

Faith Mennonite Church
January 25, 2009
World Fellowship Sunday

Who Is We?

(Isaiah 56:1-5; Philippians 2:1-11)

Today Mennonites mark what we call World Fellowship Day, appropriately in the season of Epiphany, the contact of Jesus with the magi, or wise men, Jesus' first contact with non-Jews. We can think of reasons to note world fellowship—we live in a world of division, of violence, of patterns in many places that destroy or constrict life. And we live in a nation that in many ways think of ourselves as better, freer, wiser, smarter, and stronger than people in other nations.

Twenty-some years ago I was in Jamaica for a few weeks. I recall hearing about and visiting some church social service programs in Kingston and being very impressed . . . and then realized this was because, in my more subtle racism, I really did not expect much from people living in Jamaica.

Certainly for practical reasons, we need world fellowship. But more important, the faith that brings us together, the understanding of life and God that draws us here, leads us to world fellowship. The life of Jesus is about a welcoming God. It is in particular about Jesus seeing as good, people whom others see as no good. Using only the Gospel of Luke, we find many stories of good people. We are probably familiar with the good Samaritan, Jesus' story with the hero a Samaritan, from a group of people religiously and otherwise close to the Jewish people but for reasons rooted in history not on speaking terms. But consider the man crucified next to Jesus—the good thief, to whom Jesus says, “Today you shall be with me in paradise.” Or consider the story of Zacchaeus. This is not just a story about a short man and a sycamore tree. It is a story about a good government employee, someone working for the occupying power. And Jesus has another government employee, Levi or Matthew, among his twelve most intimate followers. And one of the first stories about Jesus, the nativity story, includes some good shepherds. We associate these shepherds with children in old bathrobes at Christmas, but the late New Testament scholar Raymond Brown writes, “Far from being considered as either gentle or noble, in Jesus' time shepherds were often considered dishonest, outside the Law. Herdsmen were added by the early rabbis to the list of those ineligible to be judges or witnesses, since they frequently grazed their flocks on other people's land.” We gather here to worship a welcoming God.

And we gather here to worship a God who loves the world without forcing God upon the world. The lesson from Paul's letter to the Christians in the city of Philippi, named for the father of Alexander the Great, a military and political leader of a few centuries before Jesus, includes what many scholars consider an early Christian hymn, perhaps even the oldest one that we still have. This is a hymn with a high Christology—fancy language for saying that it sees Jesus a both human and divine, both God and a human being like us. It says that Jesus did not count equality with God something to hang on to but emptied himself and became human, became a servant or slave, to the point of dying. This one, this one who turned his back on power and privilege, is Lord. Many of us are uncomfortable with that language. But this is not only a statement of

religious faith; it is a political statement. “Jesus is Lord” is a statement that *he* is Lord—not Caesar, who also claimed the title Lord, and his armies. This is a statement that in the end the world belongs to Jesus, not to Caesar.

That is a statement not to prove, but to live by.

We need to know how to use power wisely when we have it. We also need to know how live without using force.

The world belongs to Jesus, not to Caesar. This is a statement that our first identity—of who we are—has to do with God, not nation or even family. This is not so much saying no to family or no to nation, but yes to God. That spirit is expressed in one of the hymns sung at the Martin Luther King Day service at Lyndale Church on Monday:

This is my song, O God of all the nations,
a song of peace for lands afar and mine.
This is my home, the country where my heart is;
here are my hopes, my dreams, my holy shrine;
but other hearts in other lands are beating
with hopes and dreams as true and high as mine.

My country’s skies are bluer than the ocean,
and sunlight beams on cloverleaf and pine;
but other lands have sunlight, too, and clover,
and skies are everywhere as blue as mine.
O hear my song, O God of all the nations,
a song of peace for their land and for mine.

Who are we? First of all, we are people who belong to God, especially as we see God in Jesus. The Philippians passage says, “Regard others as better than yourselves.” We could take this to mean, think less of yourself; we might better take it to mean, think more of others. The Philippians passage also reads, “Have this mind in you that was in Jesus.” The “you” here is plural, meaning it is addressed not so much to individuals as to the church at Philippi; it is a directive for their life together. How do we have the mind of Jesus here? Or how are we a world fellowship church here at Faith?

- ❖ we sing music from different parts of the world
- ❖ we have some international marriages
- ❖ we are officially a welcoming church to the GLBT community
- ❖ how many here have lived outside the United States for at least three months?
- ❖ we have members who work with people showing the diversity of our world
- ❖ we had members attending Mennonite World Conference a few years ago in Zimbabwe; another to be held this summer in Paraguay
- ❖ our prayers are not just prayers for our own sick but for the world (because our prayers are to reflect the concerns of God)
- ❖ when we eat together we have a diversity (earlier this month, Kami Blackwell Kinney, Joetta and I attended to church meeting in Manson, Iowa, at which the lunch menu ham and scalloped potatoes and eight kinds of Jell-O salad)

- ❖ we have students studying in other nations
- ❖ our pastor edited an international cookbook, *Extending the Table*

These are ways we say who we are, that we are a world church, that we are part of a world fellowship. Of course there are other ways in which we fail in being a world fellowship.

But the passage from Philippians should also be heard by us as individuals. When Martin Luther King Jr. was killed in April 1968, I was pastor of a church in rural eastern North Dakota. I was in the home of a church member who spoke of King: “Good riddance. He was just a rabble rouser.” I don’t remember exactly what I said. But we all find ourselves in situations like that, when we balance the need for civility or recognizing hospitality with the need to speak a word for fairness or truth or defense. We find ourselves in situations when—even in places like this that voted 80 percent for Barack Obama—the talk in the locker room or the workplace lunch table or the coffeehouse meeting turns to faggots, or terrorist Muslims, or people who “aren’t like us.”

We need to be able to tell ourselves and to tell others that we—as Christians, as Mennonites, as a church—are a people who belong to God, not an overpowering God, but a God who loves and welcomes.

Hermann I. Weinlick