

A New Mennonite Disaster Service

Colossians 1:11-20

Sermon by Dan Schrock

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¹¹May you be made strong with all the strength that comes from his glorious power, and may you be prepared to endure everything with patience, while joyfully ¹²giving thanks to God, who has enabled you to share in the inheritance of the saints in the light. ¹³God has rescued us from the power of darkness and transferred us into the kingdom of his beloved Son, ¹⁴in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.

¹⁵Christ is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation; ¹⁶for in Christ all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers—all things have been created through Christ and for Christ. ¹⁷Christ himself is before all things, and in Christ all things hold together. ¹⁸Christ is the head of the body, the church; Christ is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, so that he might come to have first place in everything. ¹⁹For in Christ all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, ²⁰and through Christ God was pleased to reconcile to God's self all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of the cross.

(Colossians 1:11-20, NRSV, using inclusive language)

I

During the recent presidential race, a kind of disaster occurred in the American social fabric. It feels that this election cycle was one of the most angry elections in decades. From voters and candidates, we heard appeals to violence, stories of sexual assault and sexual harassment, animosity toward immigrants, hostility toward Muslims, charges of email improprieties, accusations of tax cheating, and allegations of colluding with Russia. We were subjected to attacks on the foundations of American democracy, including efforts to suppress certain classes of voters, claims of election fraud, talk about jailing opponents, and threats to reject the final vote.

We've heard people say a lot of mean things about each other. While the election is over, the consequences of this mean speech will linger with us for a long time to come. The meanness has damaged many relationships.

II

To respond to this relational disaster, do we Anabaptists need a new kind of Mennonite Disaster Service? The idea for MDS began in 1950 at a Sunday school picnic in Hesston, Kansas, when a number of adults expressed a desire to “seek opportunities to be

engaged in peaceful, helpful activity . . . just where we find ourselves.”¹ Since then, MDS has evolved into a volunteer network of Anabaptist churches that cleans up after natural disasters such as hurricanes and floods, and repairs and rebuilds homes. MDS’s purpose is to witness to Christ by nurturing faith, hope, and wholeness.²

MDS has done great work over the last 66 years, and I hope it continues that work. Yet I wonder if we Anabaptists now have an opportunity to expand the work we’ve done after natural disasters. Could we also clean up after social disasters? In the relational disaster caused by the recent election, how can we Mennonites offer healing and hope in the name of Christ?

III

Colossians 1 offers a theological foundation for expressing healing and hope in the name of Christ. This passage is extremely dense, with lots of ideas squeezed together into only 6 English sentences. One sermon cannot possibly address everything in this text, so instead I want to land on two verses.

The first one is verse 17 which declares that “in Christ all things hold together.” This was an astonishing claim for Christians to make in the world of the Roman Empire. When Colossians was written, Christians numbered only a tiny fraction of people in the empire. Moreover, Christ had been crucified—publicly shamed through Pilate’s act of terrorism. In Roman culture, crucified people were despised. So it was downright cheeky for Christians to claim that a crucified person is the glue which holds everything in the universe together.

Many of you in this room have taken to heart this conviction that Christ is the glue of the world. I watch you live your lives, and in the snippets and pieces that you allow me to see, it’s obvious that you think Christ binds the world together.

The second verse I want to land on is verse 20 which reads, “through Christ God was pleased to reconcile to God’s self all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making

¹ “Our History,” <http://disastervolunteers.org/about-us/history/>, accessed November 1, 2016.

² “Responding, Rebuilding, Restoring: Who We Are,” <http://www.disastervolunteers.org/home/>, accessed November 1, 2016.

peace through the blood of the cross.” In other words, reconciliation is one the main things God cares about. It’s one of God’s central passions, one of God’s most fervent desires for humanity.

