

A Discord so Sharp...

Text: Psalm 37 (lectionary); Acts 15:34–16:5 (assigned)

Kyle Gingerich Hiebert

Toronto United Mennonite Church

24 February 2019

Good morning. It is a great pleasure to be here with you this morning and I'm grateful for the invitation to share in worship with you. I want to begin by bringing greetings from the Toronto Mennonite Theological Centre (TMTC). And, since TMTC is a centre of Conrad Grebel University College the greetings I bring are also from Grebel. I know that there are those of you here that have led and shaped the vision of TMTC and, therefore, know it far better than I do but for those of you that may not be familiar with TMTC, we are a teaching and research centre that helps form theological leadership for the church by providing and supporting graduate theological education from a Mennonite perspective in an ecumenical context. TMTC is supported by a number of Mennonite institutions in Canada and the US as well as by MC Canada, MCEC, and the Mennonite Education Agency. You may also be aware that you as a congregation support TMTC financially and have a formal seat on TMTC's Advisory Council, for which we are very grateful. Perhaps even more significantly, however, this congregation has also long been an ecclesial home to many, many Mennonite graduate students while they complete masters and doctoral programs. Having completed all of my graduate work overseas in England where there was no Mennonite church to which I could belong I cannot adequately express my thanks to you as a congregation for the countless ways that you incorporate the graduate students that come to study here in Toronto into your work and life. Of course, I am aware of the reciprocal gifts these students bring to you as well—it is one of the great joys of my job that I get to see these gifts in action—and am doubly thankful for their presence amongst you.

The work we do at TMTC is unique in a number of respects. For one thing, TMTC is one of the few places in North America in which Mennonites have a formal role in doctoral level theological education. We also have the immense privilege of operating within what I understand is the largest ecumenical consortium of theological colleges in North America, which means that conversations with Jesuits, Basilians, evangelical Anglicans, Anglo-Catholics, Eastern Christians, Orthodox, United, Presbyterians, and more besides are not only possible but do indeed actually happen. Perhaps most uniquely of all, TMTC exists solely for the benefit of students enrolled at institutions that are not Mennonite. A community of students drawn from the Toronto School of Theology's member colleges and McMaster University as well as a burgeoning group of fellows make up the core of TMTC's regular activity in Toronto. In fact, it is often the case that our monthly scholars forums are a microcosm of this congregation and it is wonderful to have this support not only for the personal relationships it fosters but also for the bridges that are built between the church and the academy. This is something we need more of so consider this an open invitation to any and all of you to join us! This past summer was a particular highlight as we hosted our biennial conference in Toronto, which featured 22 Mennonite graduate students from 15 different institutions across North America presenting part of their ongoing work and it is something of a gross understatement to say that the research being done by these gifted students is creative, engaging, and significant for the life of the church. TMTC also coordinates the Mennonite Scholars and Friends gatherings at the annual AAR/SBL meetings on behalf of 15 different Anabaptist related institutions across North America and is a connection point and a catalyst for many wider conversations. Needless to say, there is much energy and enthusiasm

for the ongoing work of TMTC, both at Grebel and also at TST, and it is a great privilege for me to have the opportunity to work and learn alongside many gifted students. I am immensely grateful for the deep connections between TUMC and TMTC and am delighted to be able to worship with you this morning.

We Mennonites are perhaps best described as ambivalent when it comes to our attitudes toward liturgical traditions. Our suspicion is often that these traditions are little more than ecclesiastical trappings that distract from rather than fill out our worship of God. Certainly, Christmas and Easter figure prominently in our yearly worship but the way time is oriented and bounded for us is more closely linked with the business of our lives—with the rhythms of the school year, for example—than with celebrating the feast days of the Saints. This is by no means to imply that all Mennonites completely or uniformly eschew more liturgical forms of worship. When I was living in Winnipeg, for example, there was a well-known joke that the fastest growing Mennonite church in the city was St. Margaret's Anglican. This was due, in large part, *because* and not in spite of the liturgical aspects of its worship. And, of course, there are the more liturgically minded amongst us Mennonites too and we have invested in producing resources to enhance our liturgical life together. The Anabaptist Prayer Book comes to mind as one such resource. And, if you didn't already know, it has recently been made available as an app (so the ceaseless prayer that Paul extols in Thessalonians should now be even easier).

