

The Church without Spot or Wrinkle? The Kingdom and the Church **Co-Pastor Susanne Guenther Loewen** **NPMC – Jan. 31, 2021**

Scripture: Matthew 13:1-9, 31-33 (NRSV) and Ephesians 5:25-30 (Inclusive Bible)
Hymns: One Is the Body (StJ 72 – One Licence 02533), You've Got a Place (StJ 4, public domain), Will You Let Me Be Your Servant (HWB 307, CCLI)

Matthew 13:1-9, 31-33 (NRSV)

That same day Jesus went out of the house and sat beside the sea. ² Such great crowds gathered around him that he got into a boat and sat there, while the whole crowd stood on the beach. ³ And he told them many things in parables, saying: “Listen! A sower went out to sow. ⁴ And as he sowed, some seeds fell on the path, and the birds came and ate them up. ⁵ Other seeds fell on rocky ground, where they did not have much soil, and they sprang up quickly, since they had no depth of soil. ⁶ But when the sun rose, they were scorched; and since they had no root, they withered away. ⁷ Other seeds fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked them. ⁸ Other seeds fell on good soil and brought forth grain, some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty. ⁹ Let anyone with ears listen!” ...

³¹ He put before them another parable: “The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed that someone took and sowed in his field; ³² it is the smallest of all the seeds, but when it has grown it is the greatest of shrubs and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and make nests in its branches.”

³³ He told them another parable: “The kingdom of heaven is like yeast that a woman took and mixed in with three measures of flour until all of it was leavened.”

Ephesians 5:25-30 (Inclusive Bible)

“Love one another as Christ loved the church. He gave himself up for it, to make it holy, purifying it by washing it with the Gospel’s message, so that Christ might have a glorious church, holy and immaculate, without mark or blemish or anything of that sort. Love one another as you love your own bodies. Those who love their partners love themselves. No one ever hates one’s own flesh; one nourishes it and takes care of it as Christ cares for the church – for we are members of Christ’s body.”

I begin with a quote from writer and pastor, Anna Woofenden:

Our unlikely group was standing in the middle of an empty lot in old-town San Pedro, a neighbourhood nestled in the southern outskirts of Los Angeles. On either side of us were the brick walls of neighbouring buildings. Along the back of the lot, a sagging fence separated the space from a public parking lot. ... It was a plot of littered, hard-packed, scruffy dirt contaminated by years of parked cars and city waste.¹

¹ Anna Woofenden, *This Is God’s Table: Finding Church Beyond the Walls* (Harrisonburg, VA: MennoMedia, 2020), 19-20.

Now how many of you heard that description and thought, “it’s a church. That’s a description of a church”? I would guess that wasn’t your first thought! But that’s precisely what Woofenden is describing: the Garden Church (“a church that’s in a garden, a garden that is a church”). She and others would go on to plant this Garden/Church on that empty lot, complete with a cedar stump in its centre which served as their Communion table. She writes, “This was where the urban farm and outdoor sanctuary I had dreamed of for years would have its start. We were going to reimagine church here as we worked together, worshipped together, and ate together with all kinds of people. We would grow food, establish community, and connect with nature, God, and each other.”² Woofenden’s book – right down to the title: *This Is God’s Table: Finding Church Beyond the Walls* – has seemed especially poignant to me these days as all of us have had to reimagine church. Maybe you now have a favourite “church chair” at home that you sit in to take part in the Live-Streamed worship service. Maybe you have a special “church mask” that you wear to come to the building for physically-distanced worship. Maybe you have a new ritual of watching the video of the service on Sunday evenings now. Maybe you make sure to connect weekly on the phone or Zoom with someone or a group from our congregation. Whatever church looks like for you these days, it has been “reimagined” in some way from what it used to be.

As a church with its beginnings not just in the Reformation but the Radical Reformation, this should actually not be a surprise to us! Theologian Dorothee Soelle even speaks of the church as “*ecclesia semper reformanda!*” – the church that is always reforming!³ One of the main teachings of the sixteenth-century reformation was that the

² Ibid., 20-21.

³ Dorothee Soelle, *Against the Wind: Memoir of a Radical Christian* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1999), 202

church should not get too stuck in its ways, but be willing to be renewed by the Spirit in every generation. For Menno Simons, the early Anabaptist leader from whom the name Mennonite comes, this renewal and reformation was for the purposes of perfecting the church. Like other early Anabaptists, Menno had a strong ecclesiology (meaning, a strong understanding of the church). Historian C. Arnold Snyder says, “The doctrine of the church was central to Anabaptist theology. The church was to be the visible Body of Christ.” Rather than mixing saints and sinners together and letting God sort them out, “for the Anabaptists, ‘the biblical model of Christian community was the congregation of yielded, regenerated, faithful, baptized, committed and obedient believers—a community of saints.’”⁴ This was a community that was set apart in its holiness, a community that embodied the reign or kingdom of God already in the here and now, a community of the redeemed.

Building on Paul’s language in his letter to the Ephesians, Menno emphasized the church as being “without spot or wrinkle.” As it says in the Inclusive Bible, “Love one another as Christ loved the church. He gave himself up for it, to make it holy, purifying it by washing it with the Gospel’s message, so that Christ might have a glorious church, holy and immaculate, without mark or blemish or anything of that sort” (5:25-7). Even contemporary Mennonite theologians have emphasized the centrality and perfection of the church. John Howard Yoder stated it this way in the 1990s: “The people of God is called to be today what the world is called to be ultimately.”⁵ The church is, in other words, a “foretaste” of the kingdom of God, the kingdom of God on earth.

