

### Sent to Make Peace

As you've been hearing this morning, last week about 3000 Mennonite adults, youth, and children gathered in Kansas City to attend Menno Con 19, the biennial convention of Mennonite Church USA. For me the highlight of the week, hands down, were the seven worship services. For the first time ever at an MCUSA convention, every one of these worship services combined youth with the adults (in previous conventions the high school youth had their own worship services). As a result the large hall where the worship services were held was not just full, but full of energy, excitement, playfulness, anticipation. Many of the youth (including some of our own), gathered in the very front of the room at the start of each worship service, so they could most fully and freely participate in the singing. There were times when it almost felt like a rock concert, including balloons being tapped back and forth in the air.

Except it wasn't a rock concert. It was worship. Sometimes loud, but other times quiet enough to hear a pin drop. Playful, yes. But also profound. Inspiring. Encouraging. Moving. The Spirit of God was truly in that place.

The text you just heard was the theme text for the convention. It was read aloud at each of the worship services (and by the way that video we showed this morning which based on that passage was showed at the beginning of each worship). And then each speaker was assigned a different portion of the text to reflect on. This morning I want to look with you at these four verses from the Gospel of John, to listen for how it might be speaking to First Mennonite Church of Hillsboro, as well as the denomination of which we are a part, the Mennonite Church USA.

This text of course takes us back to the Easter story, which is told very vividly in chapter 20. You'll remember that the chapter begins with Mary Magdalene, Simon Peter, and one other mysterious disciple coming to the tomb where the lifeless body of Jesus had been laid, and finding it empty. What did this mean? How could this be? Did someone steal Jesus' body? Peter and the other disciple return to their homes, but Mary stays behind. And then, Jesus appears to her. She assumed it must be the gardener. I mean, who else could it be? That is, until he calls her by name. And she runs to tell the other disciples, "I have seen the Lord."

Then come this morning's passage. It was evening of that very same day. That day of deep grief, confusing discoveries, cockamamie, impossible stories. We are told that the doors of the house where the disciples were meeting were locked, for fear of the Jewish leaders.

Fear. What are they afraid of? The answer is obvious, isn't it? They are afraid of being arrested, just like Jesus had been. Not just arrested, but beaten, tried, nailed to a Roman cross, then left there to die an agonizing death, completely alone.

The first speaker at convention was Dustin Galyon, who by the way is the men's basketball coach at Hesston College. Let me tell you: was he ever dynamic! Speaking without notes, he talked about fear. The disciples' fears, which were strong enough to spend the evening hiding, behind tightly bolted doors. He talked about his own fears, especially when he was an arrogant, cocky, self-centered young adult. He acknowledged that all that outward cockiness was merely a smoke screen for the inner insecurity that plagued him.

I think we can say that fear is the flip side of faith, of knowing with absolute certainty both who we are and whose we are. Once we know that, everything else falls into place. But it takes a long time to get there.

It's safe to say that for the last four years at least, our entire denomination, the Mennonite Church USA, has been afraid—afraid of losing who we are. Afraid of splintering over our disagreements. Afraid because of all the churches and even entire area conferences that have started leaving the denomination. The question on everyone's lips and hearts is, Will we survive?

What are we afraid of, here, now? Our nation losing itself? Our world spinning out of control? Or maybe our fears are much more localized and personal—afraid of lost livelihood (especially those of us who are farmers). Afraid of the next disturbing medical diagnosis? Afraid of an uncertain future that on some days at least seems downright bleak?

But then John says, "Jesus came and stood among them." That's right, Jesus. The one who had been crucified just two short days ago. And now, nothing—neither locked doors, locked hearts, or locked minds—could stop him. His very first words are "*Eirene humin,*" Peace be with you. Granted, it was a common enough greeting at that time, but why those particular words? Peace was the furthest thing from their experience the last two days especially. With the disciples standing there stunned and speechless, Jesus shows them his hand side. The nail marks were still there. There could be no more doubt: it really was Jesus; he really was alive again. John says that then they finally "saw" him, they rejoiced. Seems a little understated, don't you think? I can picture something like [chant] "With my hands up high and my feet down low, this is the way I praise the Lord! [sing and clap] Praise the Lord, praise, praise the Lord!"

