

Faith Mennonite Church
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Who is God calling us to become as a people?
Isaiah 43:1-7; Luke 3:15-17, 21-22; Acts 8:14-17

In 2002 Mennonite Church USA was formed, “bringing together two separate denominations of Mennonites, the General Conference Mennonite Church and what was sometimes called the “Old Mennonite” or simply Mennonite Church. In house, we referred to ourselves as either “GC” for General Conference or “OM.” A primary impetus for this merger was the growing global Mennonite Church. Mennonite Churches in other parts of the world would sometimes ask: “Why do we need to relate to various bureaucracies and different sets of mission partners if we’re all Mennonite?” For example, when Gerald and I served with Mennonite Central Committee in Central America in the 1980s we worked with Mennonite Churches that were started by the Evangelical Mennonite Conference from Steinback, Manitoba, the Conservative Mennonite Conference from Rosedale, OH, the Brethren in Christ Church, and The Eastern Mennonite Board of Missions from Lancaster, Pennsylvania.

So the question from the global church was a fair and seemingly simple question. The answer and the merger proved to be much more difficult even as we brought together just two of the many branches of Mennonites. These two historic peace churches, with common roots in the 16th century radical reformation, nonetheless had developed in separate cultural and geographical locations, which had produced distinct religious practices and theological emphases.

The coming together was not always peaceful and we’re still living with the consequences of some of the compromises that were agreed upon in order to achieve one denomination. One positive aspect of the new denomination was the focus on building an identity that was outwardly or mission focused. Mennonites in North America had, over generations, come to be regarded as “the quiet in the land.” Having fled the persecution of the 16th century, and military conscription of later centuries, Mennonites who settled in North America were glad for the opportunity to live peaceably as predominantly rural folks, caring for the land and raising families to love and fear God. They were good neighbors and developed relief, service, and mission organizations such as Mennonite Disaster Service, Mennonite Central Committee and various mission boards, but the idea of “mission” was often considered something (like being a pastor) that required a special “call” and probably meant going somewhere else, somewhere with a special “need.” Most churches maintained their membership and growth through having large families.

Many things changed in the 20th century. Mennonites moved to the city and away from agriculture even as the US economy shifted away from agriculture and toward manufacturing and then service and information. Times of political and social change are often times when creative spiritual exploration and understanding also occurs.

Our readings from Isaiah and from Luke and Acts are fine examples of this. The book of Isaiah was set within the exile, when the kingdoms of Israel and Judah had fallen to stronger powers and a significant portion of the population was forced to leave their homeland. While this was a devastating time, it became a time for self-reflection: how did we get here? Did God cause this or was it our own mistakes and unfaithfulness? Is there hope for the future?

Into these questions the prophet Isaiah spoke two important messages, which are repeated over and over in various ways. Both are messages of hope. The first is: no matter how miserable we have become, we are still beloved by God. Today’s text says: “Do not fear, for I have redeemed you. I have called you by name, you are mine.” The second is: God will bring us back home. The same passage continues: “Do not fear I am with you: I will bring your offspring from the east, and from the west I will gather you; I will say to the north, ‘Give them up,’ and to the south, ‘Do not withhold; bring my sons from far away and my daughters from the end of the earth--everyone who is called by my name, whom I created for my glory, whom I formed and made.’”

The experience of exile had a profound impact on Israel's notion of what it meant to be God's chosen people. It did not mean carte blanche protection. It did not mean that God only worked through this chosen band. But the notion of homecoming, of a people connected to a place remained intact. And, indeed, after several generations the offspring were permitted to return and they rebuilt portions of what had earlier been destroyed.

Fast forward about 500 years and Jesus enters this geographical scene with a new set of geopolitical dynamics. Israel is again besieged, occupied by Rome, and the people are still longing for a safe home, all to themselves. As all young Jewish boys, Jesus would have been formed in the sacred writings. He likely memorized the Pentateuch, the first five books of the Bible known as "the law," which were most likely written and edited during the time of exile. He prayed the Psalms with his family and in the synagogue, and he was familiar with the prophetic writings such as Isaiah. So it is not surprising that, at the beginning of his public ministry, when he is baptized and prays, he hears the Spirit speaking the same message to the people in exile: "You are beloved ... you are my Son, the Beloved, with you I am well pleased."

But the direction of Jesus' ministry, and the church that emerged and spread following his death and resurrection, was not identity to the homecoming of Isaiah's vision of a people fixed in one place. Rather Jesus pioneered an outward movement of the Spirit into all places. Thus, the lectionary includes the brief portion from the book of Acts that shows the spread of this new way and understanding of God into Samaria—disdained territory for the Jews of that day.

As Mennonite Church USA was forming at the turn of a new century, a new image of church was emerging. It is not enough to maintain faithfulness within our families and churches and to secure alternatives to military service for our young people. No, the Spirit of God draws and propels us beyond the walls of our churches to share the gift of "belovedness" with others. The new denomination adopted the following mission statement: "God calls us to be followers of Jesus Christ and, by the power of the Holy Spirit, to grow as communities of grace, joy, and peace so that God's healing and hope flow through us to the world."

This statement highlights several aspects of our identity, what we believe God is calling us to become as a people. First we are followers of Jesus. Jesus is the center of our faith, as the one who saves us from our propensity to live for ourselves alone and the one who puts a claim on us as our leader and guide. As we allow Jesus to form us—our desires and our actions—we together become a sign of the kingdom of God.

But we do not follow alone. The second aspect of our mission statement and identity is that we are called into community and this community becomes the center of our lives. This community helps form and support us. And we want to share the benefits of the community with others.

This leads us to a third aspect of our mission and identity, one that we might consider the unique gift of our Anabaptist/Mennonite tradition: reconciliation. Reconciliation, or peacemaking, is the center of our work. We understand salvation as reconciliation between God and people, and we believe that grace, joy, peace, healing and hope flow to others as they become reconciled to God and to others.

In summary, we are called to become a people for whom Jesus is the center of our faith, community is the center of our life, and reconciliation is the center of our work. As we live into this identity, this reality, we experience the homecoming of Isaiah's vision in a way that Isaiah could not have imagined. For the Spirit of God creates home, creates community wherever people of faith gather and join in the work of reconciliation. We are no longer geography bound.

All of this comes together through invitation, inviting others to experience and join in this vision and this holy work of reconciliation. The opening verse that we read from Luke 3 contains two words that were key to Jesus' ministry, his invitation. "As the people were filled with expectation, and all were questioning in their hearts..." Expectation and questioning. Jesus met people, healed, forgave and taught in response to their expectations and their questions. We too meet people with expectations and questions—and with despair and doubt.

Our invitation is simple for we too are a people of expectation and questions: Come join us as we seek the way to the One who is making us whole.