

Grace Mennonite Church – August 29/21 – A Devotional by Doug Schulz

“Letting Your Heart Speak”

In a month’s time, it will be exactly 13 years since Annie and I began attending Grace Mennonite Church. From the outset, I felt genuinely welcomed and knew that my heart and mind had found a home. I still have that good sensation every time I come into the church building, or visit in homes of the congregation.

Then, six years ago, I was brought onto pastoral staff at Grace, giving me the chance to serve my cherished spiritual family. It’s so good to feel that I can speak and act from the heart in pastoral care sorts of things, as well as in ‘outreach’ dimensions such as Bridge of Hope work - which started up exactly when I started work here at Grace in September of ’15. Out of this church’s vision and generosity, Bridge of Hope was born to do refugee sponsorships as we actively engaged a partnership with the local mosque and then Quakers and then other congregations. Bridge of Hope has become one of the highlights of my life, and I’m so appreciative that Grace has supported this work ‘from the heart’!

However, there have been points in my life within churches where ideas or initiatives I felt were essential were flatly rejected. And, on a couple of occasions, I experienced personal rejection when people ‘attacked’ with gossip or slander, and even with outright attempts to see me lose my job. Not here at Grace!

Pastoral leadership work can ‘touch nerves’ in people... not because folks are bad, but because people are in church normally because they believe certain things quite strongly. If a pastor challenges points or patterns of conviction, people can react harshly. As one person put it to me in a former congregation: “Isn’t that what pastors are paid for, to put up with anything people might throw at them?” Hmm, was that supposed to be an encouraging word?

The reason I’m referencing ‘rejection’ arises from our gospel reading for this week. In the gospel stories of the New Testament of the Bible, we can ‘track along the path’ with Jesus and his disciples. As we do, we detect places and times when Jesus and his message (and methods) were well-received, or when they were

seriously questioned, even refused. In fact, at the end of his life, Jesus had been totally spurned, turned over to be tortured and executed, and (what could be sadder?) even abandoned in his darkest hours by his dearest followers.

Mark 7:1-8 gives an account of how, earlier on in his ministry experience, Jesus is opposed. He's accused of being a radical who threatens the 'establishment'.

Now when the Pharisees and some of the scribes who had come from Jerusalem gathered around him, they noticed that some of his disciples were eating with defiled hands, that is, without washing them. (For the Pharisees, and all the Jews, do not eat unless they thoroughly wash their hands, thus observing the tradition of the elders; and they do not eat anything from the market unless they wash it; and there are also many other traditions that they observe, the washing of cups, pots, and bronze kettles.) So the Pharisees and the scribes asked him, "Why do your disciples not live according to the tradition of the elders, but eat with defiled hands?" He said to them, "Isaiah prophesied rightly about you hypocrites, as it is written, 'This people honors me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me; in vain do they worship me, teaching human precepts as doctrines.' You abandon the commandment of God and hold to human tradition."

Jesus gives fully of his life energy to heal people and guide them to higher hopes, and then gets hit with this kind of dismissal. Cruel! I mean, consider these religious types who have heard about all the good things Jesus has been saying and doing everywhere he goes, and now they're joining crowds of his followers only to accuse him of rejecting traditions they would rather cling to than accept the marvelous recovery of faith-energy made possible through his miraculous, life-changing message. No wonder Jesus says: "Their hearts are far from me." I'm pretty sure he said that with a mix of anger and deep sadness.

Have you ever had the experience of offering to the church (or maybe your family or friendship circle) some idea or insight or action of service, and found yourself told you were 'out of line' or 'not up to par' or 'stepping on someone's toes' or 'blowing your own horn'.... that kind of thing? It hurts to be suspected or rejected

when you really mean well, when you only want to give what you think is coming out of your best intentions. [As a pastor, I'm in a position to listen to people's offers of ideas or acts of service. Perhaps on some occasion you've felt I 'closed the door in your face' on your best offerings. I wouldn't do that kind of thing deliberately, but it could happen unintentionally as I exercise my responsibilities for aspects of church life. Sorry, indeed, if I've ever offended!]

Our current preaching theme is "Growing in God: Recovering". Well, how do we recuperate when we've had our heart hurt in a bad way? When we open up our heart to serve or care, and find ourselves being told to shut up or shut down?