Let us take away at least two things from Colossians 1. First, Christ holds together a world that sometimes seems very chaotic. Despite the chaos, Christ is the world’s central organizing principle. It doesn’t matter whether or not the world recognizes this, because God in Christ has the capacity to hold things together even if the world isn’t aware of it. The second thing to take away from Colossians is that people can be reconciled. Again, Christ makes this possible, whether or not people realize that Christ is working in the middle of the reconciliation. You and I know Christ works in reconciliation efforts, and that knowledge gives us the courage to persist in reconciliation even when it seems like terribly hard work.

IV

So what might it look like for us to respond to the post-election relational disaster in the United States? What can you and I do? Each of us has a role to play in responding to this disaster, because much of the work needs to be done in inter-personal relationships wherever we live and work, and whether we are old or young, female or male, white, black, Latino, or Asian.

There are lots of possible responses, but I want to focus on one deeply rooted in the biblical tradition: the practice of eating meals with our enemies. Do you remember Psalm 23, where God prepares a table before us in the presence of our enemies? Do you remember 2 Kings 6, where Elisha persuaded the Israelites to throw a banquet for the whole Aramean army, thereby stopping a war (vv. 11-23)? Do you remember Jesus, who ate with tax collectors and with Pharisees, and who near the end of his life ate a Passover meal with Judas Iscariot, of all people?

Lest you doubt the power of eating with enemies, I want to tell you the story of Matthew Stevenson, an Orthodox Jew who was a student at New College of Florida, located in Sarasota. Because Matthew Stevenson was the only Orthodox Jew in the

student body, he didn't have a natural community of support. So instead he tried to create a community for himself. Every Friday night, Matthew hosted a Shabbat dinner in his campus apartment. He cooked the meal and invited a small group of friends and acquaintances to eat it with him. Some of the people around the table were Christians and some were atheists. Some were black and some were Latino. Matthew's purpose wasn't to convert anyone to Judaism. Instead he just wanted to share his Shabbat dinner with anyone who was open-minded enough to hear him say a few prayers in Hebrew and watch him drink from a Kiddush cup.

One week in the fall of 2011, Matthew Stevenson did something daring. He texted another student on campus and invited him to Friday's Shabbat meal in his apartment. But this wasn't just any student: this was Derek Black, a nationally-known racist and anti-Semite. At the age of 10, Derek Black had started a white nationalist website for children. As a young man he had spoken at rallies filled with former Ku Klux Klan members and prominent neo-Nazis. Derek's father, Don Black, had created Stormfront, the Internet's first and largest white nationalist website, with something like 300,000 users. Derek's mother, Chloe, was once married to David Duke, the former imperial wizard of the Ku Klux Klan. Matthew Stevenson decided that the best way to deal with a white nationalist like Derek Black was neither to ignore him nor to confront him, but just to include him. "Maybe he'd never spent time with a Jewish person before," Matthew remembered thinking.

Derek agreed to go to Matthew's Shabbat dinner. Both students were polite but wary of each other, not sure of each other's motives. Matthew invited him to come back, and Derek kept coming, week after week. Eventually they found they liked each other and soon started playing pool together.

It took a long time and a lot of difficult conversations, but by the end of college, Derek Black, once a poster boy for white supremacy, relinquished his racist views. The summer after graduation, he wrote a letter formally renouncing his white nationalist

views and asking people of color and of Jewish descent for forgiveness. At Derek's request, the Southern Poverty Law Center immediately published his letter on their website.³

V

In response to the relational disaster of white nationalism, Matthew Stevenson courageously invited one of his enemies to a weekly meal. That meal in turn led to friendship, which in turn led to change.

What if we did something similar? Such actions would help us to live out our denomination's vision that "God calls us to be followers of Jesus Christ and, by the power of the Holy Spirit, to grow as communities of grace, joy and peace, so that God's healing and hope flow through us to the world."

³ Eli Saslow, "The White Flight of Derek Black," *The Washington Post*, October 15, 2016, https://www.washingtonpost.com/national/the-white-flight-of-derek-black/2016/10/15/ed5f906a-8f3b-11e6-a6a3-d50061aa9fae_story.html, accessed November 1, 2016.