I don't know where you are here at TUMC but my sense is that, at least in general, we are somewhere in the middle of all of this; with some of us marking liturgical traditions more than others and a variety of individual perspectives. The very intentional marking of Christ the King Sunday that is a regular annual feature of our worship at my home congregation of Breslau Mennonite Church was particularly poignant and meaningful for my wife, Tara, and I in recent years as we both remembered grandparents that had died. Perhaps I should simply lay my cards on the table up front and own up to the fact that I am decidedly amongst those who see a life-giving and abiding significance in the liturgical tradition and therefore yearn for a deeper engagement with it. As I was preparing for this morning it struck me that your current ongoing series investigating the Acts of the Apostles may be a fortuitous opportunity to reflect on this, particularly as it relates to how we understand what we are doing with the biblical text in the context of worship.

Before I turn to our specific text in Acts, however, I want to say a little bit about what has come to be known as the theological interpretation of scripture in general, particularly because it can be helpful to set the context of our own hermeneutical frameworks within a wider historical narrative. Of course, there are many approaches to the difficult work of scriptural interpretation. In his *Commentary on Psalms* the third-century theologian Origen of Alexandria (c. 184–c. 253) offers a helpful image that was handed down to him by his Hebrew teacher:

...the whole divinely inspired Scripture may be likened, because of its obscurity, to many locked rooms in our house. By each room is placed a key, but not the one that corresponds to it, so that the keys are scattered about beside the rooms, none of them matching the room by which it is placed. It is a difficult task to find the keys and match them to the rooms they can open. We therefore know the Scriptures that are obscure only by taking the points of departure for understanding them from another place

because they have their interpretive principle scattered among them.<sup>1</sup>

The point here is that there is no readily available map or schematic that would allow us to know which key fits which door so we must puzzle it out together. The Bible is vast, heterogeneous, full of obscure places and references—in short, difficult to understand. The way forward, at least for Origen and a great deal of premodern biblical interpretation, must take the form of a communal project that relies on a tradition of reading to which recourse can be made in deciding which key properly unlocks which door. On this model, doctrine acts as a kind of tentative schematic drawing that allows the reader to organize the vast heterogeneity of words, images, and stories into a readable and coherent whole. I realize that even this briefest of sketches may already have some of you squirming in your seats. After all, whether we realize it or not, we are heirs of the Enlightenment and so of modern biblical scholarship, filtered through various postmodern lenses, which has instilled in us a suspicion of tradition in general and of doctrine in particular. Rather than understanding doctrine, as Augustine suggests<sup>2</sup>, like a teacher of the alphabet who enables us to read with understanding, we have largely come to understand doctrine as an abstract concept or list of propositions that demand our intellectual assent and which distracts from a life of discipleship. Simply put, we have come in lesser and greater degrees to the consensus that doctrine obscures faithful biblical interpretation at best and radically distorts it at worst. The task, then, is to separate the distorting impositions of doctrine in order to get back to the original meaning of the words given to us in Scripture. Even if our postmodern mindset throws suspicion on our ability to encounter the original intention of the authors, we nevertheless remain modern in the sense that we are given to think that doctrine distorts. This problem was vividly reinforced for me at the recent Bechtel Lectures a few weeks ago at Grebel. I don't know if any of you were there but Irma Fast Dueck gave a rousing lecture on baptism and what caught my attention during the question period was the sense that the way we have done baptismal preparation or catechesis in the past has often taken the form of knowing and being able to intellectually assent to the 24 articles of the *Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective*. The irresistible follow up question for me is what if our modern understanding of doctrine and tradition as fundamentally distorting is itself the issue. Could it not be the case that faith in the God who sent and raised his only begotten Son in the power of the Spirit—faith in *this* God with *this* vocation of love for the world is the lens through which to understand the vast heterogeneity of Scripture? Even if this understanding of doctrine and tradition is what guides us to discern the proper matching of keys to doors, the task is no less demanding. Indeed, for us Mennonites it may prove particularly difficult because of our tendency to leap from the biblical narrative and the story of the early church to the Reformation as constitutive of “our” tradition. I suspect that in doing so we have surely missed keys that could open doors that we have been trying to unlock for some time, just as we have not yet dawned the doors to which we may hold the keys to unlock.

