

First Corinthians 12:4-13

Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; and there are varieties of services, but the same Lord; and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who activates all of them in everyone. To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good. To one is given through the Spirit the utterance of wisdom, and to another the utterance of knowledge according to the same Spirit, to another faith by the same Spirit, to another gifts of healing by the one Spirit, to another the working of miracles, to another prophecy, to another the discernment of spirits, to another various kinds of tongues, to another the interpretation of tongues. All these are activated by one and the same Spirit, who allots to each one individually just as the Spirit chooses.

For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. For in the one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and we were all made to drink of one Spirit.

Slide: Anabaptists Around the World**Intro:**

It is difficult knowing how best to launch off a sermon recognizing 500 years of Mennonites and Anabaptists more broadly. I won't get it right, as usual, but maybe I will come close enough to good enough to honour God, Jesus, and our tradition. I will start with a story; people seem to like stories.

In his second marriage, my brother partnered with a Mennonite woman and her two children from a previous marriage. Their second marriages have been good for them and the children who are now grown up with children of their own. The home church of my Mennonite sister-in-law has a wall devoted to those of the congregation who have served in the military—mostly men as you might imagine. They are Mennonite, yes, and also different from the sort of Mennonites among whom I was raised. Can there be unity amidst diversity? I would hope so. Maybe my bother and his partner and their family are living it. This story relates to topics I want to address on the Sunday closest to the first 16th century re-baptisms which contributed to the reformation movement that led to groups of Mennonites of various ilk, Hutterites, Moravians, and others.

Slide: Anabaptism at 500 logo

First, though, the worship committee and lay preachers thought we ought to do this year long reflection chronologically through our 500 year history. This is where we are at in planning:

- Jan 19 (today): a launch of our year long series with an introduction to the beginning.
- Feb 9: reflections from Walter Klaassen on the early theological development among these people named Anabaptist on account of their decision to rebaptize; offered by Don Klaassen in his uncle's deceased absence. Who gave him permission to die!
- March 23rd: Gordon Jensen, stalwart of the Lutheran Seminary in S'toon preaching. We share much in common with Lutherans and differ somewhat.
- April 6th: This would be a Sunday closest to our 60th anniversary as a congregation. We will take time in our Anabaptist review to celebrate the gifts of this congregation through the years.
- May will include a reflection on abundance and affluence. Our branches of Mennonites moved around, farmed well, built factories, and became relatively wealthy. Prussia and Russia will be brought under consideration.
- In June there will be a joint MC Sask worship service and potluck on a Saturday. On a designated Sunday, there will be as reports from those who attended the Mennonite World Conference gathering in Europe.
- In Fall we will look at Anabaptism 600
 - o What do need to leave behind as we enter this new century?
 - o What might be that alternative direction to which our faith tradition calls us in the next years and decades?

This is the rough outline by which we might honour our heritage, and consider our present and future.

Slide: People Cross

Part I: Scripture Text for Today (1st Corinthians 12)

Today, the lectionary (a scriptural endeavor to bring some unity to denominations which have divided back in history) points us to 1st Corinthians 12—there are many gifts but the same Spirit. It would be wrong for a sermon speaking into the origins of Mennonite life and thought NOT to start with scripture. Those early Mennonites studied the scripture in groups, talked about it, and made life choices on the basis of that discussion. This letter from the Apostle Paul was sent to a congregation in conflict. People were squabbling about which of the Spiritual gifts were most valued. It was a plea, on the part of the Apostle Paul, for unity amidst diversity.

Today, and every day in fact, it is important to know that each of us (each person!) has unique gifts. Consider, for a moment, what is your gift to your family, neighbours, community or world? As Zach asked last week, what is your super power? With our unique gifts we form congregations. Each congregation has unique gifts. Nutana Park is an amazing congregation and fits into the larger mosaic of Mennonite life and theology. Other Mennonite congregations, even in Saskatchewan, are different from us. We have our gifts of the Spirit; we should honour them; and according to 1st Corinthians 12 they should be honoured.

Questions for reflection:

- What is your gift of the Spirit?
- What is the gift of the Spirit of Nutana Park Mennonite Church?

Even if you tune out for the remainder of my sermon, these two questions are worth your being present in person or livestream or reading the sermon on-line to spark deeper reflections. God has graced you, how? God has graced this congregation, how? These are questions as we consider the origins of Mennonites.

Slide: The Christian Tree

Part II: Christians have a similar root

Within the Christian family tree, Mennonites and others of our closest cousins are more of a branch than a trunk. Amazingly, within that branch there are various extensions and twigs. This is the 500th anniversary of an event which was inspired by a desire to follow the Jesus way more closely—that of adult baptism (which at the time was re-baptism), that of group conversation around scripture, that of living the Jesus way.

First, we must acknowledge that we are linked with other expressions of Mennonite and Christianity. Christians have one tap root and that is none other than Jesus Christ. I have laments as I consider Christianity upon the world stage. Catholic and Protestant Christians of Northern Ireland could not stop the blood shed of the “troubles” in that part of the world. That Russian and Ukrainian Orthodox Christian traditions are not able to stop the shelling in their part of the world. That Rwanda, the most Christian of African nations¹, could devolve into a genocidal civil war is tragic. These examples are all Christian on Christian violence. Too often political forces have utilized religious expression to sway people into actions which do not honour the shared root we have. In the words of German Confessing Pastor Martin Niemoeller during the Nazi regime, What Would Jesus Do?² He said this in the face of genocide and world war.

