

Matthew 28:16-20

Now the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had directed them. When they saw him, they worshipped him; but some doubted. And Jesus came and said to them, ‘All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.’

Mark 9:20-24

And they brought the boy to him. When the spirit saw him, immediately it threw the boy into convulsions, and he fell on the ground and rolled about, foaming at the mouth. Jesus asked the father, ‘How long has this been happening to him?’ And he said, ‘From childhood. It has often cast him into the fire and into the water, to destroy him; but if you are able to do anything, have pity on us and help us.’ Jesus said to him, ‘If you are able!—All things can be done for the one who believes.’ Immediately the father of the child cried out, ‘I believe; help my unbelief!’

Mennonites & Mission

Mennonites & Evangelism— maybe I have waded into the weeds on this one. A number of years back, while pastoring in Minneapolis, I had a great conversation with a church member who would eventually go to seminary, became a pastor, and is now married to a Mennonite pastor. The topic of evangelism came up. As I remember it she said clearly and directly: “I wonder if we just need retire that particular word. It has so much, baggage”. Kathleen Norris describes the word as “scary”. Evangelism (εὐαγγέλιον) literally means “good news”. Norris continues that the “bad news about evangelism might be personified as the stereotypical glad-handing Christian proselytizer, who, if we take what he says to heart, will have us spouting a strange new” language” and “be reduced to preaching on street corners”.¹ Good news really ought not be bad news.

In the biblical texts, any word of good news was brought to a person or people through a messenger, or angel, bringing good news of something

¹ Kathleen Norris, *Amazing Grace: A Vocabulary of Faith* (New York: Silverhead Books 1998), p. 300.

important to our land or world. Mennonites have been able to impart “good news” through five centuries. It has taken various forms through the centuries. I am most interested in what it all means for this congregation in this context. Knowing our past is important, so we begin with Margaret Hellwart of Beutelsbach born in 1568.

Part One: Margaret Hellwart

A traveling Swiss Brethren missionary (an angel?) shared good news to the people of Beutelsbach; a village near Stuttgart. Apparently the good news entailed a more egalitarian role for women within a worshipping community. According to this evangelist... women were able leaders, able interpreters of scripture, and able bible study leaders. Margaret took to it like a fish to water, and so did many of the women of Beutelsbach. The women of the town started attending bible study with Margaret rather than worship in the Lutheran church. As one might expect, this troubled the Lutheran authorities. Their response? Chain Margaret and these other women to the floor or stove of their homes. Men they might of executed or exiled, but the women were constituted essential workers. After all, who would cook and clean if the women all disappeared? As it turns out, Margaret was a bit of a locksmith because a re-chaining “was carried out no fewer than twenty-one times between the spring of 1610 and 1621”.² She found a way out of the chains, and each time she shared the “good news” of this new movement.

When I consider Margaret’s story for our time it makes me wonder what the good news Mennonites, and this congregation in particular might have. What is the good news with which we have been entrusted that informs our reason to exist as a congregation. Let me share some of my thoughts on that question.

In North America and Europe there is pervasive scepticism by many who hear about the regressive form of Christianity which often makes the news. This congregation holds together a compassionate presence in our work places and world. We walk alongside the hurting of our congregation and communities. We try to listen well and understand my deeply. We strive to disagree well with others who view Christianity or politics differently than we do. That which we preach and teach in this space can be understood as fuel for the ministry in which people engage outside of this space: among family, among co-workers, among neighbours. We encourage each other on a noble path. That is “good news”.

² C. Arnold Snyder and Linda A. Huebert Hecht editors in *Profiles of Anabaptist Women: Sixteenth-Century Reforming Pioneers* (Kitchner – Waterloo, ON: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 1996), pp 64-67.

I also think about our efforts at peacemaking in relationship to the violence we hear about in the news, often times perpetrated by Christians and other religious folk. We trust in the gospel of peace. In an increasing polarized world, a voice articulating a gospel of peace is sorely needed and “good news”. These or but two illustrations which stem from the spirit of Margaret Hellwart, others of the 16th century and this congregation.

The examples I have shared made me think about the Mark reading for today about the father whose child is afflicted with a terrible condition. It often times seems as if our communities are convulsing and foaming. Sometimes we doubt if anything can really change. We bring our broken lives and world to the Christ of this space for healing. Like the father of the story, we cry out ‘I believe; help my unbelief!’. And sometimes we are set on a path of healing. This is “good news”. These a few good reasons to exist.

Part two: the Union of Utrecht

Prior to the time Margaret was doing her thing in Beutelsbach, persecution was taking a serious toll on the Dutch and North German Mennonites. The political and religious establishments doing the persecution were at the same point—they all were tired of the violence. So they shaped a peace treaty called the Union of Utrecht. In exchange for an end to the persecution, the Mennonites would cease and desist from evangelism outside of their Mennonite communities. They could teach the children of their settlements, but nothing beyond. Having lost so many of their family and faith community, it felt the right decision. It might be a trade we would make as well. The Union of Utrecht (1583) changed things for the Mennonites.³ This congregation is a child of that peace accord. This story from our church history has shaped our sense of evangelism.

Bedroom evangelism (a term I once heard from a Mennonite Conference Pastor, in other words procreation within the family), became the primary source of church growth. Match them, hatch them, and at an acceptable age baptize them. Get busy young couples—fill the church pews. And being capable business people and farmers, they did well enough financially to have large families and spawn new villages and colonies. Children learned about trust in God within church and living their beliefs as they observed their parents. On the balance, it worked pretty well. I have a thought or two what this part of our history means for us today.

