

10,000 Steps

Jan 31, 2016 | Patrick Preheim

Mennonite World Conference Sunday

10,000 steps is all the rage these days. It is an arbitrary number being used to help motivate a sedentary society become more active. 10,000 steps is approximately 8 K, or 5 miles if you still calculate in Imperial terms. I like the 10,000 step promotion because my preferred venue for congregational visits is on the trail. Some gathered here can attest to my penchant for conversation while ambling along the South Saskatchewan. Part of my draw to “walk talks” is health related: even with periodic exercise I spend too much time in a chair reading, typing, chatting, eating, planning, or praying. Part of my craving for cardio conversation is that I think more clearly, and probably spiritually, while sauntering: the physical movement or the cadence of the feet or the proximity to the Divine energy in creation settles me. Maybe on account of this I find that I am a better conversation partner when walking: I allow others more space to sort out their thoughts before speaking; I am less inclined to direct the conversation; I am less anxious. Sometimes it takes a walk to get things sorted properly, and sometimes a walk diffuses frustration or anger. At least that may be part of lesson present in today’s story from Luke 24.

On the way to Emmaus two disciples are talking and discussing (24.15). Isn’t that interesting phrasing—talking and discussing? We generally consider conversation and discussion to be one and the same. So Luke must have had some intention by including both terms. This word for “discuss” (συζητέω) is also translated as dispute, debate, or discernment in the Greek writing of the time (*Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, ed Kittle & Friedrich (v1 VII), p, 747). Disputes and debates about the nature of Jesus, the resurrection, discipleship implications with on the way is a reality: for Cleopas and his friend, for the early church, and is the case for us. Remaining engaged with “the other disciple” may be necessary for us to experience the fullness of the risen Christ as we eventually break bread together. Let me share three short stories.

About this time two years ago we got word that the Witness Council of Mennonite Church Canada wanted to bring Chinese pastors curious about Anabaptism to Saskatchewan. Well, that isn’t actually quite right. They wanted to take these Chinese pastors to Vancouver where a few Chinese people actually live, but the congregations there didn’t have the time or financial resources or whatever to host. So the architects of this plan thought of Saskatchewan. Ah Saskatchewan—the animal rescue shelter of the Provinces that finds a place for abandoned American pastors, lost Canadian pastors, reengage Mennonite pastors—surely Saskatchewan could host a few Chinese Christians, no? And true to Saskatchewan form we did find placements for them. Like many church decisions of my life I supported the idea out of obligation. And our Deacon Board, fools that they were, let me fall on the sword I had offered up. We drew the lot of Pastor Ma.

On day one my plan was to walk Pastor Ma out of his jet lag. A kind congregational member dropped Pastor Ma, me, and our translator off at the Western Development Museum. This is where I introduced him to the history and vast expanse of Saskatchewan. From there we paralleled Circle drive across the South Bridge,

headed north to the farmer's market, and back to the church neighbourhood. Our translator's name was Shue Feng (I often called him and will always remember him as Fung Schway) and he was a real champ. A Christian himself he translated hours of conversation as I asked about Pastor Ma about his coming to know Jesus, his call to serve the church, the blessings and burdens of overseeing thousands of seekers. I learned about these things as we traversed the sidewalks and paths of Saskatoon. Or as I think of it now: on our journey to Emmaus.

I did not really want to be a host pastor. I did not really want Nutana Mennonite to be a host congregation. I did not really want debate with a Chinese church man. But I, and we, did host Pastor Ma. And now I am different. In my times of remembering the church worldwide I never fail to hold Pastor Ma in my thoughts. When China comes up in the news I never fail to offer a quick prayer for Pastor Ma. The journey to Emmaus changes things. As we discuss, debate and eat together we soon find ourselves recognizing the risen Christ.

Are there people of faith from other cultures we find ourselves alongside? The Emmaus Road is an invitation to hear the faith story of others, offer our experience of Jesus Christ, and debate matters on the way. Let me share a second story.

Sometime late last spring or early summer we got a letter from the Board of Warman Mennonite Church. Official looking documents like these coming from the Valley following a same sex marriage are rarely a harbinger of good news. At least not for me. I do not like conflict. I love my people and I will sacrifice myself for you, but I do not like dealing with hostility from the outside. When external threats appear before me, I usually go into my turtle mode: bring in the head, the flippers, the tail and ride out the storm. Like the turtle I believe that I can wait out whatever threat is posed. But the Warman Mennonites asked for conversation so politely that I, and our Deacon Board, could not refuse their invitation. I, and we, stuck our necks out. And, as we came to learn later, so did they.

In addition to having a platform to share the twenty year process by which NPMC could endorse a same sex union, we had opportunity to hear from their board. It has been hard for their church people who go to coffee row in Warman. It has been hard for their church people who have family members in very conservative congregations. Their friends and family ridicule them for being part of a conference with Nutana Park Mennonite and our ilk. Our blessing Matt and Craig exacerbated disagreements within their congregation: disagreements about same sex attraction as well as affiliation with Mennonite Church Saskatchewan more broadly. It was important for me to hear these reflections.