In the early 90s I was a first-time pastor serving at a small 'outreach' congregation that had been founded by regular – I'll call them 'traditional' – Mennonite people who wanted to have an impact in town by creating a 'seeker-friendly' church with contemporary music and vital children's and youth ministries. I'd been happy as a high school English teacher and guidance counselor, but I took this pastoral job because I was assured by church leaders that I could freely use my interests in literature and history and psychology and philosophy, etc. any way I wanted.

So I set about creating unique sermons sometimes incorporating drama and poetry and music. Well, the youth told their 'non-churched' friends from the community to "check out our church", and many kids did - to the extent that the front rows of the sanctuary were filling up with young people. But some of the 'founding fathers' of the church complained, citing that I never preached real (three-point) sermons, never warned against hell, and didn't seem to believe we're all living in the End Times. [To me, every day is "end times"; so, love & serve Jesus!]

Some folks left the church and even organized meetings to try to convince others to join them. The budget took a huge hit, for a while. I hung in there, but slipped into a deep (undisclosed) depression, putting on a stiff upper lip above a forced smile. But my heart was enveloped in a grim state of self-doubt. I felt I was a failure, a fool, to think I could 'be myself' using the gifts God had given me. I was terribly tempted to call it quits as a pastor. I got very, very low.

As the saying goes, somethin' had to give! One day, I literally fell on my knees in a corner of our basement and cried out to God for a sign that would give me confidence in my calling again. That would renew my faith and desire to serve the church. That would make me sense God's presence filling my heart once more. A couple of days later, in my morning Bible reading, the devotional book I was using had Psalm 45 (another of our lection texts this week) listed as the day's reading. I read it, and my life got lifted 'big-time'. Here's how it starts:

“My heart is stirred by a noble theme
as I recite my verses for the king;
my tongue is the pen of a skillful writer.”

It was a gift straight from God to read this! Here a song-writer is creating beautiful words to inspire a king on a wedding day. It's all about pure celebration, confident creativity, and humble determination to accept one's gift and use it as best as possible to serve God out of a heart motivated by deep love.

It was that Bible text that 'saved my ministry', I'll say. I did not quit, but rather applied my energies back into the church, continuing to do things *en betye aundasch* ('a bit different'), as some of the older Mennonite people in the church would say about my approach to sermons and services. The church began growing again as more youth and parents kept coming. By the time I moved on to another ministry role elsewhere a few years later, that church was hosting monthly special youth services of almost 250 kids! Today, 25 years later, that congregation is a multi-generational 'faith lighthouse' in that town. It's got a dynamic worship focus, and is on the forefront of peace and justice issues, making a real difference as people's hearts continue to feel 'stirred by a noble theme'!

In my life story, I've had a few lows and highs of the heart, and I imagine you have too. What Bible texts have recovered your heart's passion and vision? Or maybe, like me, it's poems and prayers that reach your soul and keeps you going on, no matter what.

I close this reflection with a thought and a prayer. Here is an inspirational teaching about prayer that I found in my devotional readings on August 18th:

“In the depths of the heart we find the holy essence that is the source of all prayer... We might begin with an intention – such as praying for healing for a sick friend or for the Earth, for peace for someone who is suffering, or peace in the strife-ridden world we live in, or for understanding in a difficult situation – and then offer this intention to the heart. Or we can just be present in the inner sanctuary of the soul, in its waiting stillness. Prayer is essentially the heart’s conversation with the holiness at the heart of everything.” [Llewellyn Vaughan-Lee]

I believe this is how Jesus lived... in a conversation with God and God’s whole world. I want to be a person who listens, and speaks, from the heart in Jesus’ way.

Of course, Jesus taught us to pray our way through life’s challenges, especially when we need to recover strength and regain vision and direction. Here is a wonderful prayer I discovered in a conversation with my spiritual director on August 10th:

Forever Oneness, who sings to us in silence,
who teaches us through each other.
Guide my steps with strength and wisdom.
May I see the lessons as I walk,
honor the Purpose of all things.
Help me touch with respect,
always speak from behind my eyes.
Let me observe, not judge.
May I cause no harm,
and leave music and beauty after my visit.
When I return to forever
may the circle be closed
and the spiral be broader. [Bee Lake]

It’s a prayer I hope we at Grace can always speak straight from our hearts as we live in faith together, ‘being ourselves’ as a uniquely gifted people of God.