

Why are you trying to kill me?
A sermon preached at
Lendrum Mennonite Brethren Church
Edmonton, Alberta
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March 7, 2016
Text: John 7:1-32

This is a very chaotic passage of scripture. There are so many people speaking from so many different perspectives: Jesus' brothers, people in the crowd, the disciples, the religious leaders. They are coming from all over the place (which is why I had the scripture read today with the dialogue voices coming from all over the congregation). Believing, not believing, questioning, not questioning, ridiculing, worshipping. It's all in there. What do we do with a scripture passage like this?

Let's start at the beginning. The writer tells us that it's the Festival of Booths (Tabernacles). There were three major holidays in the life of the Jews in Jesus' time...Passover, Pentecost and the Festival of Booths. Each of these festivals had to do with the main figure of Moses. Passover celebrated the deliverance from slavery in Egypt, Pentecost celebrated the giving of the law in Sinai, and the Festival of Booths celebrated the way God provided in the wilderness. Moses was a central figure in each festival.

Now if you think of these three festivals, you might think that the Exodus would be the biggest festival...getting freedom from slavery. It certainly gets a lot of attention in scripture. Or you might think that Pentecost would be the big festival, the giving of the law...so much of scripture has to do with law! But you'd be wrong. The biggest festival in Jesus' time was the Festival of Booths. A whole week of celebrating; everyone who could travel, going up to Jerusalem to be at the Temple. That's why Jesus' brothers want him to go to Jerusalem now: "This is the time to make your big splash...everyone will be there!"

The Festival of Booths had various rituals associated with it, and those rituals celebrated three specific gifts in the wilderness. Those of you who went to Sunday school; think back, what did God provide to the people of Israel in the wilderness? Maybe you remember: God gave them manna, bread from heaven. God gave them water to drink when they were thirsty in the desert, water that miraculously came out of a rock. And God gave them guidance, in the form of a pillar of cloud in the day, which turned into a light in the night.

Now can you remember what happened in the wilderness? Were the people of Israel grateful to get these gifts? Was Camp Sinai filled with happy campers? Was Camp Wilderness a giant Sunday school picnic, with people living in peace and harmony? No, definitely not. I read through Exodus and Numbers this week, and over and over again you hear the people grumbling. Murmuring. Questioning. "Why did you bring us here to die in the wilderness? We should have stayed in Egypt." They say this

even though they've had some pretty dramatic signs that Moses is God's man. There were all the miracles before the Pharaoh, and the deliverance through the Red Sea, and the thunder and lightning on Mount Sinai, the giving of the Ten Commandments and Moses' shining face when he came down the mountain. In spite of the bread, the water, the light in the wilderness, they still question Moses. They rebel, they aren't sure they want to follow him. They don't always believe he is speaking for God. They worry he is leading them astray.

In the gospel of John we've seen Jesus, like Moses, performing miracles and signs. We hear him claiming that he is delivering a message from God. And right around this passage at the Festival of Booths (although we didn't read this part today), we have Jesus declaring that he is bread from heaven, he is living water, he is the light of the world. All the three gifts that the people received in the Wilderness they are now receiving again in the person of Jesus Christ. Bread, water, light.

And what is people's reaction? As we heard in our scripture, they are divided. They don't know what to make of Jesus. "He is a good man," say some. "No, he is deceiving the people," say others. Some are thinking he might be the Messiah, God's own messenger. Some are dead set against him, thinking he is a false prophet, worthy of death. In verse 12 it says that there was "widespread whispering" about Jesus. Which brings to mind the murmuring, the grumbling, the questioning of Moses by the Israelites in the desert.

But everyone has to decide. Is Jesus a true prophet, in line with Moses, or is he a false prophet, worthy of death? Moses prophesied about another prophet that would come. Hear these words of God in the mouth of his prophet Moses from Deuteronomy 18:

I will raise up for them a prophet like you from among their own people, I will put my words in the mouth of the prophet, who shall speak to them everything that I command. Anyone who does not heed the words that the prophet shall speak in my name, I myself will hold accountable. But any prophet who speaks in the name of other gods....that prophet shall die!

