

"PROCLAIM CHRIST-- RECLAIM PASSION"  
2 Corinthians 5:16-20 Annual Conference Sunday  
August 11, 2019  
York Center Church of the Brethren  
Pastor Christy Waltersdorff

*2 Corinthians 5:16-20 (The Message)*

*"Because of Christ we don't evaluate people by what they have or how they look. We looked at the Messiah that way once and got it all wrong, as you know. We certainly don't look at him that way anymore. Now we look inside, and what we see is that anyone united with the Messiah gets a fresh start, is created new. The old life is gone; a new life burgeons! Look at it!*

*All this comes from the One who settled the relationship between us and God, and then called us to settle our relationships with each other. God put the world square with Godself through the Messiah, giving the world a fresh start by offering forgiveness of sins. God has given us the task of telling everyone what is happening. We're Christ's representatives.*

*God uses us to persuade men and women to drop their differences and enter into God's work of making things right between them. We're speaking for Christ himself now: Become friends with God; God is already a friend with you.*

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The Apostle Paul's letters to the Christians living in Corinth make me feel a bit better about the state of the Church of the Brethren. Those Corinthians were a handful. They were rough and tumble people- with a reputation for hard-drinking, hard-fighting, and all around bad behavior. Becoming Christians may have changed their behavior but it didn't immediately change their attitudes. Paul spent a year and a half with them, planting the church, baptizing new members, preaching, and teaching the good news of Jesus Christ. After he left to do the same in another city, things sort of fell apart and troubles arose. They began fighting among themselves, vying for power. They wrote to him and asked for his help so he wrote the first letter.

Regardless of how much of a mess they had made of their life together Paul didn't disown them or throw them out of the church. He wrote a letter and told them

again how to live together as the body of Christ, loving God and each other. He was pretty clear about his expectations for them.

Not everyone was happy about his response and they bucked his authority. When he went back to visit them someone treated him rudely and the rest of the church didn't do anything about it. Paul left, heartbroken, and wrote what has been called "a letter of tears" criticizing the faith community in Corinth.

Titus delivered the letter and later reported back to Paul that the offender had been disciplined and the people were sorry for how they had treated Paul. What a mess!

Paul himself didn't start out as a saint, you know. He was one of the most famous and most feared persecutors of the early church. Then known as Saul, he was a devout Jew, a Pharisee, an expert in the law. And he was hell bent on ridding the earth of all followers of Jesus of Nazareth.

He believed they were preaching lies and leading Jews away from the true faith.

But one day, on his way to the city of Damascus to put more people in jail he was knocked to the ground and saw a vision of the Risen Christ. Christ asked, "Why are you persecuting me, Saul?" He was struck blind and led by the hand to the city where he was totally helpless and was taken care of by the same people he was on his way to arrest. By the time he regained his sight a few days later, he had received a new name, Paul, and a whole new vision of life. And that life was centered around the saving grace of Jesus Christ. He repented of his evil ways and became one of the most passionate of Christ's apostles. So he knew, first-hand, that people can change. He also knew that you can't meet the Risen Christ and not be transformed into a new creation.

The world Paul believed to be set in stone was suddenly changed and he had to run to keep up with it. He finally understood that God had invaded the world in the person of Jesus; and because of the resurrection of Christ the old is passing away and the new day has dawned.

He learned very quickly that his old ways of thinking are no longer relevant- including the way he looked at other people. The divisions Paul thought to be ordained by God's law were no longer acceptable to God. In the old world people were segregated by gender, race, religion, ethnic identity, and economic status. In the new world all people are loved and welcomed by God. Prejudice, bigotry, and bias are unacceptable and have no place in God's new creation. For Paul, salvation meant

being brought back into right relationship with God. This reconciliation with God also impacts our relationships with other people.

Paul believed that God was on the loose in the world in a new and startling way. It wasn't easy for everyone to keep up with what God was doing so Paul was patient- to a point. He knew that the way we treat each other gives a glimpse of what we believe about God. You can't preach love while beating up on each other. Well, you can, but it makes you a hypocrite.