I have never desired to be a controversial pastor. I have never wanted NPMC to be a controversial congregation. But I, and we, did join with Craig and Matt in their celebration. That ministry precipitated a conversation with Warman Mennonite Church, and now I am different. In my time of remembering for the church universal I never fail to hold Warman Mennonite and our Mennonite Church Saskatchewan congregations in my thoughts. When Warman comes up in the news I never fail to offer a quick prayer for Pastor Josh and his church. When I drive highway 11 north I think about and pray for our congregations along the way: Warman Mennonite, Osler Mennonite, Hague Mennonite (yes even Hague), Rosthern Mennonite, Grace Mennonite in Prince Albert.

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Are there Mennonites from other theological perspectives with whom we find ourselves in communion on the way? I think so. The Emmaus Road is an invitation to hear the faith story of others, offer our experience of Jesus Christ, and debate matters. Let me share a third story.

This one comes from an article in the *Christian Century* (Teri McDowell Ott, "In the realm of the nones" in *The Christian Century* (Jan 6, 2016), pp. 28-31) which focuses on the church's interaction with those who describe themselves as atheist, agnostic, or "nothing in particular". The author, Teri McDowell Ott, calls them "nones" for shorthand. The Pew Research Center determined that in 2014 nones made up was 23% of the U.S. population; it is probably higher here in Canada (p. 28). I pick up the article with the theological philosophy undergirding her ministry as a university chaplain.

"I believe the church is wrong to approach nones by trying to save them. The belief that we have what they need isn't just a turnoff. It ignores the fact that we need to work as hard to understand them as...to understand people of faith. This doesn't mean that the nones do not have needs that the church can meet. There are many ways that we can save these young adults from the loneliness, anxiety, and hopelessness that often pervade their lives. But we must also realize that they can save us too—save us from an unexamined faith, from the temptation to pretend we are something or someone we are not, and from being overly certain or narrow in our understanding of others. Until we honor the reality that we have something we can offer each other, our encounters will never be authentic or fruitful. If I can nurture opportunities where the religious and nonreligious can rub shoulders, then perhaps these young adults will go in search of these opportunities upon graduation as well.

A few years ago a young woman approached me following a program run by our department of philosophy and religious studies at which the meaning of life was discussed. Because I had attended these philosophical discussions before, I knew Emma was an atheist. When she approached me, though, she wanted to talk about worship. Apparently, she had attended the college's Christmas Convocation. "One of my professors encouraged me to go. He said it wasn't mandatory, but that it was going to be beautiful. I trusted him, so I went."

Held in early December, right before final exams, the Christmas Convocation is a traditional candlelight and communion worship service shaped by the school's Presbyterian tradition. For some students it is the first traditional Christmas service they have ever experienced. The year Emma attended the theme was following the light. I preached on the Magi and their journey guided by a star. At the end of the service, we each lit a candle and sang "Silent Night."

"I loved it," Emma told me, "It was very intimate. Intimate because it was talking about searching for this light. Then, they handed out the candles, and we passed the flame from one to another, and it illuminated the entire room. I looked around and saw everybody's faces brightened by the candlelight, and I thought about how we're all here thinking something different, but we're here together. It's like we're all different but also all the same."

Emma then talked about her need for a sense of community and belonging. Like many other nones, Emma had grown up going to church with her family. She was a thoughtful, passionate young woman, who had decided years ago that she couldn't agree with her parents' beliefs about God. "But," she said, "I miss it. I miss being in that space. I miss being in that community and that feeling of being connected through our singing and our praying."

I ventured to ask, "So it sounds like you want to find a place where you can go to worship, be a part of worship, but where it's also OK for you to be who you are. Where it's OK for you to even not believe in God. Is this right?" Emma bowed her head to consider. "Yes. I think that's it." I risked an invitation: "Why don't you try coming to our college's chapel services on Mondays? You can come and participate however you feel comfortable. Our chapel is so huge, you could even just slip into a far corner of the balcony, if you like. Just to see how it feels."

Emma seemed to appreciate my invitation to attend chapel on her own terms. I can never guess what college students will do with my advice. A few weeks later, however, at the chapel service I noticed someone sitting in the far corner of the balcony. The only way I knew it was Emma was because I followed a shaft of sunlight from a balcony window that had caught and highlighted her red, curly hair. For months Emma kept slipping into chapel for the service and then slipping back out. The only thing that changed was where she sat. She started in the far corner of the balcony, then slowly made her way forward row by row, until she was eventually sitting downstairs, in the back row of the main floor.

Emma graduated two years ago. I imagine she still needs a place where she can be in community with others, while also honoring her own beliefs. I hope the church will go in search of Emma and those like her. I hope Christians willing to be vulnerable, uncertain, and real will seek these nones out. I yearn for my two worlds to come together (the church I love and the nones I serve) to know the salvation each has to offer the other. I yearn for more places where we, like Emma, can hold up a candle and be made aware that although we are all different, we are also all the same."

Are there people of no faith we find ourselves alongside? The Emmaus Road is an invitation to hear the doubt story of others, offer our experience of Jesus Christ, and debate matters on the way.

In conclusion, the journey to Emmaus changes things. As we discuss, debate and eat together we soon find ourselves recognizing the risen Christ. May it be so for us. Amen.

Patrick Preheim, co-pastor Nutana Park Mennonite Church