

The 2016 MC Canada National Church Gathering in Saskatoon was notable because it marked the formal conclusion of the “Being a Faithful Church” process. For those not familiar with it, “Being a Faithful Church” or BFC as it was known at the time, was a communal scriptural discernment process which MC Canada developed over the course of 7 years. Originally designed to help congregations and the larger church body discern what scripture was saying to the church today, very quickly it became synonymous with the question of inclusion of 2SLGBTQ+ folk in the life and leadership of the church.

At this National Assembly, the leadership of MC Canada was expected to provide a summary and a resolution based on the feedback they’d received from national discernment groups. MC Canada concluded that the decision of whether to include 2SLGBTQ+ folk in congregational life and leadership was to be at the discretion of each congregation, and that other congregations were encouraged to be generous and leave room for different understandings of scripture. In the end, the decision of the National Church was not what many expected, there was disappointment that MC Canada didn’t take a firmer stance, one way or the other.

This summer marks 9 years since this MC Canada resolution, and nine years on, the church, locally, provincially, and nationally, is still trying to live it’s decision. There are still struggles along the way as the church tries to live it’s statement. Many congregations have left MC Canada because MC Canada wasn’t as clear as they would have liked, one way or another. In other places, church memberships have dropped because folk have left because the church, is perceived as either too welcoming, or not welcoming enough. Giving has dropped as well too, that’s likely to be reflective of the change in membership.

Big decisions, like the one of inclusion 2SLGBTQ+ folk in the life and leadership of the church, take a long time to live into. It takes a lot of work to come to discern a perspective, to write or pass a resolution, and to develop a statement. But that’s really only half the work. The other half of the work is learning to live into the decision.

This story of MC Canada, sounds eerily similar to that of the early church a few millennia ago. Our scripture reading this week, from Paul’s letter to the Galatian church, picks up the story of

the Jerusalem Council, from last week's reflection, albeit a number of years later. At the Jerusalem Council, the apostles discerned, and agreed that Gentiles would be admitted to the early church, without having to become Jewish first, which meant that new participants didn't need to go through the ritual purification to be admitted and for men that meant they didn't need to be circumcised. In essence, the early church said, if you were Jewish, you're welcome to continue to observe the Law, and if you're Gentile, you're welcome to join the church without jumping through a number of hoops.

Since then, the early church has been trying to live into this decision. It also hasn't been easy. There has been a lot of politicking, and new factions formed; as expected, groups that are pro and groups that are against. Some things never change. And the apostles are trying to navigate this as best as they can.

The two strong evangelists to the gentile communities are Peter and Paul. So, how are *they* navigating this perilous landscape?

Paul has embraced the welcome of the Gentiles. He sees a place in God's church for both Jew and Gentile alike, *and* he sees the primary identity of all who come to the church as first and foremost believers in Christ. Even though Paul was a Jew and a Pharisee by training, his Damascus Road conversion, and subsequent missionary travels have transformed his understanding of who Jesus' message is for.

Peter also had an experience of God's radical incision back in Acts 10, with Peter and Cornelius. But according to Paul, Peter is playing it safe. When he's in the company of Gentiles, or with 'safe' company, Peter is openly eating with them, them being both Jews and Gentiles. Now what Paul means by this is debatable, for some it might mean he shares table with them eating regular meals, and for others it might mean that he is sharing communion with them, and it might be a combination of both. However, the problem arises when members of the "circumcision faction," are present. That's the name that the NRSV uses, the Common English Bible is more generous. Paul observes that Peter withdraws from the Gentiles and the Gentile supporters. Paul in his passion, calls out Peter and calls him a hypocrite. Now, whether you see what Peter is doing as a compromise, or whether you see it as hypocrisy, I'll leave that to you to decide.

But it's this context of trying to live into the Jewish-Gentile inclusion and integration that Paul is writing his letter to the Gentiles.

There's a lot that's been going on for the last number of years since the Jerusalem council made their decision. And trouble has been brewing. Since Paul's last evangelistic visit, a group of 'missionaries', or as Paul later names them 'agitators' has have arrived in Galatia, and have been working to challenge and 'correct' Paul's evangelizing efforts.¹ "...Their primary mission (at least in Galatia) was to convince gentile believers to be circumcised and then 'live like Jews'...the Gentiles (in Galatia) were counselled as follows:

- * to be circumcised
- * to follow the Jewish calendar and dietary customs and (probably)
- * to follow the whole law."²

The message of these 'missionaries' was much more than requiring folk to become Jewish before they could be admitted to the faith; this was a much more comprehensive conversion message. For these 'missionaries', embracing the ritual and ethical boundary markers of the Law meant becoming full members in God's covenant. This was not just a matter of surgery and following a set of rules; for these 'missionaries' was a matter of salvation. The stakes were high.

