

Faith Mennonite Church
January 24, 2016
Joetta Schlabach

World Fellowship Sunday
Oriented by the Word
Nehemiah 8:1-10; Luke 4:14-21

Every family, every community has an origin story. How did we begin? Where did we come from? Some of us can trace our personal family stories back several generations, some of you, several centuries. Some of us have found interesting characters, both famous and infamous, in our family lines.

As Christians we have a couple origin stories. With the Jews we look to the creation and ancestral narratives of Genesis and Exodus to give us spiritual grounding. In the New Testament books, we encounter a rebirth, a new experience with God through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus.

Throughout Christian history there have been times of decline and renewal in the church. The late Phyllis Tickle, in her book *The Great Emergence*, suggested that about every 500 years Christianity has experienced a substantive shift – like a big rummage sale –when the old was cleared out making way for a new order. One of those shifts came in the early 1500s with the Protestant Reformation. It is in that period where Mennonite churches find our beginnings, in what became known as the Anabaptist movement— Anabaptism referring to the practice of being re-baptized as an adult. The first adult baptisms happened in a small gathering in Switzerland in January 1525. People who had been meeting to study the Bible, finding new life in its stories and desiring to follow its teaching, felt led to act in a way that would bring them into conflict with the established Roman Catholic and the nascent Protestant churches.

Up until the past 50-100 years, European and North American Mennonites have held a majority position in the global Anabaptist/Mennonite family. And for the most part, following the early years of persecution, we have existed in settings where adult baptism and re-baptism have not posed a serious danger. Our peace position has brought greater conflict, especially in times of war. But as Mennonite churches have spread and grown in Asia, Africa, and Latin America, many of those settings have held the challenges and even danger that our 16th-century Anabaptist forbearers faced. In my recent trip to Spain, I worshipped with an Anabaptist church in the city of Burgos. This church, about the size of our own, must constantly explain itself, justify its existence, and it feels the constant pressure of a very traditional, conservative Catholicism, both in social life and in government. This very day, Orv Gingerich, our member serving with Mennonite Central Committee in Nigeria, is leaving to visit the northeast part of the country where the Church of the Brethren-related churches have been decimated by Boko Haram. The area is considered safe for travel, but many people who fled are afraid to return.

The scriptures we read this morning are from the Revised Common Lectionary, which isn't based on events in our Anabaptist experience. The committee that chose today's scriptures did not have our World Fellowship Sunday in mind. Nonetheless, the texts speak meaningfully into our 500-year experience. The Nehemiah account witnesses to people being emotionally moved by listening to scripture. And in the Luke account, we see Jesus taking direction for his ministry from the prophetic writing of Isaiah. This has been a two-fold marker for Anabaptist Christians: being “warmed” and convicted by the Word of God and letting that conviction move us to action through a life of discipleship, drawing strength through the Spirit of God to be followers of Christ.

Now, just as communities have origin stories, every story has a back story. Today's scripture texts are rooted in a common story, of the Jewish Exile. The story in Nehemiah recounts the immediate aftermath as the exile community begins to return to Jerusalem. The Luke account is centuries later, but draws on a promise and a vision of God's desire for community that grew out of the exile experience.

I encourage you to read the whole book of Nehemiah this week. It's an easy read in a single sitting. It describes a Jerusalem in rubble that conjures the images we see from Syria or Mogadishu. There were no bombs in the day, but battle rams and fire had left the city in ruin. The walls and gates had fallen. When Nehemiah, who describes himself as a cup-bearer to the king in Babylon, hears a report of the

conditions in Jerusalem, he requests and receives permission and even resources to return to Jerusalem to rebuild. But it's not an easy task.

One commentator describes the situation this way: "The future of the people is in serious doubt. Enemies attack from outside, but even more disruptively internal disagreements threaten to undermine the community's future. The people form factions arguing about who is in and who is out, who should govern, how the temple can be rebuilt, how Jerusalem can be reestablished in safety and peace. . . . Like all communities that undergo military invasion and cultural breakdown, their identity has come unraveled."¹

But Nehemiah inspired hope and invited people to begin rebuilding the walls and gates. When the work had progressed to the point of offering a sense of security and possibility, he took a break from the work and invited Ezra, the scribe/priest, to bring out a scroll and read to the people. It seems there had been no religious observance for many years, perhaps decades. No public reading of scripture, as was the Jewish practice. And as Ezra reads, the words fall on the people like a spring rain shower. They drink these words of Torah, of compassionate guidance, like a glass of refreshing water. They feel joy and also contrition, for they had forgotten the word, had forgotten its way. But the word brought renewal in the same way that the rebuilt city walls did. It brought identity, structure, belonging. Replacing the physical security of the Holy City was not enough; these people needed the word to guide their new life.

When Jesus read the words of Isaiah, committing himself through these words to a ministry of healing and liberation, Jerusalem was not in shatters but it was under Roman occupation. People were free to go to the temple and listen to the word, but Rome's presence was pervasive and economically demanding. Jesus' ministry, a living demonstration of the Word, announced that God was with those who were suffering, was on the side of those under the heavy foot of Rome, that a new era was breaking in.

When 7,000 people from around the world gathered in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, last summer for the Mennonite World Conference Assembly, the primary activity was worship and reflection on the word. Men and women, seasoned sages and young leaders from every continent brought insights and interpretations of the word from their distinct contexts. Overwhelmingly there was a call to "walk" in the way of Jesus in honesty and integrity, admitting doubts, fears, and distinct opinions, but not allowing those to separate and bring division.

Now, more than ever when certain political candidates spew xenophobic, isolationist, and bellicose rhetoric, we need to listen to the voices of wisdom from our the global church. We need to proclaim that our future depends on theirs, that we are family with a shared story, and we will be oriented by the Word of God and follow in humility.

It is a pleasure to receive into membership this morning into our small, local congregation that is part of the larger world Anabaptist community, two persons who demonstrate this humility and commitment. Del Seitz and Mary Friesen Seitz have been with us for some months now and they bring a richness of experience that has been formed, in part, by time visiting in other parts of the world. I invite them to share at this time, after which we will together have a reading of commitment.

¹ Kathleen M. O'Connor, "Exegetical Perspective on Nehemiah 8:1-3, 5-6, 8-10," *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary, Year C, Vol. 1*, 267.