¹ See the preface of Lee Camp’s *Mere Discipleship: Radical Christianity in a Rebellious World* (1st published in 2023).

² Robert Ellsberg, *All Saints* (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 2011), pp 29-30.

If Christians could simply agree to not kill other Christians, some of our international conflicts would be minimized. If the children of Abraham would agree to not kill other children of Abraham, we might be even further along the road of international stability. If Mennonites could agree to not demean or demonize other Mennonites, we might offer a more compelling witness to our faith. Anabaptists, Christians, and people of faith beyond our faith do better when we serve together than talk doctrine. Dreams of a Mennonite pastor, but good dreams worthy of consideration.

Slide: Menno-Hof

Point Three: Mennonites are a wildly diverse tradition

I begin this section with another personal story. While attending the Mennonite Seminary in Elkhart, Indiana I decided to make a field trip to Menno-Hof in Shipshewana. Menno-Hof claims to teach visitors about the faith and life of Amish and Mennonites. The centre was impressive, but I also ran into several placards that offended. They said something to the effect that traditional Mennonite singing is a-capella; that Mennonites are reticent to vote; that Mennonites shy from public service. Just a moment, I thought. I was raised in a thoroughly Mennonite household in a thoroughly Mennonite congregation, and we sang to a pipe organ, we voted, we supported people in civic and political service. Menno-Hof is a centre dedicated to teaching people about Mennonites, and yet my Mennonite experience was not adequately represented. Is there one true expression of Mennonite life and Theology?

Slide: One Lord, One Church, One Hope book

Karl Koop (now a professor now at CMU) offers these words in a book apart of a series in Anabaptist / Mennonite studies:

“Several decades ago as a graduate student in theology, I concluded that understanding my own theological heritage was important if I was going to be a theologian in a church or university setting. My studies left me with a conundrum, however, in that what I encountered in my own heritage - the Anabaptist-Mennonite tradition - was a diversity that apparently lacked any unity and coherence.” This book title I have on the screen represents a myriad of confessions of faith Mennonites have created through the centuries in a variety of Mennonite traditions. It is fascinating to read through them and see the differences and the similarities.

Slide: 16th Century Anabaptism Central Locations

Koop continues: “Historians at the time were emphasizing the multiple origins of sixteenth-century Anabaptism, and the distinctive features of Swiss, South German-Austrian and North German-Dutch Anabaptist groups. This approach to understanding Anabaptism, often referred to as the polygenesis view, served as a necessary corrective to an earlier historiography that had failed to recognize the plurality of sixteenth-century Anabaptist beliefs. Yet, from a theological perspective, the tradition understood in this way seemed usable only in a selective way.

For instance, I could draw wisdom from Balthasar Hubmaier’s theology of baptism, Pilgram Marpeck’s approach to church discipline, or Menno Simon’s political ethics, but my criteria for choosing one Anabaptist perspective over another depended largely on my own preferences. There did not seem to be an identifiable tradition that could provide a point of departure for contemporary theological reflection on the church’s beliefs and practices.

Dialogue with history is a humbling and edifying experiences. Christians should not necessarily imitate the “saints of some golden age,” but they should continue to converse with history, learn from the successes and mistakes of the past, and move forward with greater wisdom and insight.³

Walter Klaassen made significant analysis on the some of the similarities of Anabaptist communities, and Don Klaassen will share some of that on February the 9th. The truth is though, that Mennonites have no Pope. We discern in our communities the best way forward at this time, and we seek to live into it. Other Anabaptists in other communities do their own discernment in their own contexts. At points Mennonite communities disagree on interpretation and application, and have declared excommunication or a start of a new denomination. Other Mennonite communities choose to work together under the mantra of “Unity amid Diversity”. Diversity exists in our Anabaptist tradition, how shall we proceed in a faith filled manner? To the discipleship of the text.

Slide: Anabaptist World Wide Distribution

Part IV and conclusion:

I was taken by an article in the *Canadian Mennonite* regarding efforts at Anabaptist Mennonite Biblical Seminary (AMBS) as they become more international and are seeking to foster dialogue among the wide range of Anabaptist personalities on campus.⁴ Understanding that their students and

³ Karl Koop, *Anabaptist-Mennonite Confessions of Faith: The Development of a Tradition* (Kitchner, ON: Pandora Press, 2004), pp 7-8.

⁴ Aaron Epp, “How to Disagree with the Beloved of God” in *Canadian Mennonite* (July 2024), p. 15.

faculty come from a variety of Anabaptist / Mennonite communities, they ask that faculty and students abide by a covenantal agreement. A short version is this:

- We commit ourselves to welcoming the insights that come from our rich diversities.
- We commit to fostering a welcoming environment for both introverts and extroverts.
- We commit ourselves to authentic interaction.
- We commit to the hard work of giving and receiving respectful challenge in conversation.

Slide: One Lord, One Church, One Hope book

I think we do this in our congregation. More challenging, however, is if we can do this in our families? Can we do this in our denomination? Can we do this amidst international conflicts?

We can. Why: Because we do have one Lord; ultimately, we have one church; we have one hope which is Jesus Christ who remembers the criminals and betrayers; we have One God. May we live into this confession in the next 100 years of the heritage we have received. Amen.

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