Any church, this church in particular, exists to train our children and youth and newer attenders in ways of trusting God more deeply. Our services of child dedication remind parents and congregation alike that we have an opportunity, and

³ N. van der Zijpp’s “From Anabaptist Missionary Congregation to Mennonite Seclusion in *Anabaptism and Mission* edited by Wilbert Shenk, (Kitchner, ON: Herald Press, 1984), pp 119-136 (p. 123 specificall

maybe even an obligation, to share good stories of peace and reconciliation which can serve as a compass for them as they mature. That is “good news” which we strive to pass on to the next generation.

As adults we try helping each other walking well the way of Jesus in a complex world. Those things Jesus taught, and following in his footsteps, is not easy business. We strive to be a place of encouragement for each other in that journey. We create space to confess our shortcomings, dust ourselves off, and try again-- what liturgists call words of confession, assurance, and rededication.

Part 3: Evangelism in the mid 20th & 21st Century

Things changed dramatically during 20th century. Our ilk of Mennonite moved from education and faith formation exclusively within the faith community into broader society. I alluded to this earlier. Organizations like Mennonite Central Committee, Mennonite Disaster Service, Mennonite Voluntary Service, Person to Person, Ten Thousand Villages, the More With Less Cookbook, creation of overseas mission boards, engagement in ecumenical theological discussions, etc.... all emerged in the mid 20th century. We shed our sectarian existence. This became a major dimension of our evangelism—going to “all nations”, or “to the ends of the earth” as other biblical versions state it. Relief & development workers as well as missionaries went from our communities and returned with stories that impacted our communities.

And guess what, the initiates have taken hold. As the Mennonite map which Susanne shared in week one of this series, the church in Ethiopia now has the highest census in their national church within Mennonite World Conference. I will share story about their church for my conclusion, but first I want offer a word or two about these world-wide endeavors for us.

It seems to me that fostering a spirit of service is part of our Mennonite identity and a core value of this congregation. Our world becomes larger when we serve be it in the city, country, continent and congregation. As children and grand-children do, they observe the important people in their lives and take on their values. Sometimes, sadly, they learn from us about materialism can consumerism. Sometimes, gratefully, they learn to be generous and service minded. This does not guarantee they will remain in the church, but they will hopefully carry the positive virtues we seek to impart in their places of work and families. And hopefully learning something of the spiritual disciplines which can sustain a life of generosity and service.⁴

⁴ Dintman, Stephen, “The Spiritual Poverty of the Anabaptist Vision” in the *Conrad Grebel Review*. Spring 1995, 17-20.

We also continue to be graced with the stories of service which return to us. That service is not always neat and tidy, and it is good for us to struggle with the complexities of our lives and world. Well, enough sermonizing. I will close from an article which appeared in the Canadian Mennonite on the Ethiopian Mennonite Church, which goes by the acronym MKC, that appeared several years back in the Canadian Mennonite. It ties together aspects of this sermon. Dave Rogalsky is the author.

Founded in 1951 following six years of Mennonite relief work including the development of a hospital” the church grew. “But it was the Derg socialist period from 1974 to 1991, a period when the church came under increasing pressure, that made MKC what it is today.

Soon foreign missionaries were sent home, property was confiscated, gatherings were banned and religious life frowned upon. But the MKC Christians, believing they needed to follow the higher authority of God in Christ, organized congregations into groups of five people to meet regularly, pray, study scripture and encourage each other” and even celebrate baptism in bath tubs”. The church, numbering around 5000 in 1982 when it was officially “closed,” resurfaced in 1991 numbering 34,000.” The year of this article appeared there were 17,000 baptisms nation wide. “This growth is fuelled by careful planning and by dependence on God’s Spirit, as well as sacrificial giving and work by its member.”⁵

May it be so again, for our congregation and Conference. May God’s wisdom guide us, our congregation, and our discernment. Amen.

Patrick Preheim, co-pastor Nutana Park Mennonite Church

⁵ Dave Rogalsky, “Ethiopian Church Grows in Maturity” in *The Canadian Mennonite* (October 10, 2012). Also found at [Ethiopian Church grows in maturity | Canadian Mennonite Magazine](#)

Parent-Child Dedication Litany

[Patrick or Luke will ask parents to come forward at the end of children's song]

Opening:- Patrick

We give thanks to God for children and entrust them to God's loving care. As families dedicate themselves and their children to God, we welcome children to the church community and commit to nurturing them as our own. We ask for God's blessing on these children, their parents, and this community as we grow together in God's love.

Luke: Raising children is an act of faith in the God of Life, God the Creator, God the Parent of us all. We welcome Clara warmly into this congregation. Following Jesus' example, we bless you, Nicole, Tristan, and Clara, as you are already a blessing to us.

Questions addressed to the parents:

PATRICK: Do you commit to creating a loving home in which a relationship with God can take root and grow? If so, answer, "We do."

Parents: We do.

Luke: Do you intend to teach your children, by word and example, what it means to live in the Jesus way of justice, peace, and compassion?

Parents: We do.

PATRICK: Surrounded by God's love, do you invite our community of faith to support you in caring for your children?

Parents: We do.

Luke: Empowered by the Spirit, may we help your children learn the joys and challenges of following the way of Jesus and experience the depth of God's love.

Blessing

(Patrick holds Clara and says:)

Clara, may God bless you and keep you, may the very face of God shine upon you and be gracious to you, may God's presence embrace you and give you peace. [*Present with certificate and book.*]

Congregational response: (on screen)

Luke: Tristan and Nicole, you have offered Clara to the strong and tender care of God.]

People: We rejoice with you and give thanks for the gift of your child. With God as our guide, we will share in your child's nurture and well-being. We will support, by our example and words, your efforts to provide a loving and caring home where trust in God grows and Christ may be known. Our prayers are with you and for you. May our shared life and witness help you grow as a family in faithfulness and joy. AMEN.