

So, what's your favourite colour of tractor? Careful, there's a right answer, this is not a matter of personal preference. The best tractors are, clearly, RED.

I was raised as a third-generation Red Tractor Farmer. My grandpa drove red Farmalls, which became the red International Harvester line in the 70s. There was a bit of a panic in my family when IH was bought out by Case in 1985, because Case produced these white-ish tractors, but fortunately the new Case IH brand stuck with the red and black. This is me at 12 driving the 584 in the field, and then at 14 packing the trench with the legendary 5088.



Red was the best. And it wasn't just the actual equipment, it was part of our family's identity. We were red tractor farmers, when most of our neighbours drove green tractors. Which was ridiculous, because green tractors are junk. I mean, they looked funny, with their long and skinny noses, and they were always breaking down... and seriously, those guys in the shop at the John Deere dealership had no idea what they were doing. Maybe they could sell lawn mowers, but if you want a real tractor it had to be a Case IH.

Now, I suppose there were technical reasons for why my dad and grandpa were so loyal to red tractors. And they weren't totally



close-minded about it, they did have green corn planters and yellow mowers and choppers. But those subtleties were lost on me as a kid: red was good, and green was bad, and I genuinely thought less of those who disagreed. I still have a reflexive inward smirk when I drive past a John Deere out in a field somewhere.

My guess is that you have some similar loyalty, whether that's a brand of trucks, or a football team, or the best way to make borscht.

My _____ is the best _____!?

Some of those are things where we choose a side, maybe we try a product and have a good experience with it, and over time a personal preference becomes brand loyalty and even identity. When I bought my first laptop I went with Windows because I couldn't afford an Apple, and now I find Windows to be much more flexible and user-friendly and all Apple does is try to get you buy all the other Apple products, so why would anyone spend that extra thousand dollars for an Apple when all they're really paying for is the logo? ;)

See how quickly that went from a personal preference to a solid statement of how things really are to a negative judgment about anyone dumb enough to make a different choice than I've made?

We do this all the time. We find ourselves as part of a group, by choice or by circumstance, and because we're on the inside, we're familiar with it and see the good things about it, and so it feels good, the way things are meant to be. And it's really easy to get up in the circular logic of identity: I chose this because it's better, so therefore *I am* better. And also, because *I am* smart, or wholesome, or have common sense, and *I* chose this group, so it must be better.

Which is sometimes harmless self-delusion. It really doesn't matter what color your tractor is; there are pros and cons to all types of farm equipment. :)

But sometimes, that internal loop of security and identity becomes about superiority: this product, this group, this culture, this country, this isn't just good for me, it's *better than* the alternatives. And therefore *I'm* better than the alternatives.

I think that tends to be true especially when it comes to religion. For most of us, religion is a choice. I was raised in a Christian family, and so that's how I think and feel and speak, through the lens of Christianity. I didn't have a lot of choice in that, but I have chosen to continue to in that path. In particular, I have chosen the Mennonite tradition for myself. And I love being a Mennonite! We're not perfect, but there is so much that is good and true about the Mennonite path of faith and life. I wear that badge with pride.

My religion is the best religion!?

And it is a matter of pride, in a lot of cases. I'm a Mennonite because I choose to be, because I think it's a better way. And at some point, that *better for me* can become a *better than yours*, and then an *I'm better than you*.

Which isn't where I started, because after all Mennonites are supposed to be humble. But it's often where we end up, especially when it comes to religion.

So my question for today is this:

**How can we celebrate and fully engage in our identity
(cultural, national, religious, etc)
without demeaning and diminishing the identities of others?**

Can I love being a Mennonite without looking down on those who are something else?

**How can the powerful (by majority, politics, wealth, status, etc)
practice and honor their values
without oppressing the less powerful?**

As has been the theme this summer, many of us in this room have power, simply by virtue of where we were born, the colour of our skin, our gender, our financial status, etc. As Christians our religion has power as well; we're part of the largest religion in our country and around the globe, and many of the most powerful institutions and structures are rooted in the history of Christianity.

And that puts us in an awkward position sometimes, where simply celebrating who we are and what we value can put pressure on others who experience life differently. There is pressure to assimilate, to acquiesce, and to convert to Christianity, in name if not in reality, simply because we are the majority, we have the money, we have the power.

It's not just a religious tension, of course. We saw this tension politically in the Canada 150 celebrations. There was a side that wanted to celebrate all the good that comes with being Canadian and living in this wonderful country. Which was good. But there was another side that reminded us that "our" history was also about aggression and violence and injustice, and that our current ways of being in the world continue to benefit some people at the expense of others.