Jesus said in John 5, "If you believed Moses, you would believe me, for he wrote about me." And Jesus follows that up by saying in this chapter, "Why are you trying to kill me?" In other words, why do you take me for a false prophet?

One of the big reasons that some people said Jesus was not the Messiah was because he healed on the Sabbath. Hank preached on that topic a few weeks ago, about the crippled man at the pool who Jesus makes whole on the Sabbath, "Pick up your mat and walk." The religious leaders were angry at Jesus because he worked on the Sabbath by healing, and the Law of Moses said not to work on the Sabbath. That was proof for them that he was a false prophet.

Jesus counters those people here. He does it by talking about circumcision. The Law that Moses gave says that you have to circumcise a male child on the eighth day after

its birth. But the Law also says that you should keep the Sabbath holy and do no work on the Sabbath. What happens though if a baby is born eight days before a Sabbath day? Should you circumcise on the eighth day, and follow that law, or should you put it off for a day, and follow the law about not working on the Sabbath. There are two laws, and you have to judge which is more important. In Jesus' time, people solved that by holding the two laws up side by side, and looking at them. They would ask, "What would Moses do?" I'm not sure the Jews had bracelets that said "WWMD?" (What would Moses do?), but that is what they were thinking. What was the original intention of the law?

And in fact it was totally customary to put aside the law about Sabbath, and circumcise a child on the eighth day even if happened to be Sabbath. The community made a judgement call...the law about including someone in community was more important than the law about not working on the Sabbath. And Jesus is making a comparison here to what he did; "Just as you bring a child into the community through circumcision on Sabbath, I made this man whole on the Sabbath. I put aside the law of Moses about Sabbath, in order to be faithful to the spirit of the Law, which is about shalom, about wholeness."

Jesus tells everyone here, "Stop judging by mere appearances, but instead judge correctly." (John 7:24) The people can't just go to the law and say this is right and this is wrong, they have to think about it. They have to use their minds to discern rightly, "Is Jesus doing what Moses would have done?"

So where do we find ourselves in the story? If you hold something very strongly, it's very easy to identify with Jesus. Like him, we might think that we are being true to the tradition, we are God's mouthpiece speaking to the world. And if we are persecuted for what we are believing in...all the better we are even more like Jesus.

But we don't have a direct line to God, like Jesus did. I actually think it's safer to identify with the people around Jesus. The church today is like the crowd, there are people here and there are people there with different ideas and feelings about an issue. It's chaotic, it's messy, we are looking for the truth, we are trying to judge correctly.

Take the issue of women in ministry, for an example. That is an issue in the Mennonite Brethren denomination that people have different opinions about. Some congregations believe that women should be silent in church. There are verses that support this position. They believe God doesn't use women in leadership. Other churches, like ours, think that God does call women to leadership (as evidenced by the fact that I am standing here today in the pulpit!) Our conference is congregationally organized, so we could just go our own way, and not worry about what other churches are doing. But should we raise our voice, should we try to bring about change in the larger church so women's voices would not be silenced?

For example, what do we do about C2C. That's a non-denominational church planting organization that the Mennonite Brethren church is vitally involved in, our MB churches give millions of dollars to C2C every year. C2C is having a big conference this year in Vancouver, and I was looking at the advertisement about it on-line. There are ten speakers at the conference. And they are all men. The message I get from that is that C2C thinks that God only speaks through men in leadership, God doesn't have anything to say to us through women.

So what do we do with that? Do we just go our way, and they go their way? Even when it seems that we are funding churches where women's voices are ignored? Do we go and raise this as a concern? How will our words be perceived? We are like the people around Jesus in John 7; we all have different opinions. A live and let live attitude might be good in some cases, but we still have to make a decision about the money.

The issue of women in leadership is a situation that the larger church is still wrestling with; most mainstream Protestant denominations settled this 50 years ago, the Catholic Church has still to address it. Although I heard that the Vatican put out a statement this week arguing that women could be allowed to preach at mass. So there is change happening. (After 1500 years!)

So that's one issue where we are like the people around Jesus in John 7. All of us having different opinions. Another issue that we are very divided on is the inclusion of gay and lesbian people, GLBTQ people, as full members in our communities.

