

Community is the Centre of our Lives

Acts 2:46-47; Ephesians 2:19-22

Sermon by Marilyn Rudy-Froese

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Erin Lane is the author of the book, *Lessons in Belonging from a Church-Going Commitment Phobe*, which she describes as a book for “people who like the idea of church but feel disillusioned by the reality of the people who make it up.” (p. 15) Early on in the book she re-tells this story:

“A woman ... took a hammer to her new car. That’s right. She took a hammer to her own car. I imagined it sitting in the driveway as she approached. Maybe her husband stood looking on. Or maybe he couldn’t bear to watch, the weight of every penny spent felt in his gut. Either way, the outcome was the same. Her hammer met the steel frame and it buckled beneath the force. You might be confused by this surprising move...But her action makes perfect sense to me...Hitting the brand-new car with a hammer released the woman and her husband from worrying about that first ding. There would be no anxiety when parking next to some beat-up truck—no ambition for resale or getting their money’s worth. There was only the hope that this dented body would carry them where they needed to go and the acceptance that it was theirs to tend.” (p. 14) And then Erin Lane adds, that this is how she imagines the church, as a vehicle of disillusionment.

You might be wondering why I choose to begin a sermon on “community as the centre of our lives” with a story about disillusionment! Shouldn’t we be holding up community in all of its ideals and gifts?! After all, we have these wonderful, scriptural images of the first believers who, “day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having the goodwill of all the people.” While I think our congregation is actually quite healthy, and I think for the most part, we enjoy each other’s company, I think we’d be hard-pressed to say that every time we eat together, we do so with glad and generous hearts and the goodwill of all the people! That’s a bit where I’m with Erin Lane—love the idea of church and community, but the reality of it is a bit different and sometimes harder to love!

We Mennonites do love community, though. Many of us come to church each Sunday to see and re-connect with friends, to catch up on the week. We are quick to provide care, respond when there is a need, particularly a need for meals. We are generous with our time and our money. We see church as one big extended family. I think that's why the divisions in our conferences and denomination are so painful—it's like a family dispute; a rupture in the very fabric of our existence and our relating; the pain of disagreement is felt keenly by all.

Community is at the heart of who we are as a people. We believe that one cannot be a Christian alone, that we need a gathered group to surround us, to encourage us and to hold us accountable. That's why Mennonites have always linked baptism and church membership—when you're baptized, you're not just baptized as a lone believer, left to find your way in the world, but you are baptized into a congregation, a specific community of people where you can give and receive counsel, where you can learn and grow, nurture and be nurtured, know and be known.

Community is also at the heart of who God is. We believe in a triune God, a God who is Three-in-One. God, by God's very nature, is communal. Each person of the Trinity is in relationship with the other 2: God as Father, in relation with God as Son and God as Spirit. The Trinity models for us what it means to be in relationship. Each member of the Trinity relates to the other members, and each member of the Trinity relates to all of creation.

I recently learned that the Orthodox believe that Christ brings stability to the church, and the Holy Spirit brings dynamism. The presence of Christ in the church brings unity, as we centre our faith on him and his presence and his teachings. Christ is the foundation of our faith. The presence of the Spirit in the church brings diversity, dynamic change. The Spirit blows where it will, turning us over, mixing us up, confronting us with newness and change. The Orthodox hold these 2 beliefs in equal tension—expecting to find both unity and diversity in the church. I wonder if we Mennonites need a stronger theology of the Holy Spirit, so that we aren't brought up short by the diversity we see; so that we can see the Holy Spirit blowing in our midst as we see the various ways of being faithful in the church.

We believe that the centrality of community is embedded in scripture. Palmer Becker writes in the booklet, *What is an Anabaptist Christian?:* “Jesus wanted his followers to not only *believe* in him, but to also have a strong sense of *belonging*. One of the first things he did when he began his ministry was to form a community. He invited first Peter then Andrew and then James and John to join him. Soon, there were many followers from whom he chose 12 disciples. They learned, ate, travelled and served together until at Pentecost they became the core of a new society called the church.” (p. 8) From the very beginning of his ministry, Jesus nurtured a sense of community and belonging. His teachings were not about how to survive as a believer and follower of Jesus alone in the world, but how to live in relationship with others, how to care for them, how to resolve disputes, how to be a healing presence in the world—to bring good news to the poor, to give sight to the blind, to help the lame walk and set the prisoner free.

