

Sermon: Mutual conversion and agents of transformation

Passage: Acts 15

Throughout this summer, the title of the theme of our sermons has been “Dangerous Liaisons: Stories of mutual conversion.” Most of the sermons focused on how an encounter between two people or groups of people caused mutual conversion. Through this conversion, we get to embrace and include the other.

When we engage with people who are from different backgrounds, we all experience some type of mutual conversion. Let me give you an example of a mutual conversion. When I took Jinah to Paraguay for the first time, I introduced to her one of the most traditional snacks called chipa. After smelling and tasting a little bit of it, I could readily see that she did not like it. She told me that she does not understand why people like this. After that incident, I did not offer her any chipa. At the same time, one of Jinah’s favorite foods is sun-dae, which is a Korean sausage made out of pig blood. I could not understand why people would like to eat pig blood! Sometimes, when we go out for lunch or dinner, she would order sun-dae and I would look at her and say to myself, “I can’t believe I am married to this person.”

Around two months ago, Jinah came back from South Korea and she brought with her two packages of sun-dae. A few days later, a friend of mine visited Toronto, and he gave me two bags of chipitas, which are small size chipas. I was so excited because I had not had chipitas for a year. I knew that Jinah would not eat chipitas and so I thought I will eat these two packages all by myself! Next day, I left my apartment early in the morning and returned in the evening. After a long day of work, I was eager to have some chipitas and so I went to my kitchen. There, I was surprised to find out that Jinah ate almost the whole bag of chipitas! So, I asked her, “What happened to you?” She then explained to me that she decided to give the chipitas another try and she really liked them!

During the same period of time, Jinah would heat up a small portion of sun-dae and eat as her side dish. I did not dare to try it again. But then, one day, I had to have dinner by myself and as I was thinking what to cook, I decided to have some sun-dae. The next day, I had to have lunch by myself, and so, I tried sun-dae again. Within a week, I ate one whole package of sun-dae by myself. Noticing that I ate half of her favorite food, with a sad tone, Jinah said that this is the side-effect of a mutual conversion.

This is a small example of a mutual conversion, where by encountering and living together, each of us understands more about others and we all come out transformed! I am sure we all have stories to tell about our own experience of mutual conversion. As we live with people who are different from ourselves, we often experience it. Yet, sometimes, our experience of mutual conversion can be a gift and a sign for us to transform our community to be more inclusive and hospitable.

On July 23, Lori's sermon passage focused on Acts 10, the mutual conversion between Peter and Cornelius. Lori explained that Peter was so preoccupied with his religious tradition and his own interpretation of the scripture, that when God spoke to him through a vision to eat these animals that were considered as "profane and unclean," he disobeyed God. God, then said to Peter, "What I have made clean, you must not call profane" (Act 10:15). Later in the chapter, we see Peter and other Jewish Christians amazed when they saw Cornelius and his family members being filled with the Holy Spirit! Thus, Peter had no option but to believe that God also wants to save the Gentiles and welcomes them to God's kingdom.

Peter and Cornelius met, and through their interaction, they both came out as transformed people. Consequently, Peter, who did not want anything to do with Gentiles, now eats and enjoys fellowship with them. He even stays with the Gentiles for several days. His theology, his interpretation of the scripture, his perception toward the Gentiles, and his lifestyle has deeply changed. This reminds me of a quote of a New Testament scholar, Luke Timothy Johnson, "*The text of Scripture does not dictate how God should act. Rather, God's actions dictate how we should understand the text of Scripture.*" Anyway, Peter's experience of mutual conversion was not an ordinary experience and his story does not end here.

In Acts 11, we see Peter explaining to the church leaders in Jerusalem what he witnessed and how he had no option but to baptize the people. After hearing Peter, now, the church leaders finally understand that salvation is for the Gentiles as well. Peter's experience of mutual conversion transformed the church in Jerusalem. Soon after, the church hears the news that there are growing Gentile Christians in Antioch and so the community supports this mission by sending one of their best people, Barnabas. The same church that questioned Peter is now

supporting the missionary work in Antioch. But, the church still did not figure out specifically how the Gentile believers needed to behave as Christians. The church all agreed in principle that the Gentiles can be saved and be a part of the church but they did not agree on the terms of admission and this becomes a major issue in Acts 15.

It seems like some people in Judea could not handle the sight of uncircumcised people speaking different languages, eating forbidden foods based on the custom of Moses, and identifying themselves as the followers of Jesus. They thought that their Jewish standard and custom was **the** standard and anyone who wants to be Christian needs to live according to that standard. So, they decided to make a great effort to travel all the way to Antioch and began to tell Gentile Christians, “Unless you are circumcised and keep the law of Moses, you are not Christians!” They were very eager to tell Gentile Christians that they are not “true” Christian if they do not follow the custom of Moses. After their arrival, they also debated with Paul and Barnabas. Through this discussion, they could not come to a conclusion and so they decided to bring this issue to the apostles and the elders in Jerusalem.

The discussion continued in Jerusalem and it was quite intense. During their short break, Peter then gave a speech. Later, Barnabas and Paul told all about the signs and wonders that God had done through them in their missionary work among the Gentiles. Afterward, James made a concluding remark and the whole church agreed to James’ proposal. His proposal was to remove unnecessary obstacles from the Gentiles to become Christians and only imposed upon them “to abstain from things polluted by idols and from fornication and from whatever has been strangled and from blood.” Interestingly, according to a New Testament scholar, Carl Holladay, these four prohibitions are actually prohibitions that the O.T. required from foreigners living among the Israelites (Holladay, 302). The church then wrote an official letter and sent it with Judas a.k.a. Barsabbas and Silas along with Paul and Barnabas. When the church in Antioch read the letter, they all rejoiced.

