

Honouring Our Heritage: Faith & Culture
Co-Pastor Susanne Guenther Loewen
NPMC – Oct. 29, 2023

Hymns: VT 797 – We are People of God’s Peace; 4 – Christ Is Our Cornerstone; 1 – Summoned by the God Who Made Us; 809 – Sing a New World Into Being

Proverbs 9:1-6:

Wisdom has built her house;

she has hewn her seven pillars.

² She has slaughtered her animals; she has mixed her wine;

she has also set her table.

³ She has sent out her female servants; she calls

from the highest places in the town,

⁴ “You who are simple, turn in here!”

To those without sense she says,

⁵ “Come, eat of my bread

and drink of the wine I have mixed.

⁶ Lay aside immaturity and live,

and walk in the way of insight.”

Ephesians 2:11-22:

¹¹ So then, remember that at one time you gentiles by birth, called “the uncircumcision” by those who are called “the circumcision”—a circumcision made in the flesh by human hands—

¹² remember that you were at that time without Christ, being aliens from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world.

¹³ But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. ¹⁴ For he is our peace; in his flesh he has made both into one and has broken down the

dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us, ¹⁵ abolishing the law with its commandments and ordinances, that he might create in himself one new humanity in place of the two, thus making

peace, ¹⁶ and might reconcile both to God in one body through the cross, thus putting to death that hostility through it. ¹⁷ So he came and proclaimed peace to you who were far off and peace

to those who were near, ¹⁸ for through him both of us have access in one Spirit to the Father.

¹⁹ So then, you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God, ²⁰ built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets,

with Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone; ²¹ in him the whole structure is joined together and grows into a holy temple in the Lord, ²² in whom you also are built together spiritually into a

dwelling place for God.

We have come to the end of October, which is when part of the church celebrates

Reformation Sunday. This year, this will start off our worship series on Honouring our

Heritage, which the worship committee has chosen. We thought of the major

anniversaries of our tradition, such as the 100-year anniversary of the Mennonite migration from Russia to Canada which was just marked this summer and the upcoming “Anabaptism at 500” celebrations which will begin in January 2025, when it will be 500 years since the first adult baptisms among early Anabaptists, sparking the Radical Reformation. In light of these milestones, we are led to ask anew what it means to belong to this tradition we call Anabaptist-Mennonite. Upcoming weeks will explore confessions of faith, peace theology and practice, mission and service, and how we honour our ancestors in faith. But today we are going to explore the relationship between faith and culture.

There has been a lot of discussion in recent years over what it means to be a Mennonite. Is it primarily a religious denomination, indicating that one is a baptised and participating member of the Mennonite church? Or is it a German-Russian cultural designation, indicating a love of cabbage borscht soup, knowing at least a few words in Low German, and an appreciation for quilts? Some faith writers like Stuart Murray, who wrote *The Naked Anabaptist*, make the case that the cultural or ethnic aspects of being Mennonite are a distraction from the faith convictions; that’s what really matters for Murray. So Mennonite culture is just excess baggage, for him. In one sense, he is right. With Anabaptism becoming more of a worldwide church, we need to remember that there are multiple cultures that now belong to Mennonite World Conference, so that having a certain Germanic last name or a really good borscht recipe is not applicable to the majority of Mennonites. We are now a multi-cultural church – as our hymns for today reflect. Along these lines, American-Somali Mennonite Sofia Samatar writes, “most Mennonites now live outside North America and Europe, while North America contains

Black, Latino[a], and other ethnically diverse Mennonite communities. Our fastest-growing church is in Ethiopia,” meaning that “the most representative Mennonite is an African woman.”¹ To insist that only Germanic-ethnic Mennonites are the “real” Mennonites – which Samatar calls “the ethnic ghost” that haunts us² – is therefore not only inaccurate, but gets into some dangerous territory, becoming an ethno-centrism that has, shamefully, at times overlapped with Nazism in terms of white supremacist pride in German, Christian heritage³ – an extremely problematic connection, to say the least! At best, this preoccupation with only one ethnic Mennonite culture is exclusive of Mennonites of colour – as African-American Mennonite pastor Vincent Harding called out already back in the 1950s, calling Mennonites to “break down the wall of German-Swiss-Dutch backgrounds.”⁴

But I can’t help feeling that Murray’s answer – to simply take off the cultural “clothing” and get down to the theological essentials – oversimplifies the reality of what makes an identity. Some of this religion vs. culture debate is, interestingly, split along the U.S.-Canadian border, and shaped by the different policies toward Mennonites in the two countries. Because we’ve benefitted from the official government policy of multiculturalism in Canada, Mennonites here have come to be seen as a German-Russian ethnicity, one among many tiles of the mosaic of Canada. This is why Mennonite literature by the likes of Rudy Wiebe and Miriam Toews has become such a success and Mennonite schools and university departments receive government funding in Canada. In the U.S., however, Mennonites are much more likely to be seen

¹ Sofia Samatar, *The White Mosque: A Memoir* (New York: Catapult, 2022), 128-129. The last quote is from poet Julia Spicher Kasdorf.

² Samatar, 118.

³ Samatar, 126-129. In her chapter, “Alphabet of Bone,” Samatar talks about the admiration Nazis had for Mennonites, whom they studied as ideal Germans within their racist ideology.

⁴ Samatar, 129.

as a religious group, one among the Christian denominations that shape that culture, which is steeped in a Protestant worldview.⁵ So I think Murray's answer is a bit too simple. Are these discussions of Mennonite history and ethnic/cultural distinctives to be ignored, as if German-Russian Mennonites don't have a specific culture? In other words, isn't this proverbial "naked Anabaptist" going to get a bit cold?

