

“Following Jesus Together Across Barriers” Yayoidai MJCF July 24, 2022

(MWC 2022 in Indonesia) Mark 7:24-30

I had the great privilege to be able to attend the Mennonite World Conference in Indonesia from July 5th to the 10th. You may wonder what people do at these conferences. It’s basically a time to connect with Mennonites and Anabaptists from all over the world for times of worship, workshops, tours, eating together, late night discussions, and games together. I found the greatest value in connecting with so many different people. The theme was “Following Jesus Together Across Barriers.”

At one of the sessions, Tim Geddert shared some insights based on today’s scripture passage, Mark 7:24-30. <slide> Here are a few things he talked about. In this story we see both the humanity as well as the divinity of Jesus. In the context, Jesus is tired, and needing a break. We read that “Jesus entered a house and did not want anyone to know he was there. Yet he could not escape notice...” Imagine! The Son of God could not even keep himself secret! This is showing the humanity side of Jesus. Jesus not only shows us something about God, Jesus also gives us an example to follow. He shows us what it means to be truly human.

He was always crossing barriers, connecting with the rich and the poor, women and men, the powerful and the powerless. Here, he encounters a Syrophenician woman, asking for him to help her daughter. She was definitely an outsider, not just a Gentile, (a non-Jew), but a woman. Initially, Jesus seems to insult her. It’s true that Jews sometimes called the Gentiles dogs (with a negative meaning - like stray dogs). But, the word Jesus uses is not the same word. The word he uses means something more like “puppies,” (“dear little house pets that surround the children at the dinner table”). <slide> Jesus doesn’t even actually call the woman a dog, but instead uses the metaphor to emphasise that Jesus’ initial focus is with the Jews, even though the final vision includes all people. One day, they will all eat together in God’s kingdom. The woman’s faith filled response causes Jesus to change his mind and he heals her daughter. Jesus had not come to the house to do ministry, yet he ends up doing it. He didn’t plan to heal the Gentile but he changes his mind – actually it’s the woman who changes his mind! Jesus is showing us about being human. He does not just keep himself sheltered away from others who may challenge him. He actually allows others around him to change him. Of course, he spends much time in prayer as well, and goes through his life with a strong sense of calling from God. But, that doesn’t mean he’s like a superhuman, focused on only his agenda, unaffected by people around him. If we follow his example, it means we’ll also be learning to be open to others – weeping with those who weep, and laughing with those who laugh. He kept his perspective in God, but also sensed God at work in connecting with people around him.

For the rest of this message, I’d like to share about some of the different people I met in Indonesia. When you actually become friends, their joys become your joys, and their problems become your problems in some small way. Indonesia is very different from Japan.

<4 slides/video> And, many of the people I met were very different from me. It was interesting to hear the experiences of others. When we see people who are different from us, we learn much about ourselves and our own cultures. As we shared time together, eating, singing, and worshipping we learned about the great variety that there is, even among Anabaptist/Mennonites. We also were reminded how we are united in our faith, in following Jesus. The opening program provided us a taste of Indonesian music and culture...<4 slides/video> Throughout the week we sang songs in Indonesian, English, Japanese, Spanish, Zulu, Swahili, German, French, etc. Here are a few samples...<singing clips video>

Before the conference I joined a 3-day trip to visit various churches. GITJ Banyutowo is a Mennonite community of fishermen on the northern coast of Indonesia, about four hours by bus from the conference location in Semarang. The entire area was almost all Mennonites or Anabaptists, mixed with a few Muslims. <3 slides> Some of the oldest churches in Indonesia are here, although many of them have built newer buildings because of the growing number of church members. This is one church that began in 1861 <slide>. You can see the original braided bamboo walls and original benches, although the rest of the church has been rebuilt. This building is now

used as a place for teaching children. In one corner there are sewing machines for teaching life-skills. <2 slides>, <slide> This slide is the new church building. To accommodate the 1,200 members they have two services, one at 6am on Sunday mornings and the other at 10am. The 6am service is the most popular. (I guess fishermen are used to getting up early). Here are a few of the other churches we visited in that area. <8 slides>

During a boat trip, <2 slides> I was surprised when I was told that the whole area had been land and houses back in the 1940s. <slide> Because of climate change, the water level has risen and that section of land has disappeared. This reminded me of many kilometres of flooded coastline that I saw from the plane as I arrived in Jakarta. The government has, in fact, considered moving the capital to another location, since Jakarta seems to be sinking. Or rather, the water level is slowly rising. Planting of Mangrove trees is an initiative of the Banyutowo Mennonite community working together with sponsorship from Tokyo Marine Insurance, to protect the coastline of Indonesia in their region. <slide> In 12 years, it has now become a forest. They continue to plant the Mangrove trees which not only protect the coastline, but also provide fruit. They see the sprouts in a biblical way. We can plant and water, but God gives the growth, just like God's love in our hearts. We planted a few trees as well. <3 slides> I made a comment regarding the deep mud we had to walk in, and they told me that when they first started, years ago, the mud was waist deep. They had to crawl over the mud so they wouldn't sink in!

