

**Sermon for January 24
World Fellowship Sunday**

Walking with God finds its total meaning in fellowship¹

On this world fellowship Sunday we remember the Mennonite world conference this past summer and focus again on the conference theme walking with God.

But the phrase “Walking with God” can not stand alone but rather must find its total meaning in fellowship. We walk with God when we are able to walk with each other.

Together let’s think of synonyms for fellowship, companionship, friendship, camaraderie, mutual support, togetherness, solidarity.

While on the one hand, as you saw in the video, walking with other Mennonite Christians around the world, especially being together for a week of celebratory worship can be joy-filled and wonderful.

But day in and day out, week in and week out, year in and year out, this fellowship, companionship, friendship, mutual support, togetherness, solidarity as you might imagine is not always easy.

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Regularly in his letters to the early churches, the apostle Paul has to remind people to improve their behaviour so that they might experience enhanced companionship.

The World Fellowship Sunday text

Philippians 2:3,4 provides an excellent example.

Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others.

Why would Paul have to tell the Philippians this if people were not prone to being selfish, or to holding their own interests as more important than others? Before and after these verses he in fact exhorts the people to have the same mind, in fact to have the mind of Christ who though he was in the form of God did not seek equality with God but emptied himself even to the point of death on the cross.

I need to qualify this verse with an important caveat. It was never intended to be used as a verse that further victimizes those who are already victims. This is a passage for persons who have the power and the strength to have selfish ambitions and conceit and it is written for those who have the power to assert their interests over the interest of others. One must first have power in order to relinquish power with humility and with the mind of Christ.

And while such advice and encouragement is valuable, I'm sure we're aware all too frequently how difficult this passage is to live into.

.....putting others before ourselves?

.....emptying ourselves with the humility of Christ?

How is this truly possible?

I hope our second text for this morning will give us even deeper insight and encouragement.

I asked that it not be read, because I want to share it with you by heart.

LUKE 24:13-35 – often called the Emmaus Road passage

¹³ Now on that same day two of them were going to a village called Emmaus, about seven miles* from Jerusalem, ¹⁴and talking with each other about all these things that had happened.

¹⁵ While they were talking and discussing,

Jesus himself came near and went with them, ¹⁶but their eyes were kept from recognizing him.

¹⁷ And he said to them, ‘What are you discussing with each other while you walk along?’

They stood still, looking sad.*

¹⁸ Then one of them, whose name was Cleopas, answered him, ‘Are you the only stranger in Jerusalem who does not know the things that have taken place there in these days?’

¹⁹ He asked them, ‘What things?’

They replied, ‘The things about Jesus of Nazareth,* who was a prophet mighty in deed and word before God and all the people, ²⁰and how our chief priests and leaders handed him over to be condemned to death and crucified him.

²¹ But we had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel.*

Yes, and besides all this, it is now the third day since these things took place. ²² Moreover, some women of our group astounded us. They were at the tomb early this morning, ²³and when they did not find his body there, they came back and told us that they had indeed seen a vision of angels who said that he was alive.

²⁴Some of those who were with us went to the tomb and found it just as the women had said; but they did not see him.'

²⁵Then he said to them, 'Oh, how foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have declared!

²⁶Was it not necessary that the Messiah* should suffer these things and then enter into his glory?' ²⁷Then beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them the things about himself in all the scriptures.

²⁸As they came near the village to which they were going, he walked ahead as if he were going on.

²⁹But they urged him strongly, saying,

'Stay with us,
because it is almost evening and the day is now nearly over.'
So he went in to **stay with them.**

³⁰When he was at the table with them, he took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them.

³¹*Then* their eyes were opened, and they recognized him; and he vanished from their sight.

³²They said to each other,

'Were not our hearts burning within us* while he was talking to us on the road, while he was opening the scriptures to us?'

³³That same hour they got up and returned to Jerusalem; and they found the eleven and their companions gathered together. ³⁴They were saying, 'The Lord has risen indeed, and he has appeared to Simon!'

³⁵Then they told what had happened on the road, and how he had been made known to them in the breaking of the bread.

It's a powerful story.

It's probably not too difficult to find yourself somewhere in this story.

You're walking along with a certain understanding or interpretation of events and then something shifts and you find your heart burning within you when you have recognized Christ among you.

I have a story from Cuba to share with you that will always come to my mind when I read this story, and I hope will also illustrate the real challenge and hope of the theme "walking with God finds its fullest meaning in companionship, mutual support and solidarity".

This story occurred on the day that I was very ill (having succumbed to a food borne illness). The worst was over and I was resting and trying to rehydrate, when John came into the room sat down beside me and said, You'll never guess what I've done. I've invited our Cuban Mennonite brothers to go to church with me tonight to hear Ralph preach.

How could this possibly be a problem you ask?

More context is necessary.

