series follows host Marnie Klassen as she seeks answers to these questions and more, travelling across Canada to find out: can we bridge The Schism Between Us?

It's probably not hard to guess why this grabbed my attention. I have, of course, spent significant time in both of these communities.

¹ <https://canadianmennonite.org/mennocreative/the-schism-between-us/>

As you likely know, I was raised in the Mennonite Brethren church. I grew up in Coaldale MB and worshiped there until I left for Vancouver to attend Regent College when I was thirty.

While in Vancouver, our family worshiped at Killarney Park MB. My first pastoral position coming out of graduate school was at a MB church in Nanaimo, on Vancouver Island. And, for the last fifteen years, I have obviously been serving in a Mennonite Church.

So, I feel like my story kind of straddles the story the podcast was interested in exploring.

Some very brief and wholly inadequate history. The Mennonite Brethren church began in 1860 out of a belief that the Mennonite church in the colonies in what is now Ukraine had kind of lost its spiritual fervour. They positioned themselves as a renewal movement within the Mennonite Church, but eventually split and became a different group altogether.

This was a painful process. Mennonites often resented MBs because, well, nobody really likes being told they're not pious or Christian enough.

And the MBs felt like the Mennonite church had become too much like the very churches the original Mennonites split off from back in the sixteenth century, where faith was assumed as a part of citizenship rather than a vibrant personal relationship with Jesus.

A hundred and sixty odd years later, the divisions are not nearly as acute as back in the nineteenth century (thanks be to God). But they still linger. The fact that a young adult is making a podcast about it in 2026 speaks to this.

In very general terms, the Mennonite Brethren Church would be considered more conservative (theologically, politically) and the Mennonite Church would be considered more progressive. MBs would *tend* to focus more on evangelism and piety, MCs on peace and social justice.

But there are churches in both communities that would complicate this simplistic binary. And there are certainly individual members of these communities who do not

feel that this adequately captures their views. One of them is standing behind this pulpit.

I remember when I began here at Lethbridge Mennonite Church and when I would begin to attend denominational events across the province and country. I would often hear some comment to the effect of, “Ah, you finally saw the light, eh?” Wink, wink. *Joined the right team.*

I would often laugh it off, but inside I found it a bit annoying. My experience in the MB churches I was a part of was a good one.

Yes, as I matured in my faith and as I proceeded down my educational path, I had questions. There were things about how some MBs talked about faith that I found annoying and frustrating just as there have been things about how some MCs talk about faith that I have found annoying and frustrating.

When I came this church fifteen years ago, I did not see it (and do not see it now) as leaving the “wrong team” and joining the “right team.” I looked at it as moving from one community in the body of Christ to another community in the body of Christ.

I am probably wired to be a peacemaker, to seek a big and a broad Christian tent. I often thought, perhaps naively, “Wouldn’t it be great if I could be part of a church that aspired to the best aspects of both of these communities (and other expressions of Christianity)?”

At any rate, back to the podcast. I was curious to hear where it went. The host, Marnie Klassen was, like me, raised in an MB church and currently attends a Mennonite church.

What follows is just my opinion. Take it for what it’s worth. You can of course listen and form your own judgments.

I listened to the first five or six episodes on my way to Vulcan and back. And while I have appreciated parts of it, while Klassen herself often has a very curious and engaging approach, I have to say that overall I have been a little disappointed.

The podcast has at times slid into a kind of binary story, portraying the Mennonites as the progressive heroes and the MBs as the conservative villains.

The voices that get the most attention are those who have left the MB church, who have had negative experiences, who have found the Mennonite church to be a better fit, etc. And this is fine. I obviously think that some communities are better fits for people at this or that point in their journey of faith.

And yet in my experience, it's pretty rare in any conflict for one side to be entirely in the right and the other entirely in the wrong. I know enough about at least a few of the stories told in the podcast to know that others would tell the story in a very different way.

And, to be clear, I had the same instinct when I encountered overly triumphant stories in the MB churches I worshiped and served at over the years. I have always been suspicious of stories with unambiguous heroes and villains.

I have witnessed the self-righteousness of the MB church. I have heard people question the sincerity of others' faith, whether Mennonites or other Christians. I have been in MB spaces where there was a theological rigidity that I did not support. I have seen power moves in denominational meetings that were unworthy of Christ. Please do not hear me excusing any of this.

In my fifteen years in MC Canada circles, I have also seen plenty of self-righteousness going in the opposite direction. I have heard Mennonites speak derisively of MBs (and other evangelicals). I have seen power moves. I have heard the same tendency to question the sincerity of faith, usually based on whether or not a certain set of beliefs, usually around social justice issues, are embraced.

In my experience, as one who spent significant time in both communities and denominational spaces, I can say that there is plenty of sneering and suspicion and self-righteousness going in both directions.

(And plenty of grace, I should add! These voices tend not to get as much airtime as the suspicious voices. Perhaps not great podcast material. But I think they should.)

What I was looking for in the podcast, and have not yet heard, is an acknowledgement that both sides of this schism (and any schism) have a role to play in healing it.

What I was hoping to hear in the podcast, and have not yet heard, is the humility to say that both communities have things to learn from the other, that both have made errors, that both have good gifts to offer the other.

