

Faith Mennonite Church
June 5, 2011
50th Anniversary of Founding Service
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Birthing Faith

Matthew 17:20-21; 13:31-32; Ephesians 2:14, 17-22; 4:7,11-16; Romans 12:9-13

Fifty years ago this weekend, a new congregation was born. Its parents—a group of 24 adults and 6 children—named it Faith. The gestation period for this “baby” was approximately a year. The parents flirted with the idea of beginning a family, but was it really possible? Here they were in somewhat foreign territory, at a distance from their extended families in Mountain Lake to the south and Manitoba to the north. Those communities were largely rural and their Mennonite congregations were large. When Mennonites in those communities had previously started new families, they had done so in large groups—whole communities had relocated from Russia and Europe to the Americas. Could you really start a new family with such a small group and so few resources?

No wonder the records show that during the gestation period the group gravitated to Jesus’ teaching about faith as small as a mustard seed that could move mountains! As they discussed names for their fledgling group they said things like: Faith sees the invisible, faith believes the incredible, faith does the impossible. Like many a young couple thinking of beginning a family, these folks talked themselves into something that wasn’t entirely rational! Or perhaps, better said: those folks accepted the Spirit’s invitation to walk by faith, not by fear. And clearly there was a lot of encouragement from the “grandparents.” Six Mennonite congregations in or near Mountain Lake, plus the Northern District Conference Home Missions Committee, provided a lot of prayer and encouragement for the start of this new church.

The group began to meet as the Twin Cities Mennonite Fellowship on October 30, 1960, approximately six months before their founding worship service as Faith Mennonite Church of Minneapolis on June 4, 1961. Frank Epp, a graduate student from Altona, Manitoba, served as a part-time leader. Those first services, held in homes, were complete with bulletins, chairs set in rows, and women in pillbox hats. In May 1961, just prior to chartering the new congregation, the charter members voted to call John Esau, then a student at the Mennonite Biblical Seminary, in Elkhart, Indiana, to be their full-time pastor, beginning in August of that year.

By the time this church was born, it was well on its way to walk, if not run! It was grounded in a firm faith and trust in Jesus, and took as its motto a favorite verse of Menno Simons, the 16th century Dutch Anabaptist leader from whom the Mennonite Church received its name: “For no other foundation can anyone lay than that which is laid, which is Jesus Christ” (1 Cor. 3:11).

Throughout this year we are hearing pieces of our history and we shall have another history moment this morning. Today, we are not focusing so much on the entire history of this congregation during the past 50 years, but rather celebrating the vision and commitment of those who were here at the beginning. We can never return to or change the past. We can, however, recommit ourselves to the foundation and to continuing to build a church that has become like the growing mustard tree, with its branches widespread.

The scriptures that Jim and Erin read this morning, from Ephesians and Romans, were formative scriptures for this congregation in its early days. They shaped who we have become and, by God's grace, they will continue to shape us.

The passage from Ephesians 2 speaks of the gospel of peace. The writer was addressing a chasm that had existed for centuries between those who considered themselves God's chosen people, the Jewish community, and those on the outside, the Gentiles. Because of Jesus, the writer said, this chasm was now bridged, the wall that had separated these two groups was taken down. People who had been alien, strangers to each other, were now members of a single household. What's more, they were being built into a dwelling place for God!

Living this gospel of peace has taken various forms over the life of this church. During the Vietnam War years, members took part in protests of the war and Pastor John Esau spoke in various forums, explaining the Mennonite understanding of Jesus' ethic of non-resistant love and peacemaking. Later, when the US supported oppressive, military regimes in Central America, this congregation provided sanctuary to "strangers" who fled the violence and were seeking asylum. When a group of members became interested in living this gospel of peace in relationship with Hispanic neighbors on the west side of St. Paul, they were blessed and commissioned to begin a new fellowship. And as African immigrants came to the city, more relational bridges were built.

When one looks at the names of the 24 charter members, one finds 14 family names, most of which would have been considered "Mennonite names," meaning that they had been in the Mennonite church for several generations, if not centuries. Over the years Mennonites have come to see that our names, and the games that we play with them, can sometimes be a dividing wall that exclude others. By God's grace, this is another dividing wall that has slowly been coming down. We continue to welcome those who have descended from families long in the Mennonite fold, even as we are enriched by the Baxters and Bardos, Dadabos, and Demings, Lemus and Lusks, Okerstroms and Ong, Villegas, Zabriskies, Wandersee and Wing. (Maybe we should have Bret compose a song of our names!)

On a more serious note, welcoming the stranger can also tear at the fabric of peace. Changing understandings of human sexuality and particularly the experience of gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender persons, brought deep pain to this congregation in the 1990s as it has to many churches and the larger society. Disagreement caused a wedge, yet faith persisted. Two groups resulted, and while they bore the wounds of conflict, today both bear testimony to the fact that: faith sees the invisible, faith believes the incredible, faith does the impossible. Two congregations have flourished and continue their commitment to the gospel of peace.

The same writer, who spoke so eloquently of crumbling walls of division, wrote later in the same book to the Ephesians of the way God equips the saints—you and me—for ministry and for building up the body of Christ. Each of us has a part in this work: as pastors, prophets and teachers—and in a similar list in the letter to the Romans: as givers, leaders, and persons of compassion. This work of equipping the saints that we (and St. Paul Mennonite Fellowship, and Emmanuel Mennonite church, and the newer Anabaptist congregations in the Twin Cities, as well as other communities that have used this building) have been engaged in for 50 years is no longer contained in our current congregations or in this city. The seeds that were planted by 24 people and six children 50 years ago have created a mustard plant that has spread all over the world! Our "black book" of official membership contains the names of over 400 people who were members here at some time, and certainly many more have been part of the congregation

without formally joining in membership. Youth who grew up in this church have traveled and served far and wide in Asia, Africa, and Latin America. Persons who found fellowship and, for some, a call to ministry here, now serve congregations and institutions across the US and in Canada.

In his letter to the Romans, a gathering of Christians that the Apostle Paul had not yet met, he wrote: “Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good; love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honor. Do not lag in zeal, be ardent in spirit, serve the Lord. Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer. Contribute to the needs of the saints; extend hospitality to strangers” (12:9-13).

These are enduring words of admonition to every Christian community, to each of us who make up the body of Christ. We know that we as individuals and as members of congregations have not always lived up to these high standards. This is why we practice confession and forgiveness. This is why we depend on and rest in God’s grace. The charter members would not have made it through their months of exploration and their early years as a small group were it not for the grace of God. Each pastor that has been called to serve this congregation and each person who has found a home here would not have done so were it not for the grace of God. None of us would commit ourselves to such a high calling were it not for the grace of God.

God’s grace is like the mustard seed. We experience it here in this finite place, with people we know, and through a short history of 50 years. Yet it extends to communities of faith (and beyond) all around the world and through countless generations. Fifty years ago the founding members gathered at the Table of the Lord in communion to celebrate the grace received in the chartering of this congregation. The same Lord bids us to come to the table to celebrate that same merciful grace, new each morning because of the love of Christ for us. We invite all who hunger for this grace to come to the table.

(We have four stations this morning and invite you to come in groups as the ushers guide; the table here on the podium will have gluten-free bread; the others will be wheat bread. Please gather in groups and hold the elements as they are served to you until all in your group have received; then partake together, demonstrating our commitment to unity in the body of Christ.)