Our passage from Proverbs 9 reminds us of another aspect of this conversation. In it, we find Divine Wisdom, God's Wisdom herself, depicted as the exemplary host. Not only has she prepared a meal, she has built the house and carved its pillars in a literal act of home-making. She then prepares the meal from scratch, from butchering and wine-mixing to setting the table and inviting the simple people of the town to eat her feast of bread and wine: "Come, eat of my bread / and drink of the wine I have mixed" (v. 5). Now Woman Wisdom in Proverbs is in one sense the counterpart of the Word of God, which we come to associate so closely with Jesus – and here, similarly, we can't help but think of the Last Supper and Communion at this invitation to a meal of bread and wine. Elsewhere in Proverbs (ch. 3 & 8), Wisdom is also connected with God's creation of the world, like the Word is in the Gospel of John (ch. 1). But Wisdom in Proverbs also represents the collective wisdom of ancient Israelite women, especially the description of the Woman of Strength that closes the book in Proverbs 31 – a woman who capably and wisely manages her household, business, and family, providing clothing and food for them and for the poor, all the while speaking wisely, grounded in faith. It reminds me of the collective wisdom of Mennonite women as well!

⁵ J. Denny Weaver, *Anabaptist Theology in Face of Postmodernity: A Proposal for the Third Millennium*, C. Henry Smith Series (Telford, PA: Pandora Press U.S., 2000), 38-39.

So here's the other issue with that attempt to leave behind Mennonite culture as unimportant compared to the theology: it discounts the contributions of women to the history of the tradition, since they're precisely the ones who have handed down recipes for beloved foods like borscht and zwieback buns, and whose beautiful quilts grace homes and church buildings. In fact, until a couple of decades ago, women were forbidden from contributing in any other way, since they were excluded from official leadership roles in the church – from writing or preaching as theologians! This is why Mennonite cookbooks took on such significance, often including reflections on faith and identity, such as Doris Janzen Longacre's *More with Less Cookbook*. This was one outlet for Mennonite women's theological reflection from their everyday, lived, embodied wisdom.

Retired history professor Marlene Epp has just recently published a book called, *Eating Like a Mennonite*, and though I haven't read it yet myself, it reflects a better way of responding to the new reality of the Mennonite church being so multicultural. Epp reflects that for Mennonites, "Food functions as something they ate for sustenance, foods they loved, and foods they had received from their mothers and wanted to pass on. But it also functions symbolically as a way to talk about the past.' ... Traditionally, what women could do has been closely defined but, as she argues, their kitchen work does more than sustain families. Recipes evoke and pass on history. Kitchens connect and support. Food labour is integral to the faith's commensality and supporting mission work through charity cookbooks. 'Their institutions wouldn't exist or survive without the church supper, without feeding the gathered,' Epp said. 'That's all taken for granted. Not to mention all the money women have raised for institutions through food labour.'"

Importantly, she includes foods from Germanic Mennonite heritage but also those of Mennonites of non-European descent, a reflection that “Mennonite food culture expands when new members bring their foods to the communal table.”⁶ It reminded me of the New Hamburg MCC Relief sale in Ontario, where Mennonite spring rolls made by Vietnamese Mennonites are one of the most popular foods! So the response here isn’t to separate theology from culture, but to add more layers of culture to our Mennonite identities (to keep us warmer, perhaps!).

Our passage from Ephesians 2 has some wisdom for us here. In that time and place, the church was also grappling with questions of identity and expanding their view of God’s people – “members of the household of God” – to include both Jewish and Gentile peoples, whom Jesus has brought together. Now, this passage could be read as an erasing of difference, or as a minimizing of their importance for the sake of unity. But if we read it closely, I don’t think that’s what it’s saying. The issue is not that these differences no longer exist in the church (and anyone who has been part of a church knows that differences crop up all the time!). Rather, these differences remain, but they are *no longer a source of division and hostility*; they are no longer obstacles to being the church together. So we read that Jesus Christ “has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us,” even “putting to death that hostility” through the cross (v. 14, 16). So he came and proclaimed peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near” (v. 17). And Jesus has built us all together into a Temple or home for God – not unlike Wisdom’s house that she built.

⁶ For an interview with Marlene Epp about her book, see: https://www.therecord.com/life/food-and-drink/exploring-mennonite-culture-through-food-connections/article_107ecf9e-9a42-5ee0-94ff-bd24241539f3.html

So where does this leave us as Mennonites by faith and/or culture? Toronto Mennonites Michele Rizoli and Hyejung Jessie Yum have called for the Mennonite church to not only see itself as multicultural, but as “inter-cultural” – that is, intentionally “intermixing” cultures within our churches, and “being willing to be mutually transformed.” The attitude is not one of “you are welcome to become like me” but rather, “how can I learn from you?”⁷ In this way, we will be able to bring with us those cultural traditions that still feed us and keep us warm in body and spirit while recognizing that God is at work extending our tables and building us together into a house of Wisdom. In the words of Mennonite theologian Justin Heinzekehr, “Rather than futilely attempting to get naked, we must expand our wardrobe and try to get comfortable in a wider variety of clothing.”⁸ AMEN

⁷ Leah Reesor-Keller, Michele Rizoli, Hyejung Jessie Yum, “Being an Intercultural Church,” *Courageous Imagination*, Mennonite Church Eastern Canada podcast, May 17, 2021, <https://podcasters.spotify.com/pod/show/courageous-imagination/episodes/05-Being-an-Intercultural-Church-e112p7k/a-a5jikbh>

⁸ Justin Heinzekehr, “Why Anabaptists Can’t Get Naked, Even If They Try: Multiple Religious Belonging as a Framework for Cultural Diversity in the Mennonite Church,” Conference Presentation proposal, Toronto Mennonite Theological Centre Graduate Students’ Conference, CMU, 2014.