And I can see where they're coming from. The early Church was a branch off of the Jewish church, one might call the early church Messianic Jews, in that they believed that Jesus was the promised, prophesied Messiah. However, in the eyes of the 'missionaries' to Galatia, Jesus' messianic presence does not change how one was in a right relationship with God. For these folk, Jesus was important not because of how he changed and offered a new vision for being the Church, or for helping people be in right relationship with God, rather, Jesus was seen as a divine teacher of the Law. For these folk, keeping the Law, meant keeping their covenant status, which meant they were in right relationship with God.

Now, for Paul, too, the stakes were also high. For Paul, what he saw was his beloved 'flock' being led astray by folk who minimized Jesus' salvific work on the cross. For Paul, Jesus, and what Jesus did on the cross change our faith, and changes people's lives. For Paul, the traditional practices didn't matter as much anymore; what mattered more was people's belief and faith in Jesus. For Paul, to be in right relationship with God, it had nothing to do with the

¹ Gorman, Michael J. 2004. *Apostle of the Crucified Lord : A Theological Introduction to Paul and His Letters*. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans. pg. 188-189.

² Gorman, pg. 189.

rituals, or traditions, or adherence to a law or rules, instead, for Paul, what mattered was that people were in right relationship with God because of our faith in Jesus, and the faith of Jesus. It was Jesus' work on the cross that changed everything. The crucified and risen Christ is sufficient for salvation. What we do, how we behave, what rules we follow, and what traditions are all done in response to Jesus' act of love.

This is a significant change for the 'missionaries'; this is a significant change for the church. And the church has always struggled with significant changes.

I began watching the Netflix film "The Two Popes" this past weekend. Now, at this stage in life, I usually watch a movie in 2 or three sittings, so I'm only partially through the first act, so no spoilers please, but what strikes me in this is watching the way that Pope Benedict XVI is portrayed; as a strict adherer to the rites, rituals, customs and traditions of the Roman Catholic Church. It is well known that Pope Benedict brought back many of the older traditions for popes, including wearing red shoes. In an early scene, when Cardinal Bergoglio was coming to meet Benedict, he was told to change before meeting Benedict because Benedict liked his "Bishops to be dressed as Bishops, and his Cardinals to be dressed as Cardinals."

At their first meeting in the gardens of the Pope's summer residence, Pope Benedict and Cardinal Bergoglio get into a heated debate about change. Specifically, how Cardinal Bergoglio's beliefs and, to a degree, faith have changed, and is at variance from what Pope Benedict believes.

At one point, Pope Benedict mutters, "Change is compromise." (Illustrating his reverence for certainty and tradition.)

Cardinal Bergoglio responds, "Life, the Life He gave us, is all change. You are the successor to San Pietro, San Pietro was married,"

Pope Benedict interrupts, sarcastically, "Oh, thank you for letting me know, I had no idea."

But Cardinal Bergoglio continues, "We didn't ask priests to be celibate until the 12th century. Angels? No mention before the 5th century, and suddenly, angels are everywhere like, like pigeons. Nothing is static in nature, or the universe, not even God."

Angrily, Pope Benedict responds: God does not change.

Bergoglio: Yes, He does. He moves towards us.

Again, Pope Benedict interrupts, “I am the way, the Truth, and the Life” Where should we find him he’s always moving.”

Bergoglio: On the journey?³

Now, I haven’t seen how the film ends but I do know a few things. I know that Pope Benedict XVI will resign from being pope, I know that Cardinal Bergoglio will become Pope Francis, and I know that the Roman Catholic church will begin the slow process of change. It will be both celebrated and it will be resisted, as almost all change is.

Paul’s letter to the Galatians marks a massive shift in theology; it shifts the followers of Jesus from seeing following Jesus as a messianic branch of Judaism to a distinct religion founded on people’s faith in Jesus. Part of this shift as Paul articulates it is that one’s salvation is not found through the law, ritual, or other practices, but rather it’s through trusting in Christ’s work and God’s grace.

What comes next, over the next millennia, will be the early church, struggling to live into this shift, this change, this new way of thinking. How that happens is different from church to church. We will have denominations, we will have schisms, we will have traditional thinkers, and progressive thinkers. We will have folk who embrace change, and folk who resist change. The church of God will grow and expand, and the tent of God will cover all.

Paul reminds us that faith is about trusting God to do God’s work, specifically around God’s relationship with humankind. God has already gifted us a good and right relationship, we know this as salvation, or justification. God has done the work to restore our relationships with God. Our job is not to earn this, it’s a gift. Rather, our job is to live in the light of faith. Faith, for Paul, is an orientation of life, a life lived in trust in the love and grace of God.

Amen

³ *The Two Popes*. Directed by Fernando Meirelles, performances by Anthony Hopkins and Jonathan Pryce, Netflix, 2019.