

A Constant Faith in Changing Times **October 11, 2015 | Geraldine Balzer**

As we gather this morning we give thanks for the abundance that we have received, for the privilege of living in comfort. We also remember that this privilege came with a cost and for that cost, we have a responsibility. We are on Treaty 6 land, a gift of the Creator by whatever name we call her.

My thoughts this morning grow out of a meditation I prepared for the Herschel church retreat at Shekinah last June. Their theme, A Constant Faith in Changing Times has caused me to examine my own thinking around faith as it connects to my Anabaptist history and the present that I live in.

I came to two conclusions in my initial thinking – first, a constant faith is not necessarily an unwavering faith, or a faith without doubts, at least not for me. And perhaps the constant faith is not my faith in God, but God’s faith in me. Over the years, I have come to realize that my faith, a faith firmly entrenched in the Anabaptist Mennonite tradition as discerned by my communities of faith, provides my ethical centre. It is why I choose to live and act the way I do. And those ways are not etched in stone but are a line in the sand that is frequently redrawn as I come to new understandings.

My second conclusion is that humankind has always lived in changing times and a constant but flexible faith has allowed God’s people to survive and thrive in many different ways.

I chose three scripture passages for this morning, three points in the Biblical story when change may have seemed overwhelming to the community of faith. In the Deuteronomy story, the Israelites have ceased wandering, have defeated tribes stronger than them, and have come to the promised land. They are no longer the slaves of the Pharaoh, no longer a wandering nomadic people, but a new nation with a new set of laws. With those new laws, a promise is made, a covenant between God and his people: “Know then that the Lord your God is God, the faithful God; with those who love him and keep his commandments he keeps covenant and faith for a thousand generations.” This promise, a promise to keep faith for a thousand generations comes with responsibility - to love and keep commandments. Keeping this covenant requires a constant faith, but as our Biblical story so clearly details, the people of God were not always good at keeping those promises, yet God always welcomed them back into covenant.

When I ponder this promise, I am linked to those generations of faithful who have preceded me and to those generations who will follow. I also think of my Mennonite ancestors who travelled to multiple promised lands and imagine them thinking that this time, it may indeed be the promised land. They held a constant faith in changing times and changing geographies. The Anabaptism of Grebel, Blaurock, and Manz is not the Anabaptism of Menno Simons. And the Anabaptism of Menno Simons changed as believers moved to Prussia and Ukraine, to Pennsylvania and Ontario, to Paraguay and Brazil, to the North American prairies. Five years ago, I had the opportunity to travel to Russia and meet my father’s cousins. The core of our faith was the same, built on the beliefs that were central to our ancestors, but our practices had changed, reflective of changed geographies, political systems, and opportunities. These faith stories, the result of constancy, are a part of my story. But I can no longer tell these stories without thinking of the people who were displaced by one group’s story of faith and faithfulness. Were the

Israelites and the Mennonites the only people with whom God made a covenant of faithfulness? And how, in our changing times, do we understand this covenant as it relates to our history and the faith traditions of those whose land we have and do inhabit? What is our response to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission? And as people of faith, what is our responsibility?

Our second story takes us to the time after Pentecost when the church was experiencing rapid growth and change. The old ways of believing and being community were no longer meeting the needs of the believers. Greek Jews and gentiles are part of the early church and leadership is struggling with being inclusive and meeting the needs of all. Following the Jewish diaspora, some Jews settled in Greece and I imagine their faith and their practices differed from the faith and practices of those Jews who returned to Israel. I imagine that it might have been a bit like Mennonite World Conference, a place where Mennonites from many different traditions gather and find commonality amidst difference. However, it is my understanding that the planning for World Conference required careful negotiation as different ways of being community and understanding God's promises through an Anabaptist lens gather in one space. It seems, in our story from Acts, that the widows, all from the community of Greek Jews, were not receiving food meant for the poor. It might have even been a bit of us and them, insiders outsiders, a power struggle between those who returned to the Holy Land and those who moved to Greece, but changing times called for new ways of demonstrating faith, new ways of organizing community. So the disciples created a new role and deacons were appointed – faith meant changing structures to better meet the needs of the community. And I think of the ways in which our communities of faith look very different from the communities of our grandparents and from other Mennonite communities. How have our communities of constant faith changed with each successive wave of immigration, 1870s, 1920s, post WW2, from Paraguay? How have our structures and communities changed as our worship services moved from German to English and our circles expanded to include those who did not come from the Swiss or Russian Mennonite ethnic traditions? And how have our structures changed as Canadian Mennonites now worship in numerous languages? The structures that enable Nutana Park to survive and thrive are not the same as those that work for other Saskatchewan congregations. The structures that work for Canadian congregations are not the structures that work in Mennonite congregations in Asia and Africa. Constant faith requires change.