What I was hoping to hear more explicitly is the simple acknowledgement that Jesus Christ is encountered, his gospel is embraced, and his way is pursued in both Mennonite and MB contexts.

Neither perfectly, of course. That's not on the table this side of eternity.

But people have found healing, hope, and salvation in MC churches, in MB churches, in all kinds of churches (including, I hope it's obvious by now, non-Mennonite churches!).

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The title of my sermon today is "How to Heal a Schism."

In many ways, the way to heal a schism, however deep, whether we're talking about church denominations or personal relationships, is to put today's passage from Romans into practice.

So, you've heard Romans 12:9-21. Now go do that.

Ah, if only it were that easy, right?

There's a concept that I've mentioned before in sermons here, one that helps me as I think about what and how we should act and think and live as Christians.

It's actually not so much a concept but a phrase that I first encountered years ago during series of lectures at Regent College by the OT scholar Walter Brueggemann (who died last year).

In speaking about the people of Israel's dramatic exodus from Egypt and the long, complex story that followed, Brueggemann said this:

The life of faith is, in many ways, about "learning the sacred art of departing." It is about learning how to leave the dominant narratives of our culture.

The sacred art of departing.

What does this mean?

According to Brueggemann, for Israel, “the sacred art of departing” meant leaving the story of Egypt—a story of oppression and injustice and slavery and dehumanizing conditions and idolatry—and following God into the future.

It meant learning how to live according to a new story—learning how to trust and live in community, how to resist the lure of idolatry in all its forms, how to worship, what it meant to be a “blessing to the nations.”

Of course, this “sacred departing” didn’t always go very well. Israel struggled and sinned and longed for the imagined security and relative comfort of Egypt. They had short memories, as so many of us do, when God places us in challenging circumstances.

They chafed under their leaders and complained against God. They constantly wandered off after other gods. They were forced to wander in the desert for forty years and, many years later when they were in the land, they suffered exile at the hands of a variety of foreign empires.

Israel struggled with the sacred art of departing—they could never fully leave or resist the temptations of other stories, other homes.

So. Which narratives do we need to be departing from?

Well, there’s probably more than one. But it is obvious that we live in a context of deep division and polarization, of self-righteousness (left/right, religious/secular), of moralizing (left/right, religious/secular) and of deeply entrenched tribalisms.

These are trends and tendencies that the church has too often reproduced, as the broad Mennonite story has shown.

The issues are not the same as they were in the nineteenth century, but the tendencies to define ourselves by who we’re not, who we’re smarter than, better than, holier than, more enlightened than, more morally sensitive than... these all remain.

I think this is a prominent narrative that we need to depart from. Over and over and over again.

And I think our text from Romans today gives us a compelling picture—a list—of what a good departure looks like.

It is, in many ways, simply a list of Christian virtues. It is a text that calls us to leave one way of looking at and living in the world embrace a different one.

I'm simply going to read this list and try to resist the temptation to add to it.

As you listen, I want you to think about whatever schism is on your mind today. It could be the MB/MC schism I have spoken about. It could be broader schisms in the Christian world. It could be the politics on your social media feeds. It could be a fractured or fracturing relationship.

This passage is how to heal a schism:

- Let love be genuine...
- Hate what is evil and hold fast to what is good...
- Outdo one another in showing honour... *can you imagine how this would change our schisms?!*
- Do not lag in zeal, be ardent in Spirit, serve the Lord.
- Rejoice in hope... be patient in suffering... persevere in prayer...
- Extend hospitality to strangers...
- Bless those who persecute you—do not curse them... *Again, can you imagine how an embrace of this attitude could have changed our history (and how it can change our present)?*
- Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep—
- Live in harmony... associate with the lowly... don't be haughty...
- Do not claim to be wiser than you are... *Oh boy, could every schism use a dose of this!*
- Do not repay evil for evil...
- Do not avenge... leave room for God... Trust God with the future.
- Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

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I recently had breakfast with an Anglican colleague. At one point, he said that the older he gets and the more time he spends in the church in all its forms, and the more time he spends trying to be a faithful presence in these deeply divided and polarized times, the more he is convinced that his role in his ministry and just life in general is to embrace and embody a “hermeneutic of love.”

The word “hermeneutic” just refers to a theory or method of interpretation. In context, we were just talking about whether or not someone approaches things primed for being critical or appreciative.

If we approach the news of the day or a conversation with our kids or a difficult co-worker with a “hermeneutic of love” we have simply decided that we love will guide how we interpret how we read or talk or listen or whatever. Love will guide what we expect to see and how we will respond.

Same goes for a schism.

Can we decide that love will guide how we interpret the beliefs and actions of others? Not an indeterminate love that is little more than a gauge for our emotional state, but a Romans 12 kind of love.

A love that blesses those who persecute...

A love that weeps with those who weep...

A love that is not haughty... that seeks harmony, not division...

A love that is patient, persevering, hospitable...

Can this love be the lens through which we interpret our many divisions, inside and outside the church? Can this love be our departure manifesto?

May God help us to learn and practice and delight in the sacred art of departing—leaving what is easy and what often comes naturally and holding fast to what is good.

For the sake of the God who made us...

For the sake of the big, broad church that God loves and will not abandon...

And for the sake of the world God is guiding toward restoration and wholeness.

Amen.

