

Celebrating the Gifts

Sermon at the Mennonite Church Canada

Gathering 2025

בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵינוּ מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם שֶׁלֹא עָשָׂנִי גוֹי:

*Blessed are You, YHWH our God, King of the Universe,
Who did not make me a gentile.*

בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵינוּ מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם שֶׁלֹא עָשָׂנִי עֶבֶד:

*Blessed are You, YHWH our God, King of the Universe,
Who did not make me a slave.*

בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵינוּ מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם שֶׁלֹא עָשָׂנִי אִשָּׁה:

*Blessed are You, YHWH our God, King of the Universe,
Who did not make me a woman.*

During the time when the New Testament was written, popular thanksgiving prayers made distinctions based on race, class, and gender. Moreover, there were similarities between several well-known Greek and Jewish prayers of thanksgiving. Those Greek prayers are attributed to Thales, Socrates, or Plato, philosophers who lived long before Jesus. There is a strong likelihood that the tradition of these prayers was known during the time of the Apostles.

Some of those prayers thank God for being human and not belonging to a lower race, revealing fractured relations between cultures. They also thank God for being a man and not a woman, highlighting oppressive gender relations. Certain versions of Jewish prayers of thanksgiving include gratitude for not being a “slave,” which exposes social class divisions and domination.¹ We find an example of those prayers in the *Siddur Birkat Shelomó*, the Jewish book of daily prayers, which I read before.²

Broken relations among races, oppression between genders, and social class domination are longstanding issues in human societies.

One of the earliest effects of sin on human beings, according to the Bible, involves fractured relationships marked by domination. We see this in the book of Genesis, in the story of Adam

¹ Cf. Karin B. Neutel, *A Cosmopolitan Ideal: Paul's Declaration 'Neither Jew nor Greek, Neither Slave nor Free, nor Male and Female' in the Context of First-Century Thought* (London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2015), 36-42.

² Cf. Sefaria, “Weekday, Shacharit, Preparatory Prayers, Morning Blessings.” https://www.sefaria.org/Siddur_Ashkenaz%2C_Weekday%2C_Shacharit%2C_Preparatory_Prayers%2C_Morning_Blessings.2?lang=bi (accessed October 22, 2022). Hebrew-English translation by the author.

and Eve, where God describes one of the consequences of distancing ourselves from our Creator: “Your desire will be for your husband, and he will rule over you” (Genesis 3:16 NIV). Relationships of domination were not part of the original divine design for creation. However, once sin appeared on earth, social structures established, maintained, and supported relationships of domination, which are present today in all cultures to varying degrees.

Domination refers to the exercise of control, power, or influence over another person or group. It involves an asymmetrical or nonreciprocal relationship, practiced in various ways but always in a top-down manner. As Christian philosopher Beatrice Bruteau states, the person or people who dominate determine “how the dominated will be permitted to act, behave, participate in common life.”³

During the rise of the church in the Roman Empire, cultural, gender, and social dominance influenced all regions of the empire. At that time, a Christian community from Rome sent a letter to a Christian community in Asia Minor. That letter is now known as First Peter. The recipients of the letter included four Roman provinces in Asia Minor. The populations in these provinces consisted of various native ethnic groups. Free citizens in the four provinces found themselves in the minority, outnumbered by many enslaved people. There were a small number of Romans on administrative or military duty, many Israelites, and various resident aliens.

In this letter, Peter refers to Jesus’ followers as “exiles,”⁴ meaning they are scattered or living in the diaspora. This idea appears several times throughout the letter (cf. 1:17 and 2:11). It is complemented by another term: “resident aliens.”⁵ These terms describe people who were “by-dwellers”⁶ living in places different from their place of origin, with minimal political, economic, and social rights and status.

It is in that context and for that type of people that Peter makes a revolutionary statement in chapter 4, verse 10.

Each one has received a gift,
use it to serve one another
as good stewards of the varied grace of God.

First Peter views the church as an alternative community that transcends geographic and local cultural boundaries. Different cultures, enslaved people, resident aliens, and Roman free citizens are now part of a new political system, a new community of God’s kingdom. Peter does not endorse the idea of monocultural congregations. His church model includes individuals from different congregations across multiple nations, genders, and social classes.

³ Beatrice Bruteau, *The Holy Thursday Revolution* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 2005), 8.

⁴ *parepidēmois*, lit., “visiting stranger.”

⁵ *paroikoi* in 2:11.

⁶ *par-epidēmos*, *par-oikos*.

For Peter, the church as a diverse community is called to oppose any form of domination through its very existence: each individual has received a gift to serve others. In the church, God's gifts are not limited or ranked by race, gender, or social class. No matter your culture, gender, or social standing, all followers of Christ are called to serve others.

To make that possible, verses 8 and 9 describe a necessary condition: love and hospitality.

