

“Feasting with enemies”

March 20, 2022

By Andy Arthur.

I am glad to be here today. Paul was my pastor for most of my life. His family is a second home for me. There are familiar faces in this congregation for me as well. From some of the summers where we shared space to worship together, First Baptist and First Mennonite. I am more familiar with those of you I know who volunteer with Village Green. Thank you for the way you support the work of MCC, and there is always room for more. It is so nice to be here together with you all.

It's nice to gather with those you care about. Gathering together has looked a little different these past few years. For many of us a chance to be with your friends and family has been scarce. You might even look forward to visiting with someone you didn't like, just so that you didn't have to feel so alone. Being together, when it has been safe, has felt all the more special during the pandemic, even at times, holy.

Jesus was sitting with many of those closest to him, in what we call the last supper. Communion, a time when we are called together to remember Him. Today I want to remember that Jesus broke bread with not only his beloved friends and disciples, but Judas, who had already begun a plot against him. Jesus washed the feet, passed food to and sat with the man who he knew was betraying him. The last supper was a feast among enemies.

As we think about this concept of feasting with our enemies, I would like to share three stories. One is from World War I another from the Old Testament and the last from a little place in Saskatchewan. I will explore how we can apply these radical stories in the life of the Church and in our own lives.

The first story, is a particular time communion was beautifully displayed in the film Joyeux Noel, that is based on historical events. It takes place in the winter of 1914, World War I has been raging and settled into trench warfare. The Germans are setup facing down French and Scottish troops.

I will tell the story from the perspective of a middle aged Scottish priest who has enlisted as a chaplain to watch over his folk on the front.

Months of brutal trench warfare have led to casualties on both sides. Living under constant threat of conflict, with meagre rations and little to no comfort. It stirs a deep longing for home when you realize it is Christmas eve. Some bag pipes have been sent. The troops around you ask you to play a few tunes. You feel responsible

for raising morale among your comrades. After you have made it through some Christmas hymns you realize, you are not alone. A voice not in your trench, nor coming from the french adjacent to you. It is a German voice, a trained opera singer. The words are unfamiliar but the tune you recognize. You lift your head above the trench line, and begin to play along. You are astonished to hear the melodious voice, rise forth and walk into no man's land, bearing a small Christmas tree. You can feel something, it compels you to lower your bag pipes and walk out towards him. Your bravery and the exhaustion of war encourages your comrades to begin hesitantly following. You greet the stranger before you with a curt Merry Christmas, before you know it, leaders from each nation have assembled around you. A cease fire for the night is called. German, French and Scottish troops begin making their way to meet each other in the middle of the battlefield. They attempt to chat, sharing of wine and chocolate go a long way to ease the awkward tension. It is here, that you hold your most sacred mass. Speaking in Latin you recite prayers familiar to many. Christ's birth, death and resurrection are remembered on a field laden with fallen brothers. It is good and it is beautiful.

You return to your trench, as do all the others. It is the next morning you realize that you and many of the others have been transformed. Leaders send message to the once called enemies, warning of artillery fire. You take turns sharing your trench with Germans or returning to theirs to avoid the bombardment. Games of football casually break out, the dead are given proper burials and stories are shared. From death and destruction the beginnings of community is formed.

It does not last, generals discover this association with the enemy. You are dishonourably discharged from service, your bishop chides you for fraternizing with the enemy. Still, that Christmas eve was the most important communion you ever gave. Among the pitted battlefield, standing near frozen corpses, surrounded by allies and enemies.

These events happened along many stretches of trenches, including the one my Great-grandfather was in. Some resumed with war in the subsequent days. Some were transformed. How could you fire your gun at one you had broken bread with? Seeing their humanity, finding commonality with the other, it changes you.

There is a story in the Old Testament with some interesting parallels to Joyeux Noel. I have never heard it preached on or shared in Sunday School, so it may be unfamiliar to you. Though it is a good Mennonite story, so you might have heard it. It is found in 2 KINGS chapter 6. This is in the time of the prophet Elisha. Elisha was Elijah's pupil, and in this passage he is now an old man. You may be familiar with some of Elisha's stories, raising a boy from the dead, healing Naaman

of leprosy and parting the Jordan river. This particular story is set around 848 BC. Israel is a separate kingdom from Judah, and one of their neighbours the Arameans are busying themselves raiding Israel. Now Elisha, with God's help, is able to know where the Arameans will raid next, giving the king of Israel warning and time to move away from any ambushes. The Aramean King learns that it is Elisha the Prophet who is to blame for his failed raids.

What do you think will happen next? What would you do if you were the King of the Arameans?

The King of Aram sends an army to capture Elisha. It is here in Dothan a small city in Israel where Elisha and one of his servants awake to find a great enemy army with many chariots and horses, surrounding the city.

What do think will happen next? What would you do if you were Elisha's servant?

“Oh, sir what will we do now!?” The servant exclaimed. “Don't be afraid!” Elisha told him. “For there are more on our side than on theirs.” Elisha prayed. “O Lord, open his eyes and let him see!” The Lord opened the young man's eyes, and when he looked up, he saw that the hillside around Elisha was filled with horses and chariots of fire.

The Aramean army advanced toward Elisha.

