

Sermon for the 50th anniversary of Faith Mennonite Church, Minneapolis

Firmly Planted

Jeremiah 17:7-8

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One of the interesting dynamics about being a Mennonite pastor in the Twin Cities is that I often got calls from people asking about Mennonites. I didn't get too many calls like that when I moved to Goshen. Back then there were only two Mennonite churches in the Twin Cities, Faith and the New Hope M.B. church so we were a bit of a curiosity. Some callers asked if we were like the Mormons. Another caller said that the name Men-nonite smacked of sexism. In a similar vein another caller asked if women were allowed to be Men-nonites. One person asked if he could bring a group to just come and look at our building. They had never seen a Mennonite church building before. When I told him that we were worshipping in what used to be a Lutheran church building he lost interest. A number of people asked if anyone could attend a Mennonite worship service or were we an exclusive group.

Perhaps the most interesting call came from a religion teacher from a local Catholic high school. This call was not unusual in the sense that I had accepted invitations to speak about Mennonites at high schools as well as to youth groups at churches from other denominations. I also spoke at Bethel College and Bethel Seminary, at Augsburg College and at Untied Seminary. I always welcomed opportunities to inform others about Mennonites and Anabaptist theology.

But the call from the Roman Catholic religion teacher was a bit different. He told me that he had invited people representing various denominations to come and speak to his class about their particular faith tradition. He confessed he didn't know much about Mennonites so he asked me to tell him over the phone what some of our distinctives were. "Well," I said, "Our beginnings go back to the Anabaptist wing of the reformation so we have believers baptism. Anabaptism means to re-baptize." "We had a Baptist here a couple of weeks ago," he replied. "We claim to be a peace church," I said. "The Catholics are becoming that," he said. "We have a strong emphasis on service," I went on. "We had someone from the Salvation Army here just last week," he replied. "Some branches of Mennonites live a rather simple life," I continued. "We had a Quaker here a month ago," he said. I also said that Mennonites believe in the separation of church and State and he informed me that one of their speakers was a Jehovah's Witness.

Then he asked, "If I saw you walking down the street, would I recognize you as a Mennonite?" "No," I said, "probably not." "Do your men have beards?" he asked. "Well, some do," I said, "but I don't think there's any particular religious reason for it." "Do your people use electricity?" was the next question. "Yes," I said, "we all use electricity." "Do you drive cars?" I assured him that most of us drove cars. Then he asked, "What are some occupations that your people are engaged in?" And I listed some of the occupations that Faith Church people were engaged in at that time: Social workers, teachers, doctors, lawyers, administrators of various kinds, engineers, architects, artists, musicians, nurses, real estate agents, photographers, people in the insurance business, etc. as well as graduate students and undergraduate students." "No farmers?" he asked. "No farmers," I said.

There was silence on the other end of the line. Then he said, somewhat hesitatingly, "Would you be offended if I ask you not to come? You don't seem that much different from anyone else.

I am still trying to figure out if that was a positive or negative response. And I think it is probably a bit of both. As Anabaptists we claim to be in the world but not of the world. Sometimes that's a fine line. As always, Christians live in a time of righteousness and unrighteousness. Christians must live their faith with that in mind.

I was not around when Faith Church began but we should be very much indebted to those who had the vision to plant a Mennonite church in the Twin Cities 50 years ago. As I understand it, someone, somehow compiled a list of Mennonites living in the Twin City area. These people were contacted to see if there might be interest in becoming part of a Mennonite church in this urban area. Some said they were not interested because they were already established in other churches. I suspect others showed lack of interest because they came to the cities to try to lose their Mennonite identity.

But there were a few Mennonites who said "yes" to the challenge of being Mennonite in a large metropolitan area. These are people who were in the world, but still cherished their Mennonite identity. And because they did Faith church has survived 50 years. It was entirely appropriate that the group chose the name Faith, for it was in Faith that they began and it is in Faith that you must continue. From these roots firmly planted by those first members, other Mennonite churches in the Twin Cities have emerged from this congregation; the St. Paul Mennonite Fellowship, and Emmanuel Mennonite. I remember saying that if Mountain Lake can have 4-5 Mennonite churches, surely Minneapolis-St. Paul can have that many. What I did not entirely envision was the way this growth in Mennonite churches would come about. The St. Paul Fellowship grew out of a vision in this congregation and that felt good. I must confess, though, that when I heard that some had left Faith to form another congregation I was deeply saddened and frankly, disappointed. But there are times when God works in mysterious ways. Sometimes it is good that people have a choice as to what kind of church they want to attend. So I say to Faith, to St. Paul, to Emmanuel, do your thing where you are planted and God will give the growth. Faith Church is evidence of that.