How do we manage that? Do we fly flags and shoot fireworks anyway? Do we rally and speak out about the negative stuff? Do we avoid the whole thing? Do whatever we want as long as it's personal and quiet and doesn't bother anyone else? (in a whisper: "Go Canada, Go!")

Again, the same tension is there with religion. How do I hold to my faith without being condescending about the faith of others? Especially when there are parts of my faith, say my values of peace and justice, that I genuinely believe aren't just the best path for me but the best path for the whole world? How do I speak out for peace without disparaging those who believe in Just War or the wrath of God?

I have more questions than answers today, as usual. So I'll share the questions and we'll see where that takes us.

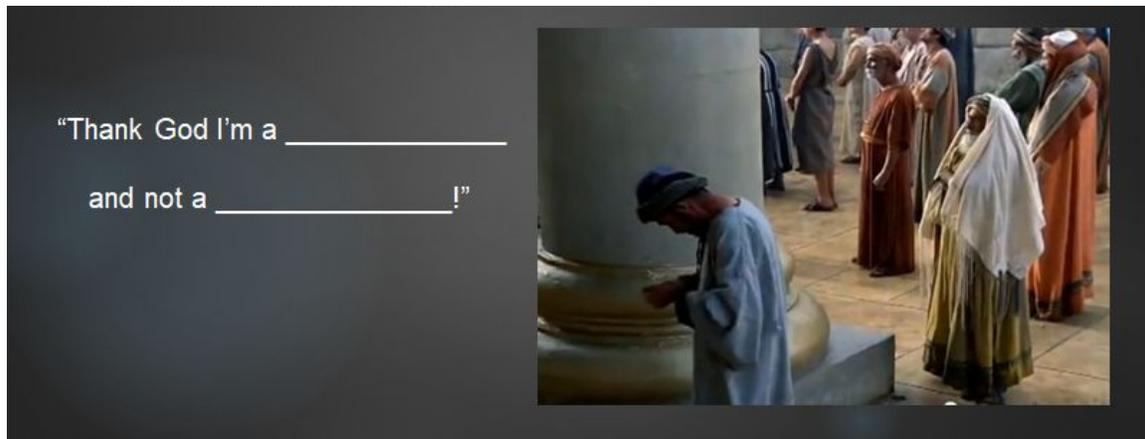
First question: Why do we care so much about the distinctions between us?

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1. Why do the differences matter?

In the gospel of Luke, chapter 18, Jesus tells the story of two men who go to pray at the synagogue. One was a Pharisee, a religious leader with significant status. He stood apart from the other worshippers, and prayed “God, I thank you that I am not like other people: thieves, rogues, adulterers, or, (snort) that tax collector over there. I am faithful, in my religious practice and in my generosity.” Meanwhile, the tax collector hung his head, “God, have mercy on me, a sinner.”

This tax collector, Jesus said, his prayer was heard by God over the other’s, “for all who exalt themselves will be humbled, but all who humble themselves will be exalted.”



Fill in your own blanks. Thank God I’m a pacifist and not a Lutheran. Thank God I’m a Christian and not one of those radical Muslims. Thank God I was born in this country and not some place without freedom of religion. Thank God my family raised me with good Christian values and not like those people who only live for themselves. Thank God my faith gives me the hope of heaven, I don’t know how those atheists live without hope in an afterlife...

It sounds like gratitude, but it’s really self-righteousness. How much of this is an ego game, a way of bolstering our insecurities by a whitewashed superiority?

For much of our history, Western Christianity has been very concerned about syncretism, the blending together of religious traditions.

When the ideas of Buddhism first came to Japan in the 6th century, most of the Japanese practiced the Shinto religion worshipping spirits and ancestors. When they learned about Buddhism through the Chinese, many of the Japanese saw goodness in both traditions, and so they built Buddhist temples attached to their Shinto shrines, and held the two of them together. Old truths and new truths combined, no problem.

Christianity has resisted this most of the time, preferring a strongly defined Orthodoxy, right belief, one permanent system of truth that applies to everyone everywhere at all times. And when we don't agree on what that truth is, we split, two groups each with their separate truth that is infinitely more true than the other's.

That rigid idea of orthodoxy is loosening a bit in recent decades, but you know, "those Mennonite Brethren, they're way too Evangelical these days." And the "MBs would say that Mennonite Church Canada is too influenced by popular culture, we're too mainstream, like the United Church or even the (gasp) Catholics."

That's one of the biggest criticisms that Christians have for each other, that someone is being too influenced by some other group outside of our "true" tradition.

And interfaith influences are even more disconcerting. Some people get really uncomfortable when Mennonite churches make friendships with Muslim communities. Or when an Indigenous leader invites us to participate in a smudge. Or when Christians practice meditation or do yoga.