What do you think will happen next? What would you do if you were Elisha?

Elisha prayed, “O Lord please make them blind.” So the Lord struck them with blindness as Elisha asked. Then Elisha went out and told them, “You have come the wrong way! This isn't the right city. Follow me, and I will take you to the man you are looking for.” And he led them to the city of Samaria.

When they entered Samaria, Elisha prayed “O Lord now open their eyes and let them see.” So the Lord opened their eyes and they discovered they were in the middle of Samaria at the doorstep of the King of Israel.

What do you think will happen next? What would you do if you were the King of Israel?

The King of Israel shouted to Elisha, “Should I kill them?”

“Of course not! Elisha replied. “Do we kill prisoners of war? Give them food and drink and send them home again to their master.”

So the king made a great feast for them and then sent them home to their master. After that, the Aramean raiders stayed away from the land of Israel.

That concludes the story. They feasted together. Wait they feasted together! This was the army that came to capture or kill Elisha. They ended up just coming over for supper.

The story provides no details, but I can imagine it started off awkwardly. Language barriers? Different cultural eating practices? Different food? Bitterness, the urge for revenge. Comments misinterpreted as threats or insults. The tension would have been palpable. In the end, perhaps after some minor incidents, there was feasting. A feast, like communion between

the trenches brought two enemies together. They were transformed and could no longer wage war against one another.

They feasted together, forming a treaty between the two armies, just as in the story of Joyeax Noel.

I couldn't imagine a better resolution for the people of both nations. The creativity of God and the willingness of his followers created something good, something beautiful.

In these stories we see individuals who made dramatic gestures, who took the initiative. While I commend them greatly, the role of the others is just as valuable. For the soldiers who participated, who sat and ate, shared in a feast. They resisted the fear and hatred of the other.

These stories feel more present with the invasion of Ukraine. I pray for followers of a loving and creative God to step forward holding God's hand. I have seen glimpses. Ukrainian citizens taking in a Russian soldier who surrendered. Giving him tea, lunch and their phone so he could facetime his mother. These moments are tender among the explosions, droning of engines of war, and crying of children.

In our relatively comfortable homes removed from military conflict by thousands of kilometres you may ask yourself, what powerful stories of feasting with enemies, but whom are my enemies that I may feast with them? We may not have as dramatic examples in our lives, but there are many implications for each of us and the communities we belong to.

What ways can you participate in inviting the other? Whether that person is different than you because of their political or religious beliefs, race or culture,

socio-economic background, age or gender. Who could you include in your social circles? Are there lonely people in your building? Are there obnoxious people no one wants around, that maybe are just looking for communion. At meal times do you always just want to sit with others who provide the best conversation? Are you constantly networking at work, missing the vulnerable? Are there activities that would involve people who

you perceive as being different from you? I will let these questions sit with us for a moment.

While I was writing this sermon I have tried to be conscious of offering or receiving invitations. Going to places that pushed me out of my comfort zone. I made an effort to speak with those I might otherwise ignore. And I have felt rewarded. Realizing I have far more in common with others than I have differences.

I will tell you a story about two groups, who felt they were very different and who in the end found common ground.

Stoney Knoll is a hill north west of Rosthern near the North Saskatchewan river. Traditionally it was the homeland of the Young Chipewyan nation. The government cracked down on the nation after the Riel Rebellion, confiscating their rifles which they needed to hunt. Many of the nation left the land due to food insecurity. Mennonite farmers settled there unknowingly and later sold some of the land to Lutherans. More than 40 years ago fragments of the scattered Indigenous nation returned to their homeland. There were unpleasant encounters between the Laird residents and those returning. *Local Church leaders decided to listen, to pay attention to the First Nation people making claims. The Church leaders were nervous, what would these meetings look like?* They asked MCC to come and help. The meetings were awkward at first. Some games and food helped break the tension. These meetings continued for several decades, with continued support by MCC. Patient listening and learning was required. In the end they bonded over the love of the land. Many of the Mennonite farmers' families had been there for over a hundred years. The Indigenous band did not want them to be disposed of their cherished land as they had been. Together they put forward a land claim to the government. Relationships were formed and now 30 years later, though the land claim is still "in process, we celebrated. I was fortunate enough to be able to attend the celebration at Stoney Knoll, this last August. Together we were able to share stories, games, dance and food. To witness the work of reconciliation and the building of friendships. It was good, it was beautiful.

My Indigenous neighbours were practising what I am preaching. In the wake of finding countless children's graves at Church run residential schools, they came. They sat and ate among Settlers, who could very well be descendants of those who operated the residential schools that have robbed their communities of culture and bestowed layers of generational trauma.

In the case of Stoney Knoll the Mennonite Settlers took land, that they didn't know belonged to another. We have been made wholly aware that the Church, in the case of residential schools, took culture, language, childhood, innocence and family. This was intentional. So too do our words and actions need to be intentional, as we take part in reconciliation.

So I leave you with this final thought: How will you feast with your enemies, build community and work towards reconciliation this year?

Closing prayer – Creative and loving God, open our eyes, that we may see. Call us out of our divisive trenches, that we may walk together. Embolden us to work for true community, that we may experience your goodness and beauty. -Amen