

Faith Mennonite Church
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Being all things to all people so that all can share the blessing
Isaiah 40: 21-31; 1 Corinthians 9:16-23; Mark 1:35-39

On Monday I worked out by swimming at the YWCA pool in St. Paul. After my swim I decided to sit in the sauna for a bit. When I entered, another woman, somewhat older than me, was already there. I said hello, but didn't proceed to make conversation. After a few moments she said, "Since you're a swimmer, I'm wondering if you have any suggestions on how to open a blocked ear. I've had a bad cold and my one ear is totally blocked." I confessed that I'm still a novice swimmer, but I remembered that when my son was on a high school swim team he sometimes used some drops for swimmers ear. My mother also recommends drops of peroxide in the ear when a cold is coming on.

The woman continued in a talkative mode and I mentioned that I am beginning to train for a sprint triathlon in August (along with some other women in this church). She quickly recommended a "boot camp" workout class that meets on Wednesday and Friday mornings. So Wednesday morning I showed up, and there she was, still recovering from her cold, ready to work out. When the instructor welcomed me, I gave credit to this woman – "she was the evangelist," I said. I don't know if everyone recognized that word, but it was apt: she heard me share an interest/need and proceeded to share with me some good news about something that had been helpful to her, which I then acted on.

Our readings in First Corinthians and the gospel of Mark are both about reaching out in ministry to others. Jesus and later Paul had a compulsion to share the wonderful experience of God breaking into our world. Jesus taught and healed and confronted evil and in the process created a community of followers, a place where people found connection and value and purpose. Paul preached, inviting people into a new experience of God's love and grace, and he too formed communities of followers, places where people found connection and value and purpose—and a bit of conflict along the way.

These readings share another commonality: neither Jesus nor Paul were content to stay in one place and minister to a single group—their own affinity group. Things were going well for Jesus in these early days of his ministry (remember, we're reading from Mark chapter 1). Lots of people were coming to listen and be healed. It seems like it would have been a temptation to stay put and soak it all up. But after spending time in prayer, Jesus told his disciples that he needed to move on, to go to other communities that also needed to hear the good news.

Likewise, Paul speaks of personally entering into and trying to understand and relate to the various contexts within which he moved. "To the Jews, I became like a Jew..." To those who strictly followed the laws of Judaism, Paul acted with due respect. When among non-Jews, Paul didn't try to impose a set of Jewish regulations. In another part of this letter he refers to conflicts which emerged around different practices within the Christian community that had to do with dietary considerations. In that context he used the language of "weak" and "strong." Here he says that "to those who were weak he became weak." (In current parlance: "when I'm with the vegans, I eat vegan.")

Now some have accused Paul of being boastful here. He does say that *he* (not Christ) is the one who is saving others. Others might see him as being wishy-washy, acting one way with some, another with others. (He certainly made the accusation against his fellow apostle Peter in the book of Galatians.) Yet both of these miss the thrust of Paul's message. The opening line says, "I am a slave of the gospel." The new reality that Paul had experienced in his conversion was so compelling that it became the ordering force of his life. He wasn't trying to build a personality cult or trying to fit in so everyone would like him. Rather he was willing to enter different realities with the desire to see how the good news he had experienced would be good news in a new context, a new community. For Paul, the good news had meant breaking free from a legalistic approach to religion, of following the rules and keeping everyone in their place, even if that meant dragging people off to prison or stoning them. Now he was looking for the ways that other people got trapped in religious and social systems. How can the reality of God's kingdom be

freeing for them? Paul is doing this not for his own sake, but for the sake of others, that all might experience the blessings he had received.

We Mennonite Christians have remained a small part of the larger Christian family. Those of us raised in “legacy” Mennonite churches and communities often value the gifts of the community and the teaching that we have received but we haven’t always been good about going beyond the comforts of our community to share these gifts with others. We can blame it on the history of martyrdom and the tendency to protect ourselves, but that martyrdom happened 500 years ago and most of us enjoy a lot of security and comfort today. While we have stayed in our safe enclaves, others have found us or found the writings of some of our theologians and have fallen in love, for lack of a better metaphor, with this tradition that we’ve tended to hold closely. Some of the more prominent Anabaptist voices today are referred to as neo-Anabaptists, for they are coming from persons who did not grow up Mennonite. Many times, as in the case of Greg Boyd at Woodland Hills Church (a Baptist church that has become increasingly Anabaptist), they were formed in another stream of Christianity which, through their study of scripture they began to question, much like our Anabaptist forebears of the 16th century. Then when they encountered the writings of ones like John Driver, Alan and Eleanor Kreider, and John Howard Yoder, they realized they were part of an older but still living stream.

Last week the theme of the Pastors Week that I attended at Anabaptist Mennonite Biblical Seminary in Indiana was “Where Culture Blurs Theology: What *is* an Anabaptist Christian?” Of the eight persons who gave keynote teachings or preached, only two were raised in the Mennonite Church. And one of those had left the tradition only to return when she got to seminary and found herself popular when she identified as a Mennonite because she hadn’t yet found another place to call home. The speakers included two African Americans, one Latina, a Canadian and an immigrant Korean. Each in different ways spoke of the strength that diversity brings to the church: diversity of persons and cultures, diversity of ideas and experiences. Greg Boyd said “diversity is an intrinsic kingdom good... a homogenous group can’t project the glory of God.” Drew Hart, from Philadelphia, said that “What is Mennonite should be changing constantly. We can’t privilege one particular ethnic history.” He called us to turn our attention to the most vulnerable in society, and echoing Paul he said, “Who do we need to come alongside?”

Coming alongside the most vulnerable in society will inevitably draw us into another action. Greg Boyd said we must *revolt* against anything that is anti-Christ in culture. Vulnerable populations are almost always the by-product, the refuse, of nationalism, militarism and materialism. As we “come alongside” and hear their stories we are drawn to practice the same incarnational love that brought God near to us in Jesus.

Many of us come alongside the vulnerable in our classrooms, clinics, counseling rooms, and on the street. But in many of those settings we are not free to actively invite people into the welcoming arms of this community. I pray that we would all pray with Jesus for the wisdom and power to take advantage of the times when we can be invitational, to have the courage to move beyond what is comfortable and enter the reality of others who have not experienced the grace of God in a Christian community. God promises that we are not alone in this endeavor. In the words of Isaiah 40: “They that wait upon the Lord shall renew their strength. They shall mount up with wings as eagles. They shall run and not grow weary, they shall walk and not faint.” This is a promise that God desires for all.