But then he said it to them again: "*Eirene humin,*" They and we can no longer mistake this for a simple, common greeting. Clearly, the Master was teaching again. Teaching about God's kingdom. The Greek word *Eirene* and the Hebrew word *shalom* both mean the same thing. Both can be translated as "peace," in English. That one-word-for-one translation can hardly do it justice. Peace means, among other things, the end of fear. Can you imagine how unbelievably beautiful that sounded to the disciples? Not to mention how beautiful it sounds to us—Jesus' confident announcement that we need not be afraid anymore. How would that message sound to our nation, and our world? Would they even understand it? .

The word peace in both Greek and Hebrew also means well-being, the state of every person having what they need to live—no more, necessarily, but no less. Peace is clearly an important word for Jesus. "Blessed are the peacemakers," he said earlier in Matthew, "for they shall be called children of God."

Peace has long been an important word for Mennonites. We are still considered today to be one of the so-called "historic peace churches." Which means, among other things, that we believe war is wrong. We teach our children that; we remind one another that. But understanding peace as merely the absence of war is far too limited and narrow. In order for there to be an end to warfare, there must be well-being, in which everybody has enough. Not too much, remember—and that point is crucial—but just enough. Peace, in other words, must go hand in hand with justice and fairness. Understood in these ways, peace is nothing less than God's will for the world.

Our speakers last week in Kansas City repeatedly reminded us of that. That peace is a crucially important word in the Bible, and that we are called to make peace, to proclaim peace, to work for peace. It was as if we needed to be reminded that this is a crucial part of our identity as Mennonites, as if we had lost sight of that in the past four years or more. And let me tell you,

already from the very first day, I sensed a difference at convention, a new energy and life, as if we have finally turned the corner and are ready to reclaim who God is calling us to be as Mennonites.

“Peace be with you,” Jesus told his disciples. “As the Father has sent me, so I send you.” As God sent Jesus into the world, Jesus was now sending his disciples. With the same mission, the same purpose. Are you sure, Jesus? As God sent you, you are sending us? That’s terrifying. I’m not sure we’re up to it.

Almost as if in response to our hesitations and excuses, John says that Jesus breathed on his disciples and said to them, “Receive the Holy Spirit.” Implying that the Holy Spirit would give them whatever they would need to fulfill their mission.

This was another central theme at convention, perhaps even the most important theme. A number of the speakers talked about the Holy Spirit. As Aleen shared a bit ago, the delegates heard from resource person Tom Yoder Neufeld that the Bible describes the Holy Spirit in at least three ways: energy, breath, and wind. I found his comparison of the Holy Spirit to electric energy—I other words, electricity—as particularly helpful. We can’t see electricity. But we can sure tell when it is present or absent, can’t we? We depend on electricity in so many ways. Light, so we can see where we are and where we are going. Power, so we can operate our appliances, enabling us to cook, clean, build things. And if we ever happen to come into direct contact with electricity, we can definitely feel it, can’t we? As a quick shock or jolt, perhaps, hopefully just enough to get our attention. Or as a powerful pulsing, sometimes so strong that it burns us. And when the Holy Spirit fills a room, we can feel it. We might even refer to it metaphorically as being “like electricity.” Those of us at the Mennonite convention in Kansas City could feel the Holy Spirit’s presence in that huge hall during worship. We felt it during the energetic singing; we felt it in our “electric” attentiveness as the different speakers shared with us.

If the Holy Spirit is like a breath that fills us, then no wonder we can feel its presence in our singing. Several of the speakers talked about the importance of our breathing in the Holy Spirit. One even had us to do so at various point during his message—and so I invite you to do it with me now. [Breathe. “again”...breathe.] Another talked about our desperate need for the life-giving breath of the Holy Spirit—as individuals, and as the church. She reminded us of Ezekiel 37, in which the hand of the Lord took the prophet to a dry valley, filled with dead bones. Then invited him to watch as God breathed new life into those bones, so that they came together and stood up, God’s creatures resurrected. In what ways has Mennonite Church USA been like that valley of dry bones in Ezekiel 37? In what ways can we already feel the breath of God’s spirit breathing new life into us, and in what ways do we still need it to do so?

And what about First Mennonite Church? Where have we experienced the presence of God’s Holy Spirit in recent weeks and months? Where do we desperately need it? I invite you to ponder that, and we will discuss it further in the Chapel following the service.

One thing seems certain: if we are to be the “blessed peacemakers” Christ is calling us to be, if we are not just to proclaim peace but to work for peace—in fact, if we are to be faithful followers of Jesus in general—the only way we can do so is by inviting the Holy Spirit to fill us, thereby giving us the wisdom and energy we will need. [Breath.]

Let’s sing again the energetic and energizing song the youth and adults learned and sang at convention, “Turning over Tables.”