

June 25, 2017  
Luke 14:1, 7-14

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“Look, a white Mennonite!: moving beyond inclusion-talk”

As I returned home from the annual meeting of the Central Plains Mennonite Conference in Sioux Falls, I felt a gnawing inside of me, a deeply uncomfortable feeling; I felt and feel unsettled. I am unsettled by the fact that while we as a Conference and we as a denomination and we as a congregation have, in various ways, sought to be a welcoming and inclusive people, we have sought to wrestle with the plight of the world in which we live, we have, as of yet, been unable to fully *wrestle* with what sometimes feels like the unbearable weight of our shared history. The narratives we tell each other about ourselves *matter*; narratives have the power to shape and form our sense of personal and collective identity, and they shape and form our values, our theologies, our relationships, and our institutional structures. And all too often our narratives play a self-congratulatory and self-justifying function. I suppose this is only natural; nobody wants to feel guilty for the past; and it is always difficult to acknowledge or really *feel* a sense of responsibility to things that seem so often out of our control. What’s more, it’s often hard to know how to move forward in a way that does not repeat the mistakes of the past.

James Baldwin once said that “people who imagine that history flatters them (as it does, indeed, since they wrote it) are impaled on their history like a butterfly on a pin and become incapable of seeing or changing themselves, or the world.”<sup>1</sup> This is the place, Baldwin says, in which most white Americans find themselves. While dimly, or vividly aware that the history we have fed ourselves is mainly a lie, we all too often suffer from the inability to know how to release ourselves from it. The inevitable result, Baldwin observes, is a deep sense of personal and collective incoherence. And so, when confronted with the truth of our history, we find ourselves quickly on the defense, stammering: “Do not blame *me*, I was not there. I did not do it. My history has nothing to do with Europe or the slave trade. Anyway, it was *your* chiefs who sold *you* to *me*. I was not present on the middle passage, I am not responsible for the textile mills of Manchester, or the cotton fields of Mississippi. Besides, consider how the English, too, suffered in those mills and those awful cities! I *also* despise the governors of the southern states and the sheriffs of southern counties, and I *also* want your child to have a decent education and rise as high as his capabilities permit. I have nothing against you, nothing! What have *you* got against *me*? *What do you want?*”

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<sup>1</sup> James Baldwin, “The White Man’s Guilt,” *James Baldwin: Collected Essays*, 723.

We do not want to acknowledge, much less, wrestle with and redress the violence of our past. Why dwell on the past, you might ask? Does that not lead to a guilt that, for the most part, only serves to *overwhelm* our activity in the present? Will not the weight of this guilt make us despair? Would it not be better to think upon all the *good* things that we have done? Would it not be more appropriate to think upon all the *good* things that we can do and are doing, together, right now? Perhaps there is some truth in moving on. To a certain extent, we *must* move on; we have no choice. The problem, I want to suggest to you this morning, is not *whether* we should move on from the violence of our past, but *how* we move on. You see, history is not something merely to be read. It is not even really past. As Baldwin notes, “the great force of history comes from the fact that we carry it within us, are unconsciously controlled by it in many ways, and history is literally *present* in all that we do. It could scarcely be otherwise, since it is history that we owe our frames of reference, our identities, and our aspirations. And it is with great pain and terror that one begins to realize this. In great pain and terror one begins to assess the history which has placed one where one is, and formed one’s point of view.”<sup>2</sup>

We saw a striking and painful illustration of this, how history is not something merely in the past, during the controversy about the capital punishment Scaffold at the Walker Art Center’s Sculpture Garden, which was based in part on the gallows used to execute 38 Dakota men in Mankato in 1862. One wonders what the process was like that led to the Walker’s decision to display the piece, what conversations were had or were not had in the first place. It seems that the past only seems distant to those who do not bear the wounds of colonial violence.

I do not mean for all of this to sound abstract or obtuse. But I am afraid that history is weighing on me this morning; I carry it with me, in my body and in my words and mannerisms, and I feel compelled to reflect on that gnawing feeling, which I experienced on my drive home from Sioux Falls.