The Banyutowo church hosted us richly, providing 2 or 3 snack boxes for us each day, along with our regular meals. <slide> One evening, they put on a musical drama for us that depicted the history of how the churches began. An Indonesian missionary, Kyai Ibrahim Tunggul Wulung sent out many evangelists who planted many churches in Indonesia. <video and slide> On the final day, they closed the fishing village in order to show our tour group of 17 people how they make their nets, and prepare the fish. <4 slides/video> It was a good time to interact with the people, and at the end there was a presentation by the children, and a time for games together. <slide and video> During this tour I stayed with a host family. It was interesting to try and communicate since they didn't speak a word of English or Japanese. <2 slides> In Indonesia I learned that the people are generally very humble and gentle.

At the conference there were many leaders of large BIC and Mennonite churches. I met one leader of a conference of 300 churches, and thousands of members. He asked me how things are in Japan, and I told him about our group of 5 churches with 5 to 30 people. He was interested to hear that we have religious freedom, because in his churches they were not so free and were experiencing persecution. In the past churches have been burned and some church members killed, even beheaded. I heard about Christians being persecuted in African countries, in Indonesia, and in India. Vical Rao <slide> is the executive secretary of the Mennonite church in India, Dhamtari, a church with almost 4,000 members. At present, particularly churches in the countryside are experiencing various forms of persecution. Hindu extremists are trying to get rid of all Christians through property damage, and physical harassment. The government seems to favor the extremists. For example, Christians need special permits to have open meetings, while the Hindus do not. Christians used to be free to preach in the marketplaces, but now if they try that, they could be beaten or jailed. If someone decides they want to get baptised, they may need to go to court to prove that no one forced them or paid them to become Christian. According to Vical, they do not violently protest, but instead try to be peaceful, and show love. And, they spend much time in prayer.

In Indonesia there is sometimes tension between Muslims and the Christians, but there are many who are working for peace. Didik Hartono, pastor of the GKMI (Muria Christian Church of Indonesia) congregation in Winong Village, shared how his church and a neighboring mosque live out Indonesia's vision of religious harmony. <slide> The meeting places of the two faiths "seem to be as one," he said, because a canopy extends across the street, connecting them. In the picture, you'll notice that the mosque on the left is joined to the church on the right with a canvas over the street. There, they host community events together, living in peace. "May we all keep on building

the brotherhood values and live in peace with everyone and also with ones who are not the same religion as us,” Hartono said.

Speaking of making peace, I met Yongha Bae, Mennonite leader and publisher, and Joe Ko, editor and peacemaker, from South Korea. <slide> Their company has been translating Mennonite books into Korean since 2010. Joe was happy to be able to meet me, a representative from Japan. He informed me of their concern over a paper published by a Mennonite author who spoke against the idea that there were comfort women forced by the Japanese army during World War II. Joe said they were interested in dialogue, but had not yet received a response to their inquiries of the author. Although Joe did feel strongly about his concern, I appreciated his sensitive and gentle style. I look forward to building more regular contact with him and others in South Korea as we work to build peace.

I met so many different people, that it’s hard for me to keep track. I was reminded of how much God loves variety. During times of worship, it was easy to catch a sense of what it may be like in heaven when many different nations are all worshipping Christ together. <slide> Following the Spirit of Christ, crossing barriers in order to make connections with people who are different is sometimes scary. But, as we let our lives be influenced by those who are different from us, our understanding of the world will deepen and we may encounter the power of God at work among us. How are we crossing barriers together with Jesus? Maybe there’s something to learn from a Buddhist friend, or maybe you know of someone from a different country or background. It’s good to take time to learn from others. Let’s pray.

Loving God, you were not afraid to cross barriers. Thank-you for the example of your Son, Jesus. May we, too, have the courage to step beyond the familiar, following the leading of your Spirit. We pray for churches around the world who are suffering because of persecution. Tensions between Hindus and Christians in India, tensions between Muslims and Christians in Indonesia, and African countries, lack of religious freedom in China and other places. Have mercy, O Lord. May those who suffer be filled with your strength and hope. Grant them the courage to remain faithful though Christ our Lord, Amen.