

Call to Worship

Leader: Eternal God, we give you thanks for the founders of your church, for those whom you called and formed in the image of your Son, for those who suffered and died for their faith.

People: We thank you for the cloud of witnesses.

Leader We give you thanks for the reformers of your church: for their rediscovery of truth, for their eagerness to live simply, for their faithful study of your word, for their endeavor to serve their neighbours.

People: We thank you for the cloud of witnesses.

All: God of our forebears, give us the courage and wisdom of the saints who have gone before us; form us in the image of your Son; renew your Holy Spirit's work in our generation. May we live and serve under the rule of Jesus Christ until your reign comes. Amen.

Scripture Reading: Ephesians 3:14—4:6

For this reason I bow my knees before the God, from whom every family in heaven and on earth takes its name. I pray that, according to the riches of God's glory, you may be strengthened in your inner being with power through God's Spirit, and that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith, as you are being rooted and grounded in love. I pray that you may have the power to comprehend, with all the saints, what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, so that you may be filled with all the fullness of God.

Now to the One who by the power at work within us is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine, to God be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, for ever and ever. Amen.

I therefore, the prisoner in the Lord, beg you to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope of your calling, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Parent of all, who is above all and through all and in all.

Prayer before the sermon

Uniting God, we pray that the church may be one in Christ, a true fellowship of the cloud of witnesses who know their oneness in you and speak the word of healing to this troubled world. For the sake of Jesus Christ. Amen. (STS #202)

We are beginning a series on “Being the Church”. Near the end of 2020 Susanne and I were considering those themes which might prove meaningful for a congregation living in a pandemic world. A few of our church people are living in lock down conditions; others are counselled to keep isolated; and still others of us are discouraged or simply not allowed to see the people for whom we care most. Unlike a number of Canadian MLAs I will not be taking a hot holiday to that resort state of Kansas for urgent business; family in my case. Compared to the adjustments we have had to make at NPMC I consider these as small potatoes.

People often ask me, “how are you doing”. So long as I am living second by second and minute by minute I seem to be doing fine. When I consider the losses and challenges which COVID-19 has brought to my table, though, I am less certain I am doing fine. Let me explain. It is a serious challenge to foster community when communal gatherings are discouraged or outright “verboden”. Rather than mutual care within the congregation, much of the congregational care has been shifted to pastoral staff as well as the Caring and Visitation Committee. I think my telephone arm has developed carpal tunnel syndrome. We are doing our best, but there is no replacement for people simply connecting with others of the church in a social setting. The Service Group was an initiative Nora and I brought into being, and the group had wonderful plans for 2020. I have this dream that our congregation can have multiple Mennonite Disaster Service groups serving locally; that we could have local Christian Peacemaker Team units ready for rapid response to community concerns; that we could build bridges with others of our community. Community engagement in person has ground to a halt, and given that the Service Group had a bit of momentum this has made me sad. I miss intergenerational worship. In spite of my waggly tenor voice, I miss singing along with hymns. I miss the people who I once greeted with the “Peace of Christ”, and in the briefest of exchanges to know if a follow up would be good. I hold these things.

How do we be church in these days? How do we foster care for those on the margins of our congregation, those with limited connection, those with no connection? How do we be present in our community? How do I be an effective pastor in these days? I suspect it is some of these sentiments, which Susanne may share in part, that has led us to consider aspects of “being church” over the course of several weeks—considering how we might be church in these challenging times.

Tom Yoder Neufeld suggests that no “document in the New Testament puts as much stress on the church as does Ephesians”.¹ I agree, and in this respect, it is a good way to begin our reflections on “Being the Church”. As we move into a brief consideration of the Ephesians text which was read, and as an initial image for our first two Sundays of this series, I offer an illustration from Thich Nhat Hanh’s book, *Going Home: Jesus and Buddha as Brothers*.

Let us visualize the ocean with a multitude of waves. Imagine that we are a wave on the ocean, and surrounding us are many, many waves. If the wave looks deeply within herself, she will realize that her being there depends on the presence of all the other waves. Her coming up, her going down, and her being big or small depend entirely on how the other waves are...A wave is made of other waves. You can discover the relationship between that wave and all the other waves with the principle of cause and effect. But there is another level of relationship, and that is the relationship between the wave and the water. The wave is aware that she is made of the other waves, and at the same time she realizes that she is made of water too. It is very important for her to touch the water, the foundation of her being. She realizes that all the other waves are also made of water.²

In his desire for Inter-faith connection, Thich Nhat Hahn was calling to mind the oft cited vertical and horizontal dimensions of the Christian Cross. It is mindfulness of God & neighbour, to use N.T. language. Immersed in the ocean of God we mingle with other waves of God’s ocean. Clearly Hanh did not offer this teaching during Winter in Saskatchewan, but we get the idea. The image holds.

Hahn’s metaphor is, actually, the structure for the epistle we often call “Paul’s letter to the Ephesians”. Whether the letter actually came from Paul’s hand or the destination was actually Ephesus is really immaterial at this point. It is a solid pastoral epistle which church leaders deemed worthy of the Christians canon, and for good reason.

The first three chapters of Ephesians focus on God and Christ. In Christ God has broken down the walls we create amongst ourselves. In Christ God has created a new humanity. In Christ God has put hostility to death. God has done the work. The ocean, in Thich Nhat Hahn language, has chosen to sustain and feed every wave out there. The breadth and depth of the ocean must not be lost on us.

In chapter four of Ephesians there is a distinct shift. On account of the ocean, the author of Ephesians writes, we are to lead a life worthy of the calling to which we have been called. From here there are words about valuing the varied

¹ Tom Yoder Neufeld, *Ephesians--* (Believers Church Bible Commentary Series, (Waterloo, ON: Herald Press, 2002), p. 19.