We can't separate our relationship with God from our relationships with each other. And maybe that is what gives me hope for our denomination. The Corinthians were pretty screwed up at times- and yet, Paul, no matter how upset he was with them, never gives up on them. He never turns his back and walks away for good. He truly believes in God's redemptive love. He believes that God's creation is ongoing; that we are constantly being renewed and transformed. Paul believed not only that new life is possible, it is inevitable. It is to be expected and welcomed.

Once again, we are at a crossroads in the Church of the Brethren. We have been here before- many times. The simple way to define it is to say the conservatives want to keep things the way they are (or change them to the way things used to be) and the progressives want the church to move forward and be transformed. It is also about power in the church, which is really the last thing you should fight about in the church. Jesus showed us what power looks like- on the cross- but we don't seem to want that kind of power.

It is also, perhaps mostly, about how we interpret Scripture. It is a division between those who believe the Bible is the literal Word of God and those who believe it is the inspired word of God. Of course, there are more than two sides in the divisions in the Church and we wonder if anything can hold us together anymore. Most of us believe that if the "other side" would just come around to our way of thinking and believing then everything would be ok.

For years many of our leaders have called us "back to our foundation in Christ," thinking that we can at least agree on being followers of Christ. But that hasn't worked either because the differing factions can't or won't agree on what that means. Some congregations are talking about leaving the denomination. And some have already left. So the question is: What holds us together? What should hold us together? Should we even want to be held together?

Annual Conference is the event that calls people in the Church of the Brethren together from every congregation and district every summer. Each congregation sends delegates to participate in the decision-making process. During business

sessions we vote on leadership, hear committee reports, and often discuss and vote on various statements about what we believe as a denomination. Acknowledging the growing divisions within the church, the Annual Conference officers initiated a "Compelling Vision Process." The only business we tended to this year was the election of leadership. All other business was put on hold.

In the past year the Compelling Vision planning committee set up conversations in every district where participants sat together at tables and shared their responses to a number of questions. 71 conversations took place with 2,577 individual participants- including some of you. Questions included: *What specifically are you grateful for in the Church of the Brethren? Where do you personally need to repent to 'prepare the way' for a compelling vision for our denomination? Where do we as a church need to repent? What changes within the Church of the Brethren could strengthen Christ's work among us even as we disagree on how to be faithful to scripture?*

The responses were analyzed and a series of questions were then formulated for use at Annual Conference in July. Cyndi and I both served as table facilitators- she at a delegate table (one of 100), me at a non-delegate table (one of 30). Our job was to facilitate community building in our group and to ensure that everyone's voice was heard.

There were seven at my table- ranging in age from late 60's to 14. We were a diverse group theologically and geographically. At first we kind of sized each other up, maybe making assumptions because of where the person was from. But before long we got to know each other and like each other. We shared openly, disagreed respectfully, and learned from each other. In answering the questions over two and a half days, we talked about our own congregations and the denomination. We shared stories about our faith and our lives. I brought candy to sweeten them up.

One woman in our group is from a congregation in Western Pennsylvania. At the very beginning she voiced her skepticism with the process, the questions, and the need for conversation. She didn't understand why everyone else in the denomination didn't think the way she and her congregation did. By Saturday morning- during our final session she said she would sign up again next year if she could sit with all of us again and continue our conversation. I would too.

I know not everyone had a positive experience at their table. But I found it to be exactly what the leadership was hoping for: a diverse group of people who didn't know each other on Thursday morning and after spending hours listening respectfully to each other and sharing our own beliefs, we built community and relationships. And we asked, why can't the whole denomination do this? We didn't

change each other's minds about controversial issues. That wasn't the goal. What we did was to learn how to talk and listen to those with whom we disagree. And to do so in love.

Our first question of the week was: *When you dream about the church of the future, what do you hope the manner of our living conveys at the time?*

And the last question was: *What have you heard that excites you or gives you hope about our future as the Church of the Brethren? And between those two questions lies the past, the present, and possibly the future of our Church.*

The Annual Conference Officers will work with the Compelling Vision Team and their consultant in the coming months to decide on our next steps. I don't know what that will mean- they probably don't know either right now- but they will.