⁴ Helmut Harder, “Ecclesiology,” *Global Anabaptist Mennonite Encyclopedia Online* (GAMEO), May 2019. Accessed 19 Jan 2021. <https://gameo.org/index.php?title=Ecclesiology&oldid=164253>.

⁵ John Howard Yoder, *Body Politics: Five Practices of the Christian Community Before the Watching World* (Waterloo: Herald Press, 1992), ix.

When I was first learning about Anabaptist history, I remember being so inspired by this grand vision of the church. How empowering to belong to a people that has this whole faith thing figured out, a sanctified, holy community that is living out the Kingdom of God, a community in which divisions and hostilities have been broken down, in which “There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus,” as it says in Galatians 3:28. And it is inspiring and empowering. I believe that is the church at its best – a community that has and continues to make a difference for good in the world. But there is also a danger to having such a strong theology of the church, especially when mixed with notions of perfection, of being “without spot or wrinkle,” unblemished and pure. The danger is that it underemphasizes that the church remains a very human community, one that is not perfect, one that sometimes makes mistakes and even does harm. If the church is perfect, you see, it makes it really difficult to name and deal with the shortcomings and failures of the church in a healthy way. The impulse to minimize or gloss over harm within the church becomes very tempting, with sometimes devastating consequences.

I’ve spoken before in sermons about the shameful legacy of influential Mennonite theologian John Howard Yoder, who was abusive toward women. Within the past few years, as more of these stories have come to light, it has been discovered that he abused over 100 women over the course of his career as a supposed peace theologian and Christian ethics professor. Over 100. I find that a very painful statistic because it means that instead of holding Yoder accountable in any meaningful way, the church leadership of the time silenced his victims, covered up his harmful actions, and

therefore enabled his cycle of abuse to continue.⁶ Just this past year, another Mennonite leader, John Rempel, was found to have abused his power and crossed boundaries with students under his care during his time as a chaplain and professor at Conrad Grebel University College. His actions were serious enough for Mennonite Church Eastern Canada to terminate his ordination.⁷ This situation was a lot closer to home for me, since I worked with John during my time as a PhD student in Toronto. Here is another person who has been a leader in the Mennonite church – who helped train a generation of pastors, who played a large role in putting together the blue *Hymnal: A Worship Book*, who wrote and compiled the Mennonite minister’s manual, for goodness sake! – who abused the power he had over others and did real harm.

What do we do as a church in the face of these deeply painful situations of abuse within the church? Do we respond with cheap forgiveness in an effort to quickly put this behind us and get back to being that perfect church, without spot or wrinkle? Or do we take a long look at the trauma and actually try to work through it and do better? I have to admit, despite the painfulness of the situation, I have personally been encouraged by the way that MCEC and Conrad Grebel have responded to Rempel’s abuse. Rather than rushing a reconciliation process more concerned with reputation than healing, these church bodies have, as a first step, centered the experiences of those harmed, the students. In doing so, they’re already choosing a different path than the church of the 1980s and 90s that failed so miserably to hold Yoder accountable for his harmful actions.

⁶ See Rachel Waltner Goosen, “‘Defanging the Beast’: Mennonite Responses to John Howard Yoder’s Sexual Abuse,” *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 89, no. 1 (January 2015): 7-80.

⁷ See the news release about John Rempel from Mennonite Church Eastern Canada from this past October: <https://mcec.ca/article/10801-mcec-terminates-ministerial-credential>

So if the church as the kingdom of God isn't meant to be perfect, without spot or wrinkle, what is it meant to be? Well Jesus' own parables about the kingdom of God present a remarkably different image to that of spotlessness or perfection. In the three parables from Matthew 13, Jesus compares the kingdom of God to seed being sown in good soil, which grows abundant grain; to a tiny mustard seed, which grows into an enormous shrub full of birds' nests; to a pinch of yeast that causes dough to rise into enough to feed about 100 people! In each of these, the kingdom is imaged as something life-giving, something nourishing, something that provides welcome and belonging, even a sense of home. This is the kingdom or reign of God as a living and organic community, a community which chooses the way of life and healing, not perfection. The late Christian writer Rachel Held Evans put it this way: "This is what God's kingdom is like: a bunch of outcasts and oddballs gathered at a table, not because they are rich or worthy or good, but because they are hungry, because they said yes. And there's always room for more."⁸

I recently heard something about Saskatchewan-raised singer-songwriter, Joni Mitchell, that has stayed with me. If you're familiar with her music, especially if you've tried to play any covers of her songs, you'll know that she made up her own unusual tunings on her guitar. It turns out that this wasn't just meant to be innovative. Joni had suffered polio at the age of 9 and it left her with a weaker left hand, so she didn't have enough strength to play conventional chords. Rather than give up playing the guitar, she created her own tunings that she could play, resulting in the rich and unique harmonies

⁸ Rachel Held Evans, *Searching for Sunday: Loving, Leaving, and Finding the Church* (Nashville, TN: Nelson Books, 2015), 148.

of her songs.⁹ In this way, Joni overcame the aftermath of the polio epidemic with creativity and imagination.

As we continue to reimagine what it means to be church, to experience the strange reformation of this Covid age, let's remember what is truly radical about the church: it's not that it's perfect or flawless; it's not that it never stumbles or falls; it's not that it's immune to suffering; rather, it's that again and again, it re-commits to being a life-giving community, a community of welcome and nourishment, in which glimpses of God's love can be seen and experienced. The church is not a community without blemish, but one in which wounds are carefully tended to and lovingly healed. Amen.

⁹ Paul Wells, "Tracing the Remarkable Rise of Joni Mitchell," *Macleans*, Oct. 30, 2020, <https://www.macleans.ca/culture/arts/tracing-the-remarkable-rise-of-joni-mitchell/>, paragraphs 20-21.