² Thich Nhat Hanh’s book, *Going Home: Jesus and Buddha as Brothers* (New York: Riverhead Books, 1999), pp. 3-4.

gifts of the community; commentary about those with power caring for those with little power; directives about the ways in which we might daily equip ourselves for being Jesus followers who have integrity.

It is the context of abiding with the water of our essence and relating to our brother and sister waves alongside us during a pandemic season that this sermon series has taken shape. And not only pondering these thoughts, but doing so from a Mennonite / Anabaptist perspective.

Here I must emphasize that bringing “a Mennonite perspective” to these quandaries is always biased. I have come to believe that there is no one “Mennonite” take on ethics, and no singular Christian understanding of atonement, or no singularly right theology; Barbara Brown Taylor’s *Holy Envy* is a wonderful book exploring such questions in narrative form³. I once believed there was a proper way of making Mennonite sense of this world and a proper Mennonite ethical response to life, but then I began to study Anabaptist history and theology. I was quite taken with C. Arnold Snyder’s *Anabaptist History and Theology* which drew my attention to “polygenesis” scholars of Mennonite history who understood local political, social and economic factors as contributing to the milieu of varied Anabaptist communities of the 16th century. It might be of interest that in the preface Snyder’s book on my shelf that he acknowledges Walter and Ruth Klaassen, (Walter being the text translator for HWB #420) as important people to him personally and in his studies.⁴ Anabaptist community and theology has differed based upon the life circumstances of this Mennonite group in mountains of Switzerland or that Mennonite gathering in Friesland or those Hutterite fellowships in East Europe. This perspective stands in contrast to the unified “Anabaptist Vision” put forth by H.S. Bender in the mid 20th century. This does not mean that I am a relativist—I do think there are such things as harmful theology and flawed ethics—but I also feel I must hold my truth lightly.

I offer my thoughts on “being the church” mindful that my particular Mennonite experience has shaped my attitudes. They emerge from my gender, my background, my education, my experiences. Susanne will offer her thoughts, which may be similar or dissimilar from mine because we are different Mennonites from differing backgrounds. Each of you will have thoughts as well. This is not a bad thing, but it will mean discerning the best route for “Being Church” together in this time will take some careful listening, courageous speaking, patience, and community discernment. This, according to my reading of the history, is the Anabaptist way forward.

³ Barbara Brown Taylor, *Holy Envy: Finding God in the Faith of Others* (New York: HarperCollins, 2019)

⁴ C. Arnold Snyder, *Anabaptist History and Theology: An Introduction* (Kitchener, ON: Pandora Press, 1995), p. v.

For the early Mennonites more significant than “Sola Scripture”, scripture alone which was a rallying cry for a number of other 16th century reform movements, was the idea that the Living Spirit of Jesus leads us. It is the Spirit of Jesus, the Holy Spirit, which guides us in discerning interpretation of scripture and the choices we face daily. Jesus did not treat the scriptures of his day with equal weight, and therefore neither do we. Jesus did not physically slay his theological and philosophical opponents, and neither do we. We follow Jesus. Jesus is the keystone for our study and living.

The Spirit of Jesus comes to and speaks through the old and young; female, male, and pan-sexual; the rich and poor; theologically trained and theological lay person. We need each other in these conversations and discernment. I believe this to be the bedrock of Mennonite discernment on what it means to be the Church even as I am aware that these are challenging times for us to be engaged in group conversation or discernment. Still, in my understanding, this is our Anabaptist way of deciding how to “be Church”.

I will be brave in subsequent weeks to share some thoughts on how we might “be Church” in these days. I will share what the Spirit has given me to offer. And then, hopefully, the conversation will continue. I would assume and expect nothing else from those speaking during the sermon time of this series. I conclude this day with several points of Good News which I think we need to keep in mind.

1. Our whole endeavour to be “People of God’s Peace” is predicated, is based upon, God’s faithfulness and not ours. Ephesians chapters 1-3 make it abundantly clear that God through Christ has done and is doing the work. The church is in Christ. Jesus is our strength. Jesus is our peace. Jesus has reconciled Christians of various backgrounds and even those beyond the church. It is very important for us to take a moment in this pandemic season to remember that God is out there and around here and in here offering works of mercy. God in Christ is doing this. This is God’s work, even before we consider our work.
2. Secondly, it is out of God’s great generosity in Christ that we seek to engage in congregational and community life. Care for the widows, orphans and aliens of this congregation and our broader community is important to God. And because it is important to God we have been given and will be given wisdom on ways to engage. God cares about the vulnerable, and we will be given wisdom, courage and strength—even as our forbearers were give this Divine energy. We are not in this alone. God is with us, dwells with us, and seeks to guide us.
3. Finally, the big picture would tell us that the story of God continues in the church and beyond it. The plague of Alexandria wiped out scads of Christians. A century or two later the bubonic plague decimated the Italian

peninsula with many Christians among the casualties. Need we mention the Black Death and political upheaval with which Julian of Norwich and Christians of Europe lived through?? Goodness, the church has suffered schism, civil war, and worse. Specific congregations have closed (where is the church in Ephesus, we wonder?), and yet the church extends beyond time and place. We do well to remember that when we are feeling glum about the present or future. And then we do well to pray. And to act as prompted.

Enough for today! We continue next week with Patrick's thoughts on a Mennonite way we might be sensitive to the most vulnerable of our communities in these days. All this grounded upon God's generous grace to us. Amen.

Patrick Preheim, co-pastor Nutana Park Mennonite Church