The Apostle Paul thought he knew what was right. He thought he knew how the world worked and what his faith was supposed to be. But then he met the Risen Christ and his world exploded. Suddenly all of the rules he had followed for his whole life were changed, he had new understanding, a new vision, a new identity. And he knew that he could only respond in one way- to move forward in his life with Christ.

A couple of years ago at Annual Conference a friend who was very disappointed in the Church asked me how I can continue to be a part of the larger church. My answer then is the same now- it is because I believe that new life is not only possible, it is to be expected, and welcomed. My frustration is that too often we block new life- even when it is from our God, maybe especially when it is from our God. New life scares us. We don't like change. We want things to be the way we want them. But apparently God doesn't work that way.

In Scripture God never allows anyone to remain where they began. Every story about every person in the Bible is the story of a journey from the old life without God to the new life with God. People get new names, new families, new homes, new clothes, new jobs, new understandings, new visions. So why do we, in the Church of the Brethren, expect to remain just exactly where we started? And why should we want to? I, of course, know where I want the Church to go, but even I need to seek Christ's vision and not my own.

At Annual Conference I was invited to participate in a panel discussion focused on this theme: "A New Vision for the Big Meeting." Five of us were given five minutes each to share our thoughts about ways that Annual Conference could be more of an

equipping, resourcing, and strengthening conference and less of a divisive and contentious political convention.

My fellow panelists included a District Executive, a leader in the Brethren Revival Fellowship, and two former Annual Conference Moderators.

I had a couple of months to ponder this assignment. And this is what I said:

- What if Annual Conference was a place where we harvested and celebrated the fruits of the Spirit: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control?
- What if Annual Conference was a place where we would name our unwillingness to recognize that Jesus-loving, faithful Christians can have differing theological perspectives, varied biblical interpretations, and divergent worldviews, and still remain in relationship with one another without judgment?
- What if Annual Conference was not about winners and losers but was instead about brothers and sisters uplifting, encouraging, and supporting one another?
- What if Annual Conference was a place where, instead of arguing about queries, we sang songs of praise, held hands and prayed together, and shared stories of how our congregations are glorifying God and sharing the good news of Jesus Christ in our communities?
- What if Annual Conference was a place where we showed respect for our leaders by trusting their integrity even when we disagree with them?
- What if Annual Conference was a place where we spent less time fighting about our differences and more time seeking and celebrating our common life in Christ?
- What if Annual Conference was not viewed as a battleground but was instead experienced as a sanctuary?
- What if Annual Conference was not a place of fear but was instead a place of welcome and love?
- What if Annual Conference was a place of inclusion for those who have been shut out of the church for too long--- LGBTQ folks, people of color, those living with disabilities?
- What if Annual Conference was not a place where we forced conformity but was instead a place where we sat down with a dish of ice cream and took the time to get to know sisters and brothers with whom we disagree?
- What if Annual Conference was a place where we focused on what unites us rather than on what divides us?

- What if we didn't spend so much time, energy, and money writing statements? What if we just admit that we only follow the Annual Conference statements we agree with anyway?
- What if Annual Conference was a place where we valued the contributions, wisdom, and gifts of people of all ages and abilities?
- What if Annual Conference was a place where we served side by side in the host community, putting our faith into action, and learning to know the people and the city where we meet?
- What if Annual Conference was a place where, instead of lining up at the microphones to make our speeches, we listened carefully as others shared the ways in which the Spirit of God is moving in and challenging our congregations?
- What if we had the courage and the wisdom to admit that our current way of doing Annual Conference no longer serves our church? What if we allowed the Holy Spirit to move in and through us to transform our yearly gathering into a time of worship, fellowship, service, learning, sharing, and celebration?
- What if we used our creativity and our spiritual gifts to create an Annual Conference that is truly a place where we embody the presence and the power of Jesus Christ as we unite, support, and equip our congregations to change the world in God's name?

What if?

May it be so.

Amen.