I'm not saying that the differences between religious beliefs and practices don't matter. But I think it's important to ask ourselves *why* they matter to us, why they invoke such strong emotions in us. And if our reasons have more to do with our insecurities and arrogance, or simple brand loyalty, then perhaps we need to reevaluate some things like that Pharisee in Jesus' story.

A second question: What's God doing outside of the stories we tell ourselves?

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1. Why do the differences matter?
2. What is God doing outside of my story?



I love this story we heard about Abraham and Melchizedek in Genesis chapter 14. We know Abraham as the father of monotheism. He was the one that God spoke to first, choosing Abraham and his offspring, that God would bless Abraham and Isaac and Jacob, and through them, the whole world. That's the storyline, that God chose Abraham to take God's message into the land of Canaan and then the world.

And yet, when Abraham gets to Canaan, God is already there. And God already has a priest and a people, Melchizedek, king of Salem, priest of the Most High God. The scripture doesn't give us much background about where Melchizedek came from or what his faith looked like. But when Abraham met him, he recognized that God was present.

Abraham thought he was supposed to bring God's blessing to these people, but there's Melchizedek, bringing God's blessing to Abraham.

Well shucks, there goes the story. It's hard to be the Chosen Ones when God keeps choosing people outside of your story. Which happens over and over again in the biblical story, if you look for it. God chooses Hagar and her illegitimate son, Ishmael. God chooses Ruth, the Moabitess. God chooses Rahab, the pagan prostitute. God chooses the Ninevites, the enemies of Israel. God chooses Cyrus, the polytheistic Persian Emperor. God chooses Baalam, the pagan prophet. God

even chooses Baalam's donkey, religious affiliation unknown. God chooses the sinners, the gentiles, the ones who persecuted his disciples.

Why do we cling so tightly to our boundaries, when God is so clearly capable of operating outside of them? What if God is up to something among our Muslim friends? What if God has been doing something since time immemorial with our Indigenous neighbours? What if God is present in the lives of our family members who don't bother coming to church? What if?

When Abraham met Melchizedek, he didn't reject him because, "God talked to *me*, and you're doing it wrong!" He didn't try to convince Melchizedek that he needed to join Abraham's church. No, Abraham recognized God's presence, and honoured Melchizedek as the servant of God, not only an equal but as someone from whom to receive a blessing.

Is there room in our stories for Melchizedek? What would happen if we treat people of traditions other than ours as a source of wisdom and blessing, expecting to find the presence of God already with them and not just with us?

A third question: should we value "us" more than "them?" In your bulletins today, there's a note about the conflict in the Democratic Republic of the Congo. 1.4 million people have been displaced by the violence, including 8,000 Mennonites. Relief efforts are underway to provide food and stability for the displaced people, through local church agencies along with MCC and other global organizations.

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1. Why do the differences matter?
2. What is God doing outside of my story?
3. Do "we" matter more than "they" do?



Mennonite Central Committee
Relief, development and peace in the name of Christ

Responding in Kasai region, DR Congo
You can help displaced people

Armed conflict has displaced 1.4 million people, including 8,000 Mennonites. Families left behind fields and animals; food is in short supply and malnutrition is increasing. A collaborative fraternalist response is underway. Your gift helps provide food, household items and shelter supplies.

Donate today 888.822.8327
mcccanada.ca/congo-relief
134 Plaza Drive, Winnipeg, MB R2T 5K3
Or contact your local MCC office.

I hadn't heard about this situation before MCC sent word about it this week, and I'm glad that MCC is working to help. Obviously this is a crisis situation and we should do whatever we can to help.

My question is this: should it matter to us that there are 8,000 Mennonites among the 1.4 million displaced people? I honestly don't know how to feel about that. On the one hand, these are people that we are connected to in a particular way--we are partners with them through the Mennonite World Conference. Our theological roots go back to the same places, and though we don't have the same ethnic heritage, I bet many of us could play the Mennonite game and come up with some common connections pretty quickly. In real ways, these are our brothers and sisters, and we have a responsibility to care for them as best as we can. That's the principle that MCC was founded on, and many of us wouldn't be here without it.

And yet, should we really value some of these strangers over others, simply because of which church they belong to or what theology they hold? Should we give our money to this humanitarian crisis ahead of others simply because there are Mennonites there? Should we care more for people who are persecuted because of their Christian faith than those who are persecuted for being Buddhist? Don't we have a responsibility to care for all people, regardless of their religious values?