Let me summarize what I have said so far. God is God of all and God wants to offer salvation to everyone and welcomes everyone to God’s community. However, in our lives and in our community, there are practices that exclude others, whether we do it intentionally or

unintentionally. Peter, a racist apostle, experienced mutual conversion, and this experience led to the transformation of a profoundly ethno-centric church community in Jerusalem, the center of early Christianity. After this change, the church then began to support the missionary work toward the Gentiles. Yet, there were still excluding practices within the community because some Jewish Christians demanded that Gentile believers must assimilate to their Jewish culture and custom. Through the council of Jerusalem, early Christian leaders then all agreed that Christianity is no longer a Jewish religion, but rather a global. Hence, they removed unnecessary obstacles for the Gentile believers to be Christians and did not expect them to assimilate into Jewish culture. During this council, Peter played a pivotal role in advocating the early church to be a more inclusive community.

Peter's experience of mutual conversion helped him to realize that he was a racist and that his community was a deeply ethnocentric community. The experience also guided him to re-interpret God's mission and it empowered him to be an agent of transformation toward his community and the future direction of the early Christianity. Based on this, I carefully assert that among several mutual conversions that we have experienced, maybe, **some of them are God's gifts and signs for us to transform our community to be more inclusive and welcoming.**

If this is true, **what does this mean for us Mennonites**, especially Mennonites in North America? In 2015, Mennonite World Conference did a research and presented that the church members of the Global North Mennonite/Anabaptist consist of 35% of the total population whereas the Global South consist of 65% of the total. Mennonite faith, which was once mostly of European heritage now has become a global church! God has been opening doors and opportunities to share Mennonite faith with people from different cultures and many found it attractive and joined the church. Noticing this reality, several church leaders have been supporting ethnic church planting and missionary work all over the world, like the early church in Jerusalem.

Furthermore, the leaders in North America are trying to change the culture of their churches to be more inclusive. Even though I don't have a typical Mennonite's last name, or know on how to sing four-part harmony, or play "Mennonite game," or have relatives who have a farm, I can still be a Mennonite! 30 years ago, who knew that a Korean-Paraguayan would one day be preaching at TUMC?! Mennonite church is not only global but it is becoming more

multicultural. Compared to the early church in Jerusalem, Mennonite church has advanced greatly in being diverse and inclusive. And if someone asks me what is the next step that a multicultural church has to go, I would say that we need to be an intercultural church.

Let me unpack some of the words here **very briefly**. What do I mean with being a global church? A global church is a church that is connected beyond one's culture or nation. The church in Jerusalem was starting to become a global church because they were making connection with the church in Antioch and other Gentile churches. Mennonite church is a global church because there are Mennonite churches in different countries and we network together through various organizations. By being a global church, we share concerns, prayers, and sometime help financially, and through this connection, we influence each other. However, there is a geographical distance and because of this, we don't engage with churches beyond our country as often as we do with local churches.

A multicultural church consists of church members who are from different cultural backgrounds. The church in Jerusalem was not a multicultural church because the members were mostly Jewish Christians. On the other hand, TUMC is a multicultural church because we are a community where people from different cultural background gather together and belong to the community. We are more than global, we are a multicultural church where we welcome and learn from one another. Every Sunday, we explicitly state that we welcome people "of all races, ethnicities, sexual orientations, faith backgrounds, physical capacities and gifts." This is a powerful statement, and it really welcomes people from all different background. Yet, I would need to say that not all Mennonite churches in North America are multicultural.

Then, **is TUMC an intercultural church?** Well, that is a question where which each of us has to answer. Before I explain more about an intercultural church, let me first point out some limits of a multicultural church. Although people from different cultural backgrounds are welcomed in a multicultural community, it does not mean that their voices will influence the church's bylaw, and it does not mean that they can be in an inner circle and in the leadership position. In order to be in a leadership position, the people from different ethnic background have to assimilate to the dominant culture that exists in the community. Furthermore, the church's system, power structure, policies, and bylaws are all centred around the dominant culture, while we welcome and provide a small safe space for people from different cultures.

And when there are people whom we simply cannot comprehend or get along, we just learn to tolerate them. I am not saying this to critique but rather to point out that this is a normal process of becoming an intercultural church. No church community that began as a mono-cultural can become an intercultural church without going through the process of becoming a multicultural church.

So, by an intercultural church, I define as a community that welcomes and also provide space to speak and engage deeply with each other. It is a community that avoids one particular culture to dominate, and change church's bylaw and policies in a way that empower people from different cultures. But remember, change is not always an easy process, as we can see from today's passage.

Let me wrap up. I believe our experiences of mutual conversion constantly lead us to accept and embrace the other. These experiences then help us to identify some practices and cultures that exclude certain people. I see this as a gift and a calling from God, to equip us to be agents of transformation. As Mennonites, we are called to transform our community to be more inclusive. From being a monoculture to a global church. From a global to a multicultural church. And from a multicultural to an intercultural church.

I believe that the final form, the most inclusive community in God's vision is an intercultural community, and this vision can be found in Rev. 7:9-12. This is a vision where people from all languages, cultures, and ethnics gather and worship God. Remember, they are not singing in English. They are all praising God with their own languages. This passage portrays God's vision of an intercultural community and intercultural worship.

In a time where hatred and violence occur because of the belief that a certain race is superior than others or that certain groups of people are not welcomed, we Christians have to oppose those beliefs and proclaim that everyone is welcomed and that everyone is God's beloved child. And one of the best ways to live out this message, I believe, is by working to become a more robust intercultural church, where each individual is fully welcomed, recognized, and empowered into the community.