Our third story, according to Amy Yoder McGoughlin, pastor of Germantown Mennonite Church, marks a time when Jesus made a mistake and realized that he needed to change. Here is an excerpt from her sermon on this passage:

Jesus went somewhere quiet—I'm sure he was mentally and physically spent. He escaped to gentile territory for a silent retreat, but it was not to be. He was recognized by a woman who was not Jewish, and who came from a rival territory.

And she begged him for help. "My daughter is possessed by a demon—please help!"

And Jesus said no. Not only did he say no, but he also referred to her as a dog.

Now there are plenty of theologians that say "He didn't really call her a dog. He was using a term related to her status, her race, her gender." But, I'm not going to be one of those pastors that defends Jesus. Jesus called this woman a name, he categorized her as something other than human, when she was in a desperate situation.

I'm not going to defend Jesus here. In fact, I'm going to paint him in a really bad light. Jesus forgot who he was. He forgot his humanity in this moment.

It's tempting to get angry with Jesus here. It's tempting to be feel bitter about his treatment of this woman, to want to put him in undoing oppression training. Jesus was not on his best behavior here. In fact, he was pretty awful. Nowhere else in the scripture does he refuse a direct request to heal someone—whether they be Israelite or otherwise. Nowhere else in the gospels does he respond to someone asking for help with such insulting words. No where else does Jesus treat someone so poorly.

What he said to this woman is completely out of character.

Now, it would be a more awful story if Jesus had said this, and the woman slunk away into anonymity. It would be awful if the story ended with an insult from Jesus to a helpless woman.

Thankfully, Jesus had met his match with this strong, determined, self-possessed woman. She knew of Jesus' power, and come hell or high water, Jesus was going to help her daughter. So, using the language Jesus used against her, she turned it around, and reminded Jesus who she was. She was a beloved child of God, a human made in God's image.

Jesus, for a moment, forgot his humanity and hers. He forgot. He gave a stock response to the woman—one that he had probably been taught in his own community—and he forgot his humanity. He forgot that he was God's beloved child, in whom God was pleased. He forgot his proclamation in the temple just a few weeks earlier—the reign of God is near. He lost touch.

But this woman snapped him back to reality.

If I was tempted to be angry with Jesus for using a derogatory term towards the Syrophanecian Woman, I'm more impressed with Jesus' quick response.

Jesus doesn't get defensive. He doesn't get indignant. He doesn't insist he's right, or justify his words. He basically said, "You're right. I will heal your daughter."

Jesus was schooled by this gentile woman, and he understood his error as soon as she pointed it out. And he changed.

Jesus really messed up, and when he was corrected by this self-possessed woman, he changed his ways. (<http://www.storiesfromtheredtent.com/2015/09/>)

McGloughlin's interpretation of this story resonates with me. It is so easy to think of Jesus as perfect and to forget his humanness. And in forgetting his humanness, we become judgemental of our own humanness. But the story isn't only about getting it wrong, it is also about making it right, recognizing that we are all the beloved children of God, and all deserve healing.

I want to reflect on my own story and a few moments that illustrate ways in which my faith, while constant, has changed and the places where I have seen the church change in order to remain faithful.

When I was a student at Conrad Grebel, I was in my righteous phase, with, when looking back, a very narrow view of faith. It came to the attention of a group of students that the administration of the College had rented facilities, including the chapel, to a group who practiced transcendental meditation. We were incensed that our holy space should be defiled by a cult. We marched ourselves to the president's office and laid out our case. Whether it was our passion or a change of plans on the group's part, the workshops never happened. Today, I would not respond in the same manner. I've learned two things – one is to be accepting of a multiplicity of practices and the other is that chapels are not easily defiled.

I have had the opportunity to participate in several faith communities, having been a Mennonite in Canada and Switzerland, a Lutheran in Germany and Canada, and an Anglican during our years in the Arctic. This last experience led me to understand the way in which our faith practices are always a collision of cosmologies. Through our time in the Arctic, I came to see the ways that traditional spiritual understandings of the Inuit were subsumed into their practice of Christianity and began to realize how many of our traditions were adapted from European rituals that predated Christianity. In my trips to Guatemala, I have seen how Mayan belief systems have been incorporated into their practice of Catholicism. And while I have changed in my understanding and openness to these blendings, I continue to see how the church has always changed in order to be inclusive.

A year ago, I was in Guatemala at the time of the Mayan new year. My group of students from the university was invited to participate in the new year's ceremony. We collected our peach branches and candles and went off to the ceremony. To my surprise, the ceremony took place in a Catholic church. Mayan shamans were present, the sacred fire was lit on the floor in front of the altar, and the candles were placed at the foot of the altar. Imagine how I would have responded if I was still in my righteous phase.