There are some denominations that are openly inclusive, like the United Church of Canada. Most denominations, though, have a diversity of opinions and a lot of conflict over this issue.

This January Anglicans from all over the world gathered in Canterbury Cathedral in England. There was disagreement over gay and lesbian marriage. The conservatives in the group were against it, saying that "they stood for truth". Those arguing for inclusion also believed that they were following in the footsteps of Jesus. After a week of intense prayer, the Anglican communion did not officially divide, but the American branch of the church was sanctioned for a period of three years.

Presbyterians, Lutherans have branches of their denomination that are inclusive, and branches of their denominations that are not inclusive. Mennonites are no different.

Last November the 163 congregations Lancaster Conference of Mennonite Church USA voted to withdraw from their conference. They withdrew because the larger church was moving in the direction of inclusion, and Lancaster Conference felt that was the wrong direction to go.

Mennonite Church Canada embarked on a long study process over the issue of inclusion. First Mennonite Church here in Edmonton, who we will be worshipping with in our Easter services, just recently voted to be a fully inclusive church welcoming LGBTQ people. They are joining with a number of Mennonite congregations across Canada who are taking that inclusive position.

In our Mennonite Brethren conference we are at a different point in the discussion. At the Mennonite Brethren conference on sexuality this past fall in Winnipeg, there was some discussion that showed there is some diversity of opinions on this issue. There are some MBs who want to be fully inclusive of GLBTQ people, although probably the majority do not want to be inclusive. Some people in leadership wanted to shut down the discussion, "We can't talk about this. It's wrong even to talk about this."

I think it's important that we have scripture passages like this one in John 7, that show the people around Jesus in disagreement, and there are other passages in the New Testament that show the church divided, the church discussing, the church trying to discern which way to go. It's a messy time, but that doesn't mean that it's bad. We need to judge correctly, and to do that, we need to talk together.

Here at Lendrum we have diversity about the issue of inclusion, I know that for sure, because I've talked to you about it. For some of you it's a very painful thing that we are not openly inclusive of gay and lesbian people. For others of you, it's a very painful thing that we are even talking about this because it seems if we do, we are denying a certain interpretation of scripture that you hold very dear. There are a couple of direct passages in the Bible which condemn homosexuality. I think we need to look carefully not just at certain verses in the Bible, but at the meaning of scripture.

Jesus himself was attacked by religious leaders who took a few verses and from them said that Jesus was breaking the law. We don't want to judge by appearances. Jesus wanted people to get to the Spirit of the Law, to ask themselves, "What would Moses do?" We need to look for the Spirit of scripture and ask ourselves, "What would Jesus do?"

We are in the middle of this chaotic time, just like the people around Jesus in John 7. Which is the right way to go? There is a right way to go on this, both ways can't be right. The pain of people around this issue, pain on both sides, doesn't go away.

As your pastor, my job is to point us to Jesus. Jesus calling us to discern and judge, yes, but also and at the same time, Jesus calling on us to love one another. "Love one another," Jesus said, "as I have loved you." Even in a time of chaos, we must love each other.

During this time of Lent we have been reading a poem every week, so we've had our poem for today, but I am going to close my sermon with another poem, a poem I wrote last year, and what it means to be faithful in times like these.

Mutiny on the Disciple Ship

Getting on board the disciple ship
was not what I expected.
I imagined clear sailing,
Jesus at the helm,
the congregation a happy crew
learning the ropes together.

Back then, I didn't know how close quarters
can sometimes drive us
to gnawing on the ties that bind.
Conflicts rolling over us like sea billows.
Doctrines, finances, personalities,
all these loomed large in their turn
until they were dwarfed by
a tsunami of debate on inclusion and exclusion.
The wind came from every direction,
and we either cut or lost the anchor somewhere.
It was a dark and stormy night,
and though the call was for
"All hands on deck",
we were tossed over like Jonah.
Adrift on the sea, we tread water,
looking for a whale of a solution.

Imagine our surprise when Jesus appears
walking on this wind-swept sea.
Looking at both the overthrown
and the throwers-over,
he throws out the one-word life-line:
"Come."