Above all, maintain constant love for one another,
for love covers a multitude of sins.
Be hospitable to one another without complaining. (NRSVue)

The very idea of love and hospitality involves setting aside the advantages that come with your own identity, culture, gender, and social status as a host to focus on the other, even to the point of serving them. Ensuring the guest feels comfortable, at home, and well cared for becomes your main goal. As Jesus said after washing his disciples' feet, "Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another."⁷ Love and hospitality are character traits that each disciple and Christian community must develop. It is far deeper than the modern concept of multiculturalism.

Multiculturalism values differences and aims to coexist peacefully among various cultures. However, it does not ensure equal inclusion for everyone: the language and customs of the dominant culture often require minority cultures to adapt and conform to the majority.

First Peter addresses more than just tolerating cultural differences; it goes beyond multiculturalism. It encourages us to celebrate and respect diversity, actively creating opportunities for meaningful interaction among different cultures. It urges us to shift focus away from a single dominant culture and to end its supremacy over others by fostering full inclusion of all cultures on equal footing. This approach can be called interculturalism.

A diverse intercultural community without systems of domination captures our interest. There is something inherently appealing about it. Cultures that are diverse yet united, living harmoniously despite their differences, and working interdependently rather than just tolerating each other, are rare. That might be one reason why the artwork "*The Last Supper with Twelve Tribes*"⁸ by Hyatt Moore has achieved a high level of recognition and popularity. It shows a traditional scene of the Last Supper, with Jesus seated at the table with his disciples. Each disciple in this artwork represents a different culture, creating a strong visual impact.

However, comments from Christians about that painting might be disappointing. Christians often describe the gathering of different cultures as an event at the end of times, when people

⁷ John 13:34.

⁸ *The Last Supper with Twelve Tribes* can be viewed at <https://www.hyattmoore.com/thelastsupper/>

from every nation will sit at the table with Jesus. But now? No. That isn't possible. It's too difficult.

Nevertheless, Jesus did say that God's kingdom has arrived. He confirmed that, through his life and ministry, the prophecies in the Old Testament about the last days had begun to come true.⁹ According to the Apostle Paul, there is already a new creation¹⁰ in which the barriers between people no longer exist. There is already a new humanity made up of diverse ethnic groups.¹¹ Each person has already received a gift, Peter says. What are some implications for our church?

Firstly, not all local congregations exist within multicultural contexts. When members of a local community share the same culture, maintaining connections with other congregations from different cultures within our regional and global church becomes essential. This can provide the intercultural interaction that a local congregation needs to go beyond its own cultural boundaries. Leaders in monocultural congregations must be intentional about making sure that diverse cultural traditions influence their preaching, teaching, and worship. In this way, the congregation introduces its members to theological perspectives and worship customs of Christians from backgrounds that may not be represented in their immediate community.

Second, within local congregations embedded in multicultural societies, genuine inclusivity of new cultures requires honesty, deliberate effort, and often a willingness to face discomfort. Sadly, too often, multicultural churches include people of colour who sacrifice their cultural heritage to worship in ways that are unfamiliar or foreign to their backgrounds. A church might appear diverse in its membership but still lack real diversity in leadership and methods of mission and discipleship. Sometimes, a church can be multiracial yet remain culturally uniform because members of the same cultural group hold all the power and influence within the congregation.

A truly intercultural congregation brings together members and leaders from many different cultural backgrounds, all sharing equally in the church's governance, worship, theology, and programs. In such a community, everyone becomes comfortable switching between different cultural norms, not just people of colour. This involves sharing power and making space for diverse perspectives by decentralizing the dominant culture.

Cultural and social diversity is God's intention for the universal Church and the guiding principle for regional and local congregations. We need to reflect on whether the structure of our regional churches represents their diverse cultural and social identities through their leadership.

- Do we offer programs that promote interaction among diverse cultures?

⁹ See, for example, Luke 4:21.

¹⁰ 2 Corinthians 5:17.

¹¹ Ephesians 2:14.

- Are we considering the cultural differences within our regional church concerning governance, worship, and programming?
- Is our church at all levels—local, regional, and multiregional—deliberate about cultural leadership representation in line with its constituency?
- Are monocultural congregations actively engaging with churches from different cultures to truly understand, love, and share gifts with one another?
- Are churches engaging in both sharing and receiving gifts? For example, in terms of finances, we often see churches that either only receive or only give financially. Giving and receiving according to our capacity is part of God's invitation to share our gifts.

In the community of God's kingdom, communion replaces domination. Relationships are equitable and symmetrical. The Spirit of God transforms us to eradicate structures that facilitate the control of some people over others. Is our church like that? Have we identified and eradicated processes that enable one culture to dominate another? Are our churches sharing their gifts and serving one another regardless of their social status or culture?

Slaves worshipped alongside privileged Romans in the first-century community in Asia Minor. Like them, may we embody a new creation where each of us shares the gifts we have received!

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Kitchener, After Pentecost, 2025