Father Stanley Rother, a Catholic priest from Oklahoma who made Guatemala his home and the Tzutuil his people, understood how important the blending of cosmologies was. Within the Mayan cosmology, there are places in the mountains that are portals to other worlds. Men never go there alone, always in the company of others. Some of these portals are passages to the underworld. In the Catholic cathedral in Santiago Atitlan, Father Rother recognized and incorporated these ways of understanding. One of the murals depicts the road to Emmaus. The men walking with Jesus are dressed in traditional Tzutuil clothing and they are walking toward a cave, a portal to another world. What better way to describe Christ's post-resurrection ability to appear and disappear. There is also a portal to the underworld beside the altar, opened at Easter when Christ descends, according to the Apostle's creed, into hell. Father Rother understood that fostering constant faith required embracing local understandings, changing the traditions of the church.

I wonder how much different the experiences of Canadian Aboriginal peoples might have been had cosmologies been allowed to collide. Over the last years, as the horrors of the residential school system have become known, I have wondered this often. And now, following the completion of the Truth and Reconciliation hearings, I marvel at the faithfulness of many of our Aboriginal neighbours, whether that faithfulness be to the traditions and beliefs of their ancestors, to the traditions and beliefs of Christianity, or the melding of the two. And I wonder what action, we the people of faith are called to take in light of this knowledge.

Nutana Park, like all other congregations in Mennonite Church Canada, has been challenged to consider what it means to be faithful church. And like many other congregations, this has included consideration of our LGBTQ community. We have taken a stance that to us seems right and to others is controversial, and to still others is wrong. This, I believe is another example of constant faith in changing times as congregations understandings of the wideness of God's love shift.

But how do we come to these decisions. In the April 27th issue of the Canadian Mennonite, Dick Benner references the work of James Fowler who developed a model for discernment, a process which is very much part of Mennonite Church Canada's commitment to being a faithful church. The church has struggled with changing times and the tension between literal readings of the Bible that do not necessarily provide clear cut answers, and interpretations that are more contextual. I believe Fowler gives us good direction for this process.

First is the need for dialogue – a conversation that is capable of holding in tension multiple truths that cannot be easily integrated into a logical and coherent system of thought. Fowler says, “It is precisely this style of faith that is necessary for genuine participation by a congregation and its members in the teaching process. They must open themselves to the insights of multiple authorities at various levels of the church’s life and be willing to live with the tensions generated by the interaction of differing perspectives – perspectives that cannot be easily reduced to a single ideology or theology.”

Next, a faith development perspective is needed, one that allows us to see that transitional periods are a necessary part of growth in faith. Fowler continues, “It allows us to accept and affirm persons in such times, communicating to them that doubt and struggle can be a legitimate part of the faith, and not necessarily an antithesis.”

I’m challenged by the idea of holding in tension multiple truths. It would be so much easier to believe that there was only one truth, a capital T truth, unchanging over the millennia, but that is not the case. For me, a constant faith is the knowledge that God is present in all the messiness of our lives and our world. But how do we deal with our changing times?

The face of the North American church is changing – but unlike the congregation in Acts, we are decreasing in number. Based on the Canadian census from 1971 to 2001, the number of Canadians who identify as Catholic decreased by 34%, Protestants declined by 17%; other religions increased by 175%, and Religiously Unaffiliated increased by 500%. Nearly a quarter of the Canadian population is now Religiously Unaffiliated, up from 4% in 1971. On a Mennonite note, official membership in Mennonite Church Canada congregations declined by 6% over the 10 year period from 2002 to 2012.

We have a lot of dearly beloved institutions which are feeling the implications of this decline in church membership, a reduction in monetary givings, and perhaps some changes in values. Church institutions today vary greatly from each other – from the programs run by individual congregations to the structure of the national church, and everything in between. Donations to Mennonite Church Canada and the five area churches are about 75% of what they were ten years ago. When I attended RJC, there were 185 students, ten years ago, there were over 100 students; now there are 75, and for years only about 50% of the students have come from Mennonite churches. What do these shifts mean to our institutions? Do we, like the members of the Hellenic church in Acts, need to rethink the way we do things?

We live in changing times and just as those who came before us, our faith, in order to be constant, must live with change. We can hold on to the promise God gave the Israelites as they entered the promised land, knowing that with those who love him and keep his commandments he keeps covenant and faith for a thousand generations. But we also struggle with determining what are God's commandments and which are the laws specific to that time and context. And we can consider the early church in Acts restructuring themselves to meet the needs of their distinct community. And we can look at the ministry of Jesus, which was always about welcoming the unwelcomed, extending the covenant to all who wanted membership. As we watch our church institutions struggle with attendance and budgets, we are faced with a similar problem. How do we remain a people of faith in times of change? Or is the manifestation of our constant faith, the ability to discern and change in order to live in the context of the moment and ensure that the church is relevant for the communities of the future, just as Jesus did in his interaction with the Syrophenician woman? We have God's covenant to be with us for all of the future. What is our response and responsibility as partners in this covenant?