As you have no doubt seen over the course of the past number of weeks in this series, and as is made abundantly clear if you sit down and read it in one go as I believe Michele suggested you might on the week you began this series, Acts is a book of action: conspiracy, intrigue, ambush, hostile confrontations, fierce conflicts that sometimes lead to death, rioting lynch mobs, personal violence, and incessant travel all over the Mediterranean world complete with shipwrecks, incarceration, jail breaks, famine, earthquakes, and much else besides. It is by some measure the most action-packed book of the New Testament. Discord and conflict, it seems, are lurking around

---

<sup>1</sup> See Origen, *Commentary on the Psalms 1–25* in the *Philokalia* (New York: Routledge, 1998), 70–71.

<sup>2</sup> See Augustine, *On Christian Teaching* (New York: Oxford, 1997), 102–4.

every corner. At least one of the larger lessons Acts may well be trying to teach us, should we have ears to hear, is that whatever harmony existed in the early generations of the church—teaching (doctrine), fellowship, breaking bread, prayer (cf. Acts 2:42)—did not preclude sharp discord and vigorous debate. To be sure, it is not as if the Apostles are portrayed as a rebel band of activists out looking for trouble but when it found them, as it did time and time again, they did not seek the path of avoidance. Quite to the contrary, in fact, I would suggest that we can understand the role of discord and disagreement in Acts not primarily as a problem to be solved or overcome but rather as a providential opportunity for further theological clarification that the church could not have sought without it. In nearly every chapter, there is evidence of ongoing theological disagreement, which is evidence of the seriousness with which the church took fundamental questions of doctrine. In retrospect, it is possible to read Acts as a preview of controversies that erupted in the church centuries later and, perhaps, of ones that are erupting for us today.

In an effort to look at this a little bit more closely, I want to contrast our passage in Acts first with the lectionary texts for today and then with a story. As you may have suspected from my earlier confession that I long for a deeper engagement with the liturgical tradition, when I'm invited to preach I tend to opt for the lectionary texts. There are many reasons for this but one of the unfortunate consequences is that some of the biblical text is left out of the lectionary readings and this is especially the case with Acts so while I'm grateful for your invitation to be part of this series because it means I get to wrestle with texts I wouldn't ordinarily get to I hope you'll forgive me for resorting to the lectionary. We heard the Psalm read and fortunately, the Gospel reading from Luke for today is likely so familiar that you know it by heart so I'll try to disturb you at least a bit with a new translation you will not likely have heard:

“But to you who listen I say, Love your enemies, do well by those who hate you, Bless those cursing you, pray for those reviling you. To him who strikes you on the cheek turn the other also, and from him who takes your cloak do not withhold your tunic as well. Give to everyone who asks and do not ask back from the one taking your things. And just as you wish men should do to you, do likewise to them. And if you love those who love you, what is your thanks? For even sinners love those who love them. For even if you do good to those who do good to you, what is your thanks? Even sinners do the same. But love your enemies and do good and lend without despairing of it; and your reward will be great, and you will be sons of the Most High, because he is kind to the ungrateful and wicked. Become compassionate, just as your Father is compassionate. And do not judge, and you surely shall not be judged, and do not condemn, and you surely shall not be condemned. Forgive and you shall be forgiven. Give, and you shall be given: Into your lap they will pour a goodly measure, pressed down, shaken together, and spilling over; for in whatever measure you measure it shall in turn be meted out to you (Luke 6:27–38, trans. David Bentley Hart).”<sup>3</sup>

If we had to choose just one passage of scripture to represent that most coveted category of “Anabaptist distinctive” this would surely have to be in the running. Coupled with Psalm 37, which exhorts us to “refrain from anger, and forsake wrath (Ps. 37:8),” the lectionary texts this morning certainly do not shy away from conflict. In both cases, conflict and discord is on full display and, perhaps more easily seen in the Gospel passage than in the Psalm, avoidance of such conflict and discord is not advocated. Restraint from anger, perhaps even righteous anger, in the Psalm is echoed

---

<sup>3</sup> Hart, *The New Testament: A Translation* (New Haven, Yale University Press, 2017), 118–119.

in Luke's Gospel passage where, as we know, offering the other cheek is emphatically *not* simply an act of submission to a tyrant but a subversive way of inviting one's perceived enemy to recognize in oneself a fellow human being made in the image of God. Contrasting this with our passage from Acts, then, it could seem as if the situations into which the lectionary texts presumably speak are only or at least primarily dealing with relationships between the burgeoning number of new disciples and those outside the fold, so to speak. However, what are we to make of the sharp disagreement (Acts 15:39) between Paul and Barnabas from our text in Acts? This is certainly a conflict within the church and if we read it in the light of the lectionary texts it begins to blur the line between friends and enemies in a potentially generative and illuminating way.