I hope it is not too personal for me to share with you that I came to the Mennonite Church naïvely. I came to the Mennonite Church because of its long history of nonconformity, its long history of peacemaking, and its long history of opposition to war. I stayed in the Mennonite Church because of the commitments of *this* congregation, and I accepted a call to ministry in *this* congregation, because of our shared commitments to the legacy of this tradition of nonconformity. Anabaptists have long understood themselves as a people of dissent; a people who take seriously, not only the commands of Jesus to “love your enemy,” but also God’s preferential option for the poor and the oppressed. Anabaptists have long taken seriously the teachings of Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount, which lift up those voices who do not have a seat at the table; or, as our scriptural text today says, “For all who exalt themselves will be humbled,

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<sup>2</sup> Baldwin, “The White Man’s Guilt,” 723.

and those who humble themselves will be exalted.” Unlike our Protestant and Catholic sisters and brothers, or so we like to think, Anabaptists have long insisted that these words must always stand at the heart of Christian faith and practice. And my commitment to this tradition, to this congregation, has not wavered. But that does not change the fact that I still experience this *gnawing* feeling, particularly when I move out into the “wider” Mennonite Church. And as I have wrestled with the history of racism in America and Mennonite complicity in this history, I have begun to think that the gnawing feeling is but an expression of the incoherence that Baldwin speaks about.

As a white heterosexual Mennonite man of European descent, moving out into the “wider” Mennonite Church has not been very difficult. While I regularly experience the awkwardness that comes with having an unrecognizable Mennonite last name, I could not honestly say that I have ever felt marginalized. I have felt bothered by certain remarks from well-meaning people, but my inclusion into the Mennonite Church has been, for the most part, fairly painless. This past weekend I was even invited to join the Conference Board as an at-large member. I have learned that Mennonites seek to be an inclusive people, and many Mennonites even enthusiastically welcome newcomers to the table, and not only white men. The civil rights leader and historian, Vincent Harding, was in many ways enthusiastically welcomed into the church, invited to speak at many Mennonite institutions and conferences. Yet, when he began to really challenge and to call into question the inability of white Mennonites to wrestle with the reality of racism in America, when he began to raise questions about whether Mennonites would ever make their “peace stance count” on the violent history of white supremacy, he was more often than not, met with a posture of defensiveness. He was invited into the circle of the Mennonites, but was his voice truly heard in a way that *transformed* the circle itself? Harding left the Mennonite church, perhaps in no small part because of the white Mennonite inability to wrestle with the collective incoherence that resulted from the shocking truths that he felt compelled to share. The black Mennonite pastor, Hubert Brown in his book *Mennonite and Black* describes the way in which Mennonites welcomed him and his family with open arms. In 1966, shortly after he became the pastor of Bethel Mennonite Church, Brown learned that he was only the second black person ever to have received a license to preach in the Franconia Conference, noting that only ten years earlier it would have been very difficult to obtain such credentials. Brown describes his relationship to Mennonites in the following way: “Basically my relationship with Mennonites has always been good. I cannot forget, though, that some Mennonites have been almost too ‘nice’ to me and to black folks in general. I have felt at times that I was being treated like a Christmas tree, like an object put on display. I have found myself alternately valued and then put aside in a manner often used with things rather than people.”<sup>3</sup> I am sure Vincent Harding could have said the same kind of thing, and I wonder how people like the black

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<sup>3</sup> Hubert Brown, *Black and Mennonite*, 19.

Anabaptist theologian, Drew Hart, must feel today. While drawing inspiration from Anabaptist theology I know that Drew has been unsure about how exactly to relate to the Mennonite Church at large, despite the fact that he has often been enthusiastically welcomed by many denominational leaders. Perhaps he, too, could relate to Brown's comments about feeling a bit like a Christmas tree, an object put on display, and perhaps, too, he has felt alternately valued and put aside.

Some truly wonderful and exciting things are happening in the Mennonite Church, even in our own conference; and I by no means want to ignore this or downplay the significance of what is happening. For example, at the Central Plains gathering this year we heard from a young pastor of the Mennonite Church in Quito, Ecuador. Exciting things are happening as Central Plains continues its partnership with the people of Ecuador and Colombia. Central Plains has welcomed a number of Latino churches into its circle, and has even included Latino and Latina people among its leadership. Leadership has been vocal in advocating for Pastor Max Villatoro since his deportation by ICE. In 2013, at the National level, Elizabeth Soto-Albrecht, originally from Puerto Rico, became the first Latina to serve as moderator of MCUSA. But I am still left wondering how much has changed as a result of their inclusion? Are their voices allowed to shape the present and the future of our conference and our denomination? To what extent, do family ties and a nostalgia for the past of Mennonite identity as the "quiet in the land" continue to shape the identity of our Conference? And to what extent is this identity bound up with a nostalgia for the dominance of white American identity more than, say, a commitment to the Anabaptist emphasis on Gospel nonconformity and radical discipleship of Jesus Christ?