You have chosen for your theme verse for this celebration, Jeremiah 17:7-8:

Blessed are those who trust in the Lord, whose trust is the Lord. They shall be like a tree planted by water, sending out its roots by the stream. It shall not fear when heat comes, and its leaves shall stay green; in the year of drought it is not anxious, and it does not cease to bear fruit.

How is Faith Church like this verse? Well, for one thing, this church was planted near the Mississippi River. I understand that was by design. The early founders wanted a location near the St. Paul and Minneapolis city limits. By the providence of God a building became available at 22nd St. and 28th Avenue. And God did the rest. For from this church planted by the river its roots have extended far beyond the walls of that building. Not only did those roots extend to this building when we outgrew the other building, but from the group of people who have worshipped and trusted God here in this corner of the Twin Cities, have gone forth missionaries, pastors, MCC workers, and people of various occupations who have lived their faith as a witness to others around them. People in the world, but people with distinctively different values than those they might encounter on a daily basis. At one time the then Northern District Conference of the General Conference listed 12 missionaries from the N.D. in the annual report. 6 of those 12 were from Faith. At about the same time people from Faith Church were serving with MCC in Indonesia, New Orleans, and in Germany.

The Jubilee Shop was begun and a local V.S. unit as well. Refugees were sponsored. Work camps for high school youth were held. The roots of this congregation were firmly planted locally and from here around the world. Faith Church did not cease to bear fruit.

How did this happen? Because people, past and present, who have been a part of this congregation have put their trust in the Lord. Some made significant sacrifices in time and money to keep the church going. And visionary pastors, such as Frank Epp, John Esau, and Don Kaufman, helped the church put down firm roots in those early years. May that rootedness continue for another 50 years or more.

To have trust is to have confidence in someone, someone to be safe with, someone to be secure with. Such trust cannot always be assured with people, but it can be assured with God. I believe that through the years the people of Faith Church have been planted in the world but not of it. Mennonites in urban areas are not tourist attractions, like the Amish in northern Indiana, but nonetheless carry values of peace and justice, community, integrity, mutual aid, and service. People may not recognize you on the street as a Mennonite, but by “your fruits they shall know you.” As Jeremiah says: “the tree planted by the water, shall not cease to bear fruit.” Substitute Faith Church for tree. “The church planted by the water shall not cease to bear fruit.” Roots are important, but the world knows Christians by their fruits, not their roots for roots stay underground. We don’t need underground Christians in the Twin Cities. We need the roots to hold up trees that bear fruit.

When one thinks of a tree planted by water, the image that comes to mind is that of a river, sometimes flooding and sometimes dry. In the history of any church there are times when grace seems to be overflowing and there are also times of drought. When one thinks of rivers, one thinks of currents, perhaps for our purposes this morning, a current as a metaphor for carrying people along on their faith journey. But sometimes one must be bold and go against the current. There are times when one’s faith asks you to go against the safety of the current. When we stand for peace and justice, that is sometimes the case. Other Christians are willing to go along with whatever our nation asks us to do. We are not to let our government define for us who our enemies are or how we are to use our tax dollars. We should be unwilling to go along with a nationalism that co-ops our faith for its own purposes. In earlier verses in chapter 17, just before our theme verse, Jeremiah writes “cursed are those who trust in mere mortals, and make mere flesh their strength” and points his people to “trust in the Lord” when the heat is on. For Jeremiah, nationalism, however much it claimed the blessing of religion, was not enough. Jeremiah made it clear that to place your trust in any kind of human power is ultimately a recipe for disillusionment. At a time when wars are going on, when the defense budget is obscenely high, when the rich are getting richer and the poor suffer because of it, it is time for Christians, especially Anabaptist-Mennonite Christians, to go against the current and witness to a better way, a trust in the Lord rather than trust in nation or mere mortals. As Richard Mouw, president of Fuller Seminary, stated in a recent article in the *Christian Century*: “When the church allies itself too closely with political power it loses the freedom to be the kind of Church that God wants it to be.”

So I encourage you to hold unapologetically to the peace witness associated with Anabaptist-Mennonites. In fact, a number of people have come to Faith Church precisely because of our peace stance. The world needs the gospel teachings on peace more than ever. And more and more denominations, not just Catholics like the religion teacher claimed, are beginning to understand the gospel of peace. Last summer I attended an ecumenical peace conference at

AMBS. 36 denominations were represented, from Catholic to Pentecostals. Many said they were there because of what they had learned from the Mennonites about peace. At break time one day I had a conversation with a fellow who was from The Community of Christ, which was formerly called the Reorganized Church of Latter Day Saints. He said they are striving to be a peace church. At a time when so many are discovering the gospel of peace, it saddens me that some Mennonites are running from it and don't wish to claim it. I believe God had a plan for Faith Church when it was planted here in the Twin Cities, and that was to be a voice for peace at a time when so few churches embraced that gospel teaching. It is crucial in our time that you continue to witness to that core teaching of the New Testament. The cities need you.