I don't know the answer to that. I feel like there's at least a bit of prejudice in that choice to value more the people who are in some way like me. It's pretty silly for me to think more highly of people who like red tractors more than green, or to stop to help a family in a Toyota but refuse to help someone driving a Ford. Is there more to this connection between Mennonites or Christians than branding or familiarity?

I told you I have more questions than answers.

A fourth question. How do "we" look to "them?"

A lot of interaction between groups is about competition or conversion. It's not enough for me to be happy with my red tractors. I also feel compelled to explain to those who prefer a different brand why my brand is better. And I'm fairly certain

that if we talk long enough, if other people are at all reasonable, then they're going to come around to my side, my way of seeing things.

Again, that's been a primary characteristic of Western Christianity, particularly in the past two centuries. Evangelism. By explanation and logic, by the quality of my character and the depth of my compassion, by threat of hellfire, I will convince you of the rightness of the way of Jesus, and you'll convert to my religion. Some of you are rolling your eyes at that, or possibly shuddering with disgust. Yet many Christians would say that evangelism is a central part of Christian faith, perhaps even our central purpose in life, to convert others.

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4. How do I look from their perspective?

PETER ROLLINS

THE
EVANGELISM
PROJECT

I'm not here to settle that one today, but I do want to raise a different way of thinking about evangelism. Pete Rollins is a writer and Christian philosopher who specializes in taking traditional ideas and turning them inside out. Watch what he does with the idea of Evangelism: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XDd4G22zrOI>

Who's coming with me? :)

This practice reminds me of the story when Jesus came across a Gentile, a Canaanite woman (Matthew 15). This woman had a daughter who was ill, and she came to Jesus for healing. She shouted to be heard above the crowds, “Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David; my daughter is tormented by a demon.” But Jesus didn't answer her. She kept on shouting, to the point that the disciples came and begged Jesus to deal with her, because she was bothering them. So Jesus told her

that her daughter was not his problem, because Jesus was only sent to help the children of Israel, not the Gentiles. Not exactly the compassion we'd expect to hear from Jesus.

Nevertheless, she persisted. She knelt before Jesus, pleading for his help. Jesus was again sharp with her: "It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs," he said. But she replied, "Even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table." At that, Jesus relented. "How great is your faith!" he answered, "Let it be done for you as you wish." And the daughter was healed, instantly.

Is it too much to say that this woman in some way converted Jesus, softened his heart towards the Gentiles by her faith and grit? What might we learn, and how might we be changed, if we're willing to listen and learn from others instead of expecting them to learn from us?

One final question: What do we have to offer to the other, freely and without conditions?

Theologian Thomas Berry described religions as having two phases. First, in what he called the "microphase," a religion is focused inward, with strong boundaries and emphasis on its uniqueness.

It's like when people first have children. For a while, all the energy and time is focused on what the young family needs, because the new life needs to be protected and cared for in order to flourish. In the microphase, the blessings of the young religion are mostly kept inside the circle, for the benefit of those who "belong" to the tradition.

But after a while, when a religion is firmly established, Berry describes the "macrophase," where the blessings of the tradition can be freely shared. The children are healthy and thriving, family life is strong, so there's now time and energy to offer to other things: hospitality, productivity, creativity...

John Philip Newell writes this:

"It is time for Christianity to enter its macrophase. It is time for us to grow into the maturity of our Christhood and make our offerings freely to the world. Not on the basis of whether people become Christians and choose to enter our household but on the basis of the gifts we have to offer for the well-being of the world.... There is no shortage of treasure in our household. What do we need to give away freely to the world and what do we need to receive from humanity's other great religious traditions?"

*~John Philip Newell, *The Rebirthing of God**

What do we have to give? Not because it might convince someone to join us. Not because we might get credit or so that it might come back to us someday. Not to enhance our public image or stroke our egos by proving just how generous we are. But simply because we have something to share, and sharing is good?

I wonder, as we consider our vision and calling as Wildwood Mennonite Church, as Mennonite Church Saskatchewan, and Mennonite Church Canada, what if we made that our central question? Rather than focusing on what we need, or what we can afford, or how we might adapt in order to survive, what if we organize ourselves around the things we might offer to all the people in our regions.

As individuals, what if we ordered our lives around how we might bless our neighbours? As we discussed a couple of weeks ago, to "look not to our own interests but to the interests of others?"

That's a long, long way from "Thank God I'm a _____ and not a _____!"

So, those are my questions today. I'm still glad to be a Mennonite. And I still like red tractors. But maybe I can hold onto those in ways that lift up others and bless the world, instead of just myself.

May God give us wisdom as walk together in the mystery and beauty of diversity. Amen.

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4. How do I look from their perspective?
5. What can we offer, freely and unconditionally?