

The First Mennonite Church

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May 17, 2026 - Ascension Sunday

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Moving, as much as I have, means that I've said goodbye to many people, and more importantly, a good many friends. Many of these people have had a profound impact on me in ways that I'm still discovering. These relationships have changed me; I've learned to appreciate history. I've learned to see a diverse number of perspectives. I've been challenged to hold the difficult truth that two opposing views might both be right. I've learned to be patient and learned resilience. I've learned to be humble and recognize that other ideas may be better than my own. And for each person who's helped me learn these lessons, I am forever grateful. I remember them fondly.

And I've also had to say goodbye. So when these folk, who've impacted me, are no longer around, what next? I'm not talking about death, but just that they're not present. How do we live on when the ones who taught us are absent? Is it enough to remember them?

This is a question that I would, no doubt, have imagined the disciples wrestled with. This Sunday in the Church calendar is known as Ascension Sunday, which is the Sunday before Pentecost. It's also the Sunday when the church remembers Jesus' ascension into heaven. We remember the day when Jesus leaves the disciples, when they say goodbye to Jesus, their teacher, the one who has shaped, changed, and impacted them in ways that they could not believe, nor could they have imagined, and ascends into heaven.

Standing there while Jesus goes away, I'm sure the disciples wondered, "What now?" "What next?" What do they do, how do they live, now that Jesus is gone? Jesus was the glue that held them together. Is that still the case?

Our scripture reading, written decades after Jesus' Ascension, and having never met Jesus himself, Paul argues to the Philippian church that yes, Jesus still matters. Jesus remains the glue that holds the faith community together, even though Jesus is no longer there. Except now, instead of the physical person of Jesus, it's the character and teachings of Jesus which hold Christ's followers together.

Paul is likely composing this letter from a Roman prison cell. The Philippian church was special to him; it was the first community he founded in Europe, the one we discussed last week, where Lydia was one of the early members. It was one of the few churches that financially supported him and continued to support him in other ways while he was imprisoned. This letter is a part thank you, and part encouragement for the church to remain faithful to Christ, even though he is away from them.

His encouragement is to remind them that they are a part of something much larger than just their house church. I read this passage as Paul reminding the people that they are a part of a movement and a way of life that's spreading across the globe. A reminder of who they are called to be imitators of, Jesus.

It's said that imitation is the highest form of flattery, and if you want to best remember someone and what they've taught you, trying to imitate them is one way. Paul is encouraging the Philippian house church to remember who and whose they are; to recall what they've been taught, and to recall that in the midst of all their differences of opinion, what their common core is; what their shared center is; Jesus.

Paul is calling the Philippian church, in the face of conflict and division, to recall what unites them. It's not just a sameness of opinion about causes. It certainly isn't a shared ethnicity, nor is it similar values (although that does help); it is, instead, who they hold as the center of their community, and that is the person and character of Jesus. What glues them together is the teachings and desire to follow, emulate, and imitate Jesus, the image of Christ.

So what does the image of Christ look like, as emulated in a faith community? It's more than a collection of individuals; rather, it's a people bound together in a deep unity. This isn't to be mistaken for uniformity. A like-mind doesn't mean the same mind. Rather, this is an intentional commitment to be bound together by a shared sense of what it means to follow Jesus. This community shares life, the joys and the sorrows; celebrations and sufferings are held together. Each other's burdens are gladly borne. This community actively makes room for one another, carving out space in lives, hearts, and resources. This community embodies the Gospel, that is to say, it's lived out, not just something that's felt, or thought, but it's internalized, integrated into themselves, through shared practices, which shape and form the community to be more like Christ.

This community is marked by the radical simplicity and peaceableness which Jesus modelled that refuses to be disturbed by the chaos of the world; instead, it engages that chaos, promoting peace and peaceful resolution. It is a community that is rooted in justice, advocating for the disenfranchised, the discriminated, and those on the other side of power. It is a community that embodies selflessness and a love that is familial in both its depth and intimacy. Yes, let me be clear; this is not a sentimental love. It does not rely on warm fuzzy feelings. Rather, it's a love that goes to the point of death, as modelled by Jesus. It's the kind of love that, like Christ, is willing to endure loss and to sacrifice its own comfort for the good of the neighbour, and possibly even enemy, as we are wrestling with in our book study.

This is the image that this faith community is called to bear: a family bound not by blood but rather by this shared center, this common conviction, this image of Christ. This doesn't sound too different from what the Anabaptist Mennonite Church strives for. It sounds a lot like something we here strive for.

As Paul encourages the Philippian Church we too are invited to join this new family. We are invited into something far greater than a collection of individuals who happen to share a building or a belief system. We are invited to become siblings in Christ—not in a sentimental sense, but in the profound sense of familia.

In a culture that often defines belonging by biology and bloodline, Christ offers us something different. Through the simple transformational act of accepting Christ's invitation, we are joined and bonded together into the familia that Christ is shaping. Not because of our similarities, a quick survey of the whole global Body of Christ would show us to be very different, but because of our shared center. When we gather together in Jesus' name, we are knit together in a way that transcends our differences. We become the people described above, the people Paul is encouraging the Philippian church to embrace. We become a familia an ever-widening circle of connections formed through a shared commitment to Christ. It is a belonging that moves beyond birth or marriage into the realm of chosen kinship.

And this familia de Dios, this family of Christ, is special. It's not meant to blend in. Rather, when we join Christ's familia, we become set apart from our surrounding culture to become a distinct people. Where the world around us operates on the logic of self-preservation, accumulation, and the pursuit of power. The community of Christ is marked by many different values and characteristics. Values and characteristics which reflect Christ: a radical simplicity, a witness that upsets the powers of war and violence, a justice that advocates for the

marginalized. We are called to be a counter-cultural witness, a people who embody the Gospel of Jesus not just in our words, but in our very posture toward the world. We are distinct because we believe that God's Upside-Down Kingdom is what God truly dreams of, and what God desires for the world. And we believe that we are co-creators, working alongside to help bring that dream into reality.

The church is more than a social covenant; it is a call to share life, bound by love that transcends the biological. We accept the invitation to be bound together in a way the world cannot replicate. We commit to the hard, beautiful work of becoming a distinct people who honour Jesus by living out His image in our midst.

We imitate Christ, not because that's what we're supposed to do, but rather because it comes from a place of gratitude. Through imitating Christ, we honour Jesus, someone who has made such a profound difference in our lives. We imitate Jesus deliberately. We do so to continue to work that Christ already started in our own lives, shaping us to reflect his image more clearly in the world. And we do so daily. It's the daily choice to be humble when pride is easier, to be patient when frustration is quick, to speak truth when deception is easier, to speak peace when violence tempts, or to love when cruelty may be more compelling. We choose to imitate Christ, and by doing so, we join in the broader, wider familia de Dios. A family that transcends any barrier that we could possibly imagine.

Amen