There were times in the past history of this congregation when we stood, with others, outside of Honeywell headquarters protesting Honeywell's manufacture of nuclear triggers and cluster bombs. On one occasion a larger protest was scheduled, one which the organizers felt might become violent, and they didn't want that. So they came to the Mennonites, seeking counsel as to how to keep the demonstration peaceful. We decided we would pass out bread to the demonstrators and sing hymns. We did and no violence occurred. During that period of Faith's history, some members were arrested at Honeywell and others took up tax resistance. The world continues to need such witnesses for peace and Faith church can continue to nurture them. (G.C. war tax conference: People of Faith peacemakers etc.)

Being an urban Mennonite Church, Faith Church needs to have a strong sense of community. Many of us came to the cities, distant from relatives and having to find community in a large metropolitan area. Faith Church provided that community for many over the years. It has been a family to those far from families and that included many of us. John and Hilda Warkentin: patriarch and matriarch of Faith Church.

Stuart Murray, in the book, *The Naked Anabaptist* describes the Anabaptist community this way:

Churches are called to be committed communities of discipleship and mission, places of friendship, mutual accountability, and multivoiced worship. As we eat together, sharing bread and wine, we sustain hope as we seek God's kingdom together. We are committed to nurturing and developing such churches, in which young and old are valued, leadership is consultative, roles are related to gifts rather than gender, and baptism is for believers.

From my experience Faith Church has been such a community. Such a community attracts others. And in a community all are welcome and I emphasize the "all." As a pastor here I remember going to a couple of church growth conferences. I heard speakers and attended seminars in which so-called experts presented formulas for church growth: everything from marketing your church to planning strategies to attract the kind of people you want, in other words, the more homogenous the better if you wanted to grow your church. One expert said throw out your organ and get a set of drums. Well, I am happy to say we didn't do any of that. We didn't have any grand strategy for growth. We didn't blanket the neighborhood with fliers. We didn't advertise in the papers much, except for an occasional peace aid. We just remained who we were, and the church grew, because people saw what was going on here.

A turning point came when several members, who lived throughout the twin cities, covenanted together to move into the Seward neighborhood. At that time just two Faith families lived in the neighborhood, the Westbys and our family, in the parsonage next door to the church. The influx of new Seward resident who were members of Faith made an impression in the neighborhood, so much so that at one time there were 40 Faith Church people within walking distance of the

church. And it must also be said that some people came because they read John Howard Yoder and used the More with Less cookbook and those were influential in them seeking out a Mennonite Church.

I once got a call from a pastor in another urban congregation who thought it might help his church grow if they dropped the name Mennonite. I strongly advised against that because in our situation it was the name Mennonite that attracted people. If we called ourselves the Community Bible Church or something like that, there would be nothing distinctive about us. Most people seem to know that the name Mennonite stands for peace, justice, community, service, and that is what many people are looking for.

In a community difficult issues can be struggled with in a spirit of unity. And that was done, and several examples could be given. I think especially of our discussions over civil disobedience at Honeywell or the way we rallied around Helen and Alberto when they were harassed by neighbors.

As you look ahead, I encourage Faith Church to be rooted in Christ. Put your trust in Him. And when heat and drought come, as they may, if you as a congregation are firmly rooted, firmly planted, you shall, in the words of Jeremiah, continue to be blessed

I remember vividly the day we moved from across the street into this building. It was an untypical mild January Sunday. We began the service in our building across the street. We had a call to worship, sang a hymn, presented the keys to the building to the Vietnamese Alliance church which had purchased our building. Then we gathered up our hymnbooks, communion ware, some banners, and the cross crafted by John Warkentin and carried them to this building. There the remnants of the Ebenezer Lutheran congregation were standing at the entrance with the doors wide open to welcome us. When we got inside Lutheran pastor Lew Sundquist had words of welcome. Pastor Sundquist had been at Ebenezer 10 years. When he came he had great hopes of reviving the congregation but it was not to be. The congregation of mostly elderly people declined until they could no longer maintain the building. But during Pastor Sundquist's time the Lutherans graciously allowed us to use this building for our overflowing Sunday School. So when they offered to sell this building to us, we purchased it. On the day we moved in to this space Pastor Sundquist uttered the most gracious welcome I have ever heard: Speaking from a heart which must have been breaking over Ebenezer's lack of growth, Pastor Sundquist said: "Perhaps we must decrease so you can increase."

So my prayer for you is that you will continue to increase not only in numbers, but in faith, in commitment, and in carrying out God's mission here. May you continue to be firmly planted.