John and I had by now spent one week with three Mennonite leaders from Santiago de Cuba. Mennonite Church Canada had sent them to the Seminary in Matanzas, a 14-hour bus ride from their home in Santiago to take my Spiritual Direction course and to participate in Biblical

storytelling workshops and a narrative theology course from John. We spent the mornings together for a couple of hours in John's class and the afternoons with other seminary students for a couple of hours in my class. We ate together regularly in the cafeteria and had many other opportunities to talk. We were becoming friends.

At the seminary as well was Ralph Carl Wushke, an ecumenical Chaplain at the University of Toronto and a United Church pastor who was spending his entire sabbatical at the Seminary at Matanzas, Cuba. Ralph is someone who talks quite openly of his experience as a gay man. John and I were also enjoying his friendship.

Ralph, as it turns out, was going to be preaching in Spanish at the Friday evening worship of a fledgling community of LGBTQ Christians in the heart of Matanzas. LGBTQ persons generally in Cuba have experienced a lot of oppression and prejudice. Generally, they did not feel safe to worship in very many churches and so they had begun to worship on their own on a roof top patio of someone's home on Friday evenings. They had only been meeting this way for a few months.

Ralph had invited John and I to come to the service and hear him preach and when I became sick John invited our Cuban Mennonite brothers from Santiago, to join him instead, at first not giving it a second thought, and then realizing that he had no idea how these men would understand or experience this worship context, or how this fledgling congregation of LGBTQ Christians would experience the presence of these men.

"What have I done?" John asked me that afternoon.

“Well,” I said, “start by being honest with them. Tell them where you are going and where you stand on this matter. And then they can decide whether or not to come with you.

But you have to tell them.

And who knows, let’s pray that God is in this.”

We were quite sure that Mennonite Church Canada folks did not have something like this in mind when they sent these Cuban Mennonite leaders to the seminary to spend time with John and I.

And so John talked to our new Cuban Mennonite friends about the nature of the community with whom they were being invited to worship. They were pretty open with John about their fears. This was going to be an entirely new experience for them and they worried that they were going to be entering a sinful place. John explained some of his own understandings and prayed with them that together they seek the presence of Christ wherever it might be found. The men decided to go and agreed to meet with John and Ralph and a few others at the seminary gate so that they could walk together to the service about 2 or 3 km away.

On that same day, John found Ralph to tell him of what he had done only 10 minutes before it was time to walk together. Ralph was a bit flummoxed at first and shared this news with a young seminary student who was also walking with them.

Estas mintiendo

Estas mintiendo

You're lying

You're lying

was at first all this young man would say.

The mutual fear of each other was palpable.

And this is the way they walked to the service.

Ralph told me later that along the way he realized that he would need to be the non-anxious presence.

I know that John was trying to be that as well, but he told me that even so when they had gathered on the roof top patio, about 30 people altogether, the fear of each other remained palpable.

Ralph led the service and introduced their visitors, the four Mennonite men, John and the three Cuban Mennonites, he introduced them as members of a non-violent peace church tradition.

Ralph also chose to stick with his plan to preach about the different LGBTQ interpretations of scripture through the 70's, 80's and 90's.

Just before communion, one of the Cuban Mennonites received a call on his cell phone and the three of them left the service. John presumed they had gone home (ie back to the seminary).

John noted that by the end of the service, the fear in the place had lessened considerably and he had some good conversations with people afterward.

When it was time to walk home, Ralph and John and the others found our Mennonite Brothers waiting for them on the sidewalk outside the

house. They then walked back to the seminary together exchanging walking partners several times along the way.

I noted in the days that followed a new easiness between our Mennonite friends and the others they had worshiped with that night, in particular Ralph.

A few days later, John and I and the Cuban Mennonites hosted a storytelling evening for the seminary students and professors as a culmination of John's course and when we wondered afterward how we should celebrate the evening when none of us had any food, Ralph overheard our dilemma and told us he had purchased a pie that afternoon from a street vendor that he would be happy to share. Gathered at a table, Ralph brought the pie, cut the pie and shared it with us. We ate as friends – no awkwardness, no fear - only laughter and stories and food.

Christ was among us that evening in the breaking of the piecrust.

Ah, the challenge and hope of walking with God.

It truly does find the fullness of its meaning in fellowship, companionship, mutual support and solidarity.

Globally this has not been easy in the past and will not be easy in the future either. It is so very difficult to walk together when convictions on

different matters run deep. And when our investment in these convictions is usually highly charged emotionally.

I hear the echo of the disciple Cleopas' words,
"We thought that he was the one to redeem Israel," in anguish that redemption had not occurred in the way he understood that it was supposed to.

"How foolish and slow of heart you are to believe all that the prophets declared. The Messiah must suffer before entering into glory. " And Jesus starting with Moses and all the prophets interpreted all the things about himself to them in all of scripture.

"Were not our hearts burning within us when he talked with us on the road and opened the scriptures to us?"

And after returning to their companions in Jerusalem they shared with them everything that Jesus had said to them on the road and how he had become known to them in the breaking of the bread.