

Faith Mennonite Church
December 30, 2012

Growth, new understandings, new questions, new ideas about God's work
Pierre G-B

Good morning. Many of you know me—I attended this congregation fairly regularly for about 11 years. Now I continue to attend when I can, but that's only maybe once a month. Joetta asked me to share my ideas on areas of growth this past year: new understandings, new questions, new places of awareness of God's work.

I've now completed 1½ years out of four of medical school at UW-Madison. One personal highpoint for me was last spring, when I represented my class with a speech in a ceremony for families of the persons who donated their bodies for dissection. It went gratifyingly well.

As for the coursework—it's not getting easier. I feel like I'm running full tilt just to basically stay with the pack. I'm used to leading my academic packs, so that takes some self-image reconfiguration. I'm mostly enjoying the material, though I keep being amazed at how much detail there is to memorize. Our tests put a premium on memorizing power, so it's easy to measure myself that way. Then after the tests, much of the detail I managed to corral in my head slips away, and I end up feeling less than competent. I think part of dynamic of med school is to drive us to excellence through a terror that our patient may die or be disabled through our failure or oversight. That's an anxious place to be.

At the same time, I'm trying to learn to think about health more broadly. I don't know how many of you remember the video we saw in Sunday school a few years back—the full title was “Unnatural Causes: Is inequality making us sick?” The conclusion for doctors is that a huge part of patient outcomes—much greater than billable medical interventions we carry out—come from patient social status, wealth, and behaviors. While doctors still need to be clinically smart and competent, this raises the suggestion: Maybe my MOST IMPORTANT role in my patient's lives will be to be an UN-ANXIOUS presence, affirming that they have a contribution for the community, a reason, and a capacity to change their lives. You might say these are pastoral skills.

These are skills that are introduced here and there in our curriculum, but they certainly don't have a central place in it. However, I'm hoping this spring to get into an urban medicine program that will have me spending a substantial part of years 3 and 4 in Milwaukee, doing rotations in clinics and hospitals while also pursuing a public health-oriented longitudinal project with some community organization. I'm hoping that that will be a setting that fosters thought about the pastoral, community-building elements of medicine.

One of the main challenges then is to figure out how to foster that unanxious place in my own life and in my family life. That's hardly an easy thing to do. I don't know if God has been working there or not, but I feel it's a place that needs God's work. I do know that the support and encouragement that various ones of you have offered to Lori while I've been mostly away have made a difference in keeping us sane and positive. Thank you.

I also want to give you a bit of an update on our adoption process. Many know that Lori and I have been in an adoption process for a long time—I first mentioned this in church maybe 3 or 4 years ago. Each advent season this has given special poignancy to the theme of waiting. Now it's looking as if the waiting has entered a final stage—in a few weeks we'll be traveling to Ethiopia to pick up our child. We're looking forward to meeting—how strange to say it—our daughter. And then to the ongoing work of figuring out how to make her a normal, structured part of OUR lives, and providing HER a stable, permanent structured family.

Somehow the plant analogies abound... She's a transplanted seedling, and we're giving her a place to put down roots that won't be jostled and torn again. The family is becoming a grafted tree, and this new branch will bear new fruit in our family dynamics, in our understandings and relationships in the community, as we become a multi-racial, multi-cultural family. We hope and fret, well aware that, just as with biological children, we can affect the outcome, but we can't control it. This has been and certainly will be an area of growth for us. Here as well, we appreciate your support and prayers.

A quick final aside, but an important one. Our adoption agency recommends that we be very private with our daughter's adoption story. The idea is that these very deep identity issues belong to our child and should be hers to divulge or keep private when she wants to do so. Please don't be offended if we divert the conversation when your questions stray in the direction of her origins.

Spreading the light

Karen P

Our bible texts for today talk about rejoicing, spreading the message of peace and light, and living that message. I believe, with all my heart, that by doing this, it is possible to spread light to others. It's pretty simple, really...but we humans are complex creatures with a great distrust for "simple."

As a woman in her early fifties, I have experienced the requisite physical limitations, moodiness, and restlessness, that go with this time of life. I've done some soul-searching, attempted to "find myself" as the cliché goes. Middle-aged angst has cultivated a desire to figure out how to make a difference with the rest of my time here on this planet. I was led to take the STAR workshop in October, which left me equipped with useful knowledge that has already come in handy on several occasions. I've started looking for employment and volunteer opportunities that will allow me to fulfill my mission. All good, right? Well....Not so fast.

There are still those pesky temptations, faults, and failings that must be dealt with. I've got the mission, but I'm still the same flawed individual I've always been.

Right before Christmas, I found myself despairing because I had, once again, spoken without thinking. The injured party sent me an e-mail, literally writing me off. I totally deserved it. I gathered all my courage and wrote back an apology. No excuses, just "I'm sorry." I didn't expect an answer, since the original e-mail had informed me that there was "no need to respond." I spent the next few days, which felt like weeks, praying, and trying to get my head around the fact that I really am not always the good person I'd like to think I am. Then, on Christmas Eve Day, I got an e-mail saying that my apology was accepted. Not that I was forgiven, or that the person was no longer mad at me, but

that my apology had been received and accepted. This is really all I could have hoped for, and exactly what I needed. Hopefully, I've been properly humbled, and have learned my lesson. We'll see. one thing I did learn, for the umpteenth time, is that "this too shall pass." There is redemption, of a sort. Not without effort, but it is possible.

In the last year, I've often thought that our contentious society might just be irredeemable. It seems like people just can't seem to get past their differences. With each crisis or public tragedy, we split for our "corners" faster than the time before. But I've been around long enough to know that it's never hopeless, as long as we carry that light; live that message. Humans have struggled with themselves, and with each other, since they were sentient. There have been times of great anger and sadness, but there have also been times accentuated by peace and cooperation. Me? I'm going to continue to try and keep that light going, and carry it with me wherever I go. I'm going to keep trying to make a difference, no matter how small, and despite any self-imposed distractions.