

Faith Mennonite Church
February 13, 2011
Annual Meeting Sunday
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The Church: Paradise Found

Deuteronomy 30:15-20; I Corinthians 3:5-16

Today is Annual Meeting Sunday here at FMC. Later this morning and afternoon we'll gather around tables down in our fellowship hall to review our congregational activities of the past year and affirm a budget, our leadership, and plans for the coming year. Our deliberations will likely not feel very newsworthy in comparison to the events that we've watched unfold in Egypt during the past two weeks. But just one week prior to the initial gathering of protestors in Tahrir Square on January 25, most of the people who eventually made their way to the square were no doubt doing the ordinary: sitting in meetings, visiting over meals, going to work, playing with their children, and thinking about all the things that weren't right in the world.

Then, a young Egyptian woman, Asmaa Mahfouz, became incensed by the reaction after four young men set themselves on fire as a protest against the poverty and corruption in their country. The official state media portrayed them as psychopaths, and after one of them died, some accused him of being a sinner for taking his own life. Asmaa interpreted their action differently. She saw that they feared death less than they feared living in a society that accepted corruption and injustice. She recorded a video¹ in which she gave an impassioned invitation for people to meet in Tahrir Square on January 25, and the rest is history.

I don't know anything about Asmaa's life; I've only seen her video on Youtube. Like Rosa Parks, who refused to move to the back of the bus, sparking the Montgomery Bus Boycott in 1955, Asmaa's small action triggered something that she couldn't have fully imagined. Both of these women made a decision in favor of life, as Moses counseled the children of Israel. Each made a deliberate choice to reach out and accept and walk into a life that God was leading them into.

Our scriptures this morning provide helpful reference points both as we think about the events in Cairo and also about another year in the life of Faith Mennonite Church. Both scriptures—Moses' farewell sermon in Deuteronomy, just before his death, and St. Paul's counsel to a conflicted church in Corinth—speak of choices we make for good, but also of the gift we receive that is so much more than anything any one person or one group can bring about.

The youthful crowd in Tahrir Square these past few weeks seemed to have heard the charge of Moses: choose life and prosperity, not death and adversity. In the euphoria following President Mubarek's resignation, parents thanked their children for doing what their own generation had failed to do—stand up against the corruption and rule of fear. I anticipate that we will learn in days to come what the foundations were that gave rise to this seemingly spontaneous, yet disciplined nonviolent revolution. Last Sunday Candace told the children about one of the foundations: the distribution in Egypt of an Arabic translation of a comic book recounting the story of Martin Luther King, Jr's nonviolent action against racial discrimination in the United States. I imagine we will learn of others.

We know that prior to her act of civil disobedience, Rosa Parks had attended the Highlander Folk School, a Tennessee center for workers' rights and racial equality. She was the

¹ <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SgjIgMdsEuk>

secretary of the Montgomery chapter of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People. She had laid a foundation that undergirded and prompted her protest action.

In Paul's letter to the Corinthians, he is emphatic that the church, regardless of its leader or its particular identity, has one foundation: Jesus Christ. As Christians, we have a role in building on that foundation, but we build in harmony with the foundation, inspired by the foundation. We build and we plant seeds knowing we may never see the completion of the building or the full harvest. Yet we work expecting to be surprised by new shapes, new forms, new varieties of growth that are beyond our imagining.

Irenaeus of Lyons, a 2nd century bishop, invited believers to "take refuge in the Church, to drink milk at her breast, to be fed with the Scriptures of the Lord" because the church was "planted in the world as a paradise."² God intends for the church to be a paradise, a garden, a place of refuge, a place of nourishment, a seedbed for new movement of the Spirit.

Of course this is not always our experience. Any one of us can quickly recount all the times and ways in which the church has been less than a paradise. In fact, we probably spend more time lamenting the state of the church as *Paradise Lost* than imagining our role in the church as Paradise found. Irenaeus no doubt had the same struggle, even in the early days of Christianity. His elegant words, in fact, are found in his writing titled *Against Heresies*. Irenaeus lived and served as a leader at a time when a huge conflict raged in the church between those who defended the authority of scripture passed down from the apostles versus some, known as Gnostics, who believed they had access to secret knowledge (gnosis) about God.

Despite the conflict Irenaeus didn't lose sight of what he believed to be God's intention for the church. His vision of the church as paradise echoed Abraham's and Moses' expectation that the People of Israel would receive and offer blessing. It echoed Paul's vision of the church—the people of God, including all of us here—as God's holy temple. This paradise, this temple, come to us as gifts of God yet we are more than mere recipients. Moses said we need to choose how we will respond to this gift. Paul says we build on the foundation and continue to shape the gift.

Last week during the education hour as several of our gardeners spoke of what they gain from the experience of tending life that springs from the earth, several of them commented on the significance of compost. Compost is waste, that, when left in the right conditions, is converted to life-giving fertilizer. Even in paradise the cycle of life includes waste that must die in order to give life in a new form.

I hope that as you read the annual reports of the activities from the various commissions in preparation for today's meeting, that you caught at least a small glimpse of paradise. I hope as we listen and talk in our meeting and over our fellowship meal today, we will be mindful of God's Spirit among us. If there are points at which we disagree, I hope that we will view conflict as compost that will eventually enrich and strengthen our life together. And as we engage in outreach activities this year, as we worship, as we take part in Christian education, as we celebrate the 50th anniversary of our congregation, as we deepen relationships with one another, may all that we do be grounded in our foundation, Jesus Christ, who we come to know more fully in Scripture and in prayer.

"[We] are God's servants, working together; [we] are God's field, God's building." (1 Corinthians 3:9)

² *Against Heresies*, V, 20, 2, as quoted in Olivier Clement, *The Roots of Christian Mysticism: Texts from the Patristic Era with Commentary* (New York: New York City Press, 1995), 96.