I left the annual meeting wondering what would happen if we not only *included* these voices at the table of the Mennonite Church, but allowed these voices to *re-shape* our future together? What would happen if we not only *widened* or *enlarged* the circle of Mennonite identity, but *re-narrated* that identity in a way that opened out onto an honest reckoning with the past. If the global Mennonite Church is mostly black and brown, then why is it all too common for white Mennonites of European descent to hold decision-making power? "Friend, move up higher," the host in our parable says of the one who takes the lowest place. What if white Mennonites were to extend this kind of hospitality to our brothers and sisters in the Congo and India, our African American Mennonite Churches in North America, our Latino and Hmong Mennonite Churches in our own region?

Our denomination is already beginning to prepare for the 500th anniversary of Anabaptism in 2025. In a recent issue of *Mennonite Life*, historian Ben Goossen suggests that this provides an opportunity for Mennonites to *re-narrate* our history. He points out that Mennonite history has always been more complex than the narratives and stories we tell each other about ourselves. He writes, "The notion that Anabaptism is a singular, person-like entity with a "monogenetic" or

even “polygenetic” origin in the Reformation and a 500-year backstory is not a self-evident truth, free of ideological baggage. It is bound up with a form of history telling centered around great white men.” Such a narrative is a familiar one: “it posits Europe as the birthplace of a faith now held primarily by non-Europeans. It portrays white, ‘ethnic’ Mennonites as members of a historically persecuted minority – even when most live extremely privileged lives. And it has been closely associated with both militarism and scientific racism.”<sup>4</sup> The standard ways of telling the history of Mennonite origins and Mennonite identity that center European voices all too often end up justifying a patriarchal, Eurocentric, and white understanding of Anabaptism. The problem, in part, is that such storytelling does not reflect the interests of the majority of our congregations worldwide, nor is it faithful to the commitments of our faith. Whose interest does it serve? Whose power does it help to maintain?

In 1994 Vincent Harding spoke of the necessity “of creating a history that is faithful to the realities of our ambiguous past, our contentious present, and our rather uncertain future.” Part of moving on then means that we examine the history of how some people became designated as “white” and others as “black” or “brown.” Will we dare to examine this history? And will we dare to allow for an open dialogue that is honest about the past? As Baldwin said, “The American situation is very peculiar, and it may be without precedent in the world. No curtain under heaven is heavier than that curtain of guilt and lies behind which white Americans hide.” Baldwin said that an open dialogue must begin with personal confession, a cry for help and healing on the part of white America. The same holds true for white Mennonites it seems to me. For people of color, a personal confession is also necessary as the start of any honest dialogue, which as Baldwin says, will inevitably carry with it an accusation and judgment on white America. If we are not open to this kind of dialogue, a dialogue that indeed involves serious risks and perhaps serious confrontation, then we will never be set free from the trap of racism that has possessed our world long before any of us were born. Perhaps what I am saying is that we must learn to move on in a posture of *humility and listening*, not defensiveness; a posture of open confession, not self-congratulation; perhaps we must allow for accusation and judgment to be that which sets us free and transforms us from the baggage of our ambiguous past into an uncertain future. For this kind of transformation to take place, we will need to do more than widen the circle, we will need to do more than acknowledge our privilege, we will need to do more than welcome voices to the table; this is a start in the right direction, but it will not lead to transformation if we do not allow these voices to have decision-making power, if we do not allow these voices to creatively destroy old systems and structures and ideologies that keep us from becoming human and keep us from living faithfully as Christians.

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<sup>4</sup> Ben Goossen, *Mennonite Life*

Perhaps, as a start we can recognize and celebrate Anabaptist and Mennonite faith as richly diverse, constantly changing, and being made new in different contexts around the world. Rather than thinking of Anabaptist and Mennonite faith in terms of its continuity with 16th c. Europe, what if we were to center the congregations of the global South, and locally, our Hmong congregation? Ben Goossen suggests we begin tracing “the birth of Anabaptism – or more accurately, *one* birth of Anabaptism – to the establishment of the first Mennonite congregation in Indonesia during the 1850s; we could trace it to the formation of South Korea’s Anabaptist community just a few years ago; to the emergence of groups like Pink Menno and the Brethren Mennonite Council on LGBT Interests; and also to each new baptism.” “But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind. And you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you, for you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous.” I am not sure what Luke’s experience was like at banquets, but my hunch is that when those who have long been excluded from the banquet are invited to join in, blessings will come, not only for us in the future, but even now.