Jesus proclaimed, embodied and lived God’s vision for the world, a vision that included a peoplehood, “an identifiable group committed to living out the authority of God in their personal and corporate lives.” (Jack Suderman, “Jesus and the Church”, in *Jesus Matters*, p. 205) From the call of Sarah and Abraham, through the coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost to this present day, God was calling and is calling a people to embody and live out God’s vision of shalom for the world. The gospel is meant to be proclaimed by the people of God and to be lived out by the people of God; God’s kingdom is a “communal, social, political, economic and relational presence. It is not simply meant to be an individual, inner or personal preference...From the beginning of Jesus’ ministry, the formation of a community was integral to his proclamation of the gospel and the gospel was integral to his understanding of peoplehood. The 2 are inseparable.” (p. 206) Peoplehood, community, is central to the vision of God for the world. (Jack Suderman at Lebold banquet lecture)

As Anabaptists, we believe that community is the centre of our lives, because we believe that God’s intention for the world is that the gospel be lived out and embodied by God’s people. The gospel only makes sense as it is lived out in community, as it is put into practice. The good news is not theoretical, but is made visible, embodied in community. And community also embodies the “not yet” nature of God’s kingdom—we are not yet the gathered people God

intends us to be, but we continue to live into that identity, and we continue to strive to be that kind of people.

Erin Lane's concept of the church as the vehicle of disillusionment speaks to this "not yet" quality of community. She says that disillusionment is being freed from our illusions. (p. 14) So, the church is the place where we are freed from our illusions and idealism about a perfect community, or a perfect church. It is important to be freed from our illusions in order that we can be real people, in relationship with real people, dealing with real concerns and real situations. Being freed from our illusions as God's gathered people means that we can see each other and ourselves for who we really are, and know that we are loved and accepted just as we are—by God and by the community. Being freed from our illusions means that we can gather, holding before us God's vision for the world, and recognizing the places where we fail to live into that vision, and the places where we have touched the Holy. It is allowing all of that to be part of who we are as the people of God.

Living with a particular group of people over a period of time teaches us a lot about what it means for community to be the centre of our lives, and what it means to belong to a community. Belonging is a 2 way street: it recognizes the ways in which others have included us, have said yes to us and invited us in, and it recognizes the ways that we have said yes to others and placed ourselves beside them. It is more than others accepting us; it is we ourselves taking initiative in our own belonging and saying, "This is where I want to be; these are the people I am choosing to join; or this is the community I am giving myself to." Rather than saying, "These are the people who care about me", we say, "These are the people I care about." Erin Lane talks about learning to be an agent of her own belonging—joining a group intentionally, rather than waiting for them to invite her in; sitting beside someone else in worship, rather than sitting by herself. Sometimes, when we don't feel included in a group, we need to take our share of the responsibility for not including ourselves. There may be lots of real barriers to our belonging to a community, but we also need to take an honest look at ourselves and be active agents of our own belonging.

In her book, Erin Lane explores a variety of aspects of belonging (as outlined by Parker Palmer in his foreword to the book, p. 10): it is not a set of feelings we depend on, but a set of practices we enact—like placing ourselves within a group, rather than staying on the edges, like making sure our coffee conversation groups always leave space for others to join.

Belonging requires a choice to trust others and risk the consequences. There are no guarantees that in community we will not be hurt or disappointed. In fact, the guarantee is that it is most likely to happen. That is the risk of trusting others—we are imperfect and will let each other down. But that doesn't mean it isn't worth the risk. The alternative is being alone, and never belonging anywhere. Risking trust and vulnerability are the very things that deepen our belonging. When we can have honest interactions with people, when we can work through forgiving and being forgiven, we increase our sense of belonging to each other.

Belonging requires discernment about which relationships and which communities can help us be and see ourselves rightly—not all communities are trustworthy for this. Community is about being real with each other, and being accountable to each other. That is a big part of Anabaptism—it's giving and receiving counsel; knowing that we and others desire to follow Jesus, and being willing to tell each other when we see something inconsistent with that.

Belonging gives us what we yearn for—reconciliation with God, with our world, with others, and with ourselves. Community at its best will bring out the best in us, and help us to grow in being the best we can be.

We gather with this community and we are reminded that **these** are the people to whom we belong, and **these** are the people who help us remember who we are. Yes, we're imperfect, at times sharing gossip disguised as a prayer concern, or forgetting to send that thinking-of-you card or sign up to take someone a meal. And yes, we are different from each other.

But in Christ, the dividing walls have come down and continue to come down; we who were once strangers, now in Christ are made one; we've become members of God's family, supported by Christ the cornerstone. In

Christ, we are built together spiritually into God's dwelling place. This is a communal reality—all of us collectively are knit and joined together; not each of us individually. The whole letter to the Ephesians is about how a group of people gather together in Christ's presence and with the Spirit active in their midst becoming one body, one dwelling place.

It is in the gathered community that Christ is most fully known, as we break bread together—not just around the communion table, but during fellowship meals, in small groups, as we take meals to each other. Christ is most fully known when we wash each other's feet, literally and figuratively. Christ is most fully known when we are present in our neighbourhood, responding to the needs we see there, looking to see where God is at work on Berkey Avenue and asking how we can join in. We are not perfect people, but we are God's people. May Christ continue to make us one just as God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, is One.