Let me try to illustrate what I have in mind here with recourse to a short story by the Southern Catholic writer Flannery O'Connor. For those of you that aren't familiar with O'Connor, she died at the age of 39 from lupus and spent most of her adult life living at her mother's home in rural Georgia. She penned two novels and thirty-two short stories in addition to a number of essays and letters. Writing for O'Connor was a dangerous task because it had to deal with matters that expose the worst in humanity. And, indeed, much of her writing wrestles with discord, conflict and violence. The short story I'd like to draw our attention to this morning certainly falls into this category. The story is called "A Good Man is Hard to Find" and, in brief, it describes a squabbling family on an outing that ends in horror. The family gets lost, their car turns over into a ditch, and the first vehicle to stop along the desolate road where they're stuck happens to be an escaped convict who the family soon learn is a psychopathic murderer called "The Misfit." Quietly and purposefully, he and his companions kill the family one by one and the last to die is the selfish grandmother who in her last moments tells The Misfit to pray. In response, The Misfit says:

"Jesus was the only one who ever raised the dead...and he shouldn't have done it. He thrown everything off balance. If He did what He said, then it's nothing for you to do but throw away everything and follow Him, and if He didn't, then it's nothing for you to do but enjoy the few minutes you got left the best way you can...it ain't right I wasn't there because if I had of been there I would of known and I wouldn't be like I am now." His voice seemed about to crack and the grandmother's head cleared for an instant. She saw the man's face twisted close to her own as if he were going to cry and she murmured, "Why you're one of my babies. You're one of my own children!"<sup>4</sup>

What I want to draw particular attention to here is the grandmother's vision. In the midst of what can only be described as a scene of pure horror, she catches a glimmer of the deep mystery that profoundly connects her and, at least in some sense, makes her responsible for the man (significantly *not* referred to as The Misfit for this brief moment) standing before her. Her own sin, self-obsessions, and delusions (cf. 1 John 1:8: "If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves...") are caught up in making a world in which he is possible and her recognition of this is a moment of confession and compassion in which she reaches out to touch the face of the man who has just murdered her entire family. Admittedly, this is difficult to see, particularly because The Misfit recoils at the grandmother's recognition and kills her but, in the end, even The Misfit seems to have recognized the grandmother's final gesture as one of compassion: "She would of been a good woman...if it had been somebody there to shoot her every minute of her life."<sup>5</sup>

---

<sup>4</sup> O'Connor, "A Good Man is Hard to Find," in *The Complete Stories* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1971), 132.

<sup>5</sup> O'Connor, "A Good Man is Hard to Find," 133.

I hear you asking what this story could possibly have to do with the biblical texts we have been investigating this morning and I realize that I'm going a bit long here so I'll end with this. What I think O'Connor's story helps us see in the biblical text is that conflict and discord is not only unavoidable in this life but can be embraced as a providential opportunity to see in the wounds of the risen Christ not only or even primarily an offence against eternal love but also in our fellow human beings a glimmer of the grace of God. This is precisely what O'Connor invites us to see in the grandmother's final recognition of the man who murdered her family as one of her own children and if we can manage to see this then the story is more nearly comedic in character than tragic because, in the final analysis, it begets life. This, indeed, is characteristic of many of O'Connor's short stories and, likewise, I would suggest of our texts this morning that embrace conflict and discord instead of looking away and thereby hold out the tremendously hopeful possibility that the Spirit at work amongst us might transfigure our pain and sadness into everlasting joy. This might be easier to see in the Gospel text from Luke where turning the other cheek is a subversive act that invites one's enemy to recognize in oneself the same image of God. The sharp disagreement in Acts is a more difficult case, at least partly because it seems to result in disunity of some kind. However, if we see conflict not primarily as something to be overcome but rather as a gift then we can receive this as good news because it holds out the possibility that that Spirit may well be doing a new thing within us, too. Can you perceive it?