

**Finding our Centre**  
Jubilee Mennonite Church  
October 15, 2017

**Purpose:** To introduce the question of what lies at the centre of being an Anabaptist.

**Message:** As people of faith we must discern between that which is cultural trapping and what lies at the centre of our faith, our practice.

**Scripture:** Hebrews 11 [selections—I will read]; Isaiah 25:1-9 (Please read/have read)

**Synopsis:** Our traditions are what make us who we are, at least if we are to believe the guidelines of cultural diversity. But we can also become entangled by our traditions—those things of cultural doing—that we can forget the reasons for which we have begun doing them in the first place. For us, it can be easy to answer the question of 'who are you' first with the qualification of 'I am a Mennonite' citing all the particularities that go with that name, whether they lay as cultural markers or as essential elements of the Christian faith with Anabaptist characteristics which underlie that marker. Christian identity is found in the claim of Christ.

## **Hebrews 11:1 – 3, 8-11, 17-18, 23-25, 32-40**

Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for,  
the conviction of things not seen.

<sup>2</sup> Indeed,  
by faith our ancestors received approval.

<sup>3</sup> By faith we understand  
that the worlds were prepared by the word of God,  
so that what is seen was made  
from things that are not visible.

<sup>8</sup> By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called  
to set out for a place that he was to receive as an inheritance;  
and he set out, not knowing where he was going.

<sup>9</sup> By faith he stayed for a time in the land he had been promised, as  
in a foreign land, living in tents,  
as did Isaac and Jacob,  
who were heirs with him of the same promise.

<sup>10</sup> For he looked forward to the city that has foundations,  
whose architect and builder is God.

<sup>17</sup> By faith Abraham,  
when put to the test, offered up Isaac.

He who had received the promises was ready to offer up his only son,

<sup>18</sup> of whom he had been told,  
"It is through Isaac that descendants shall be named for you

<sup>23</sup> By faith Moses was hidden by his parents for three months after his birth, because they saw  
that the child was beautiful;  
and they were not afraid of the king's edict.

<sup>24</sup> By faith Moses, when he was grown up,  
refused to be called a son of Pharaoh's daughter,  
<sup>25</sup> choosing rather to share ill-treatment  
with the people of God than to enjoy the fleeting pleasures of sin.

<sup>32</sup> And what more should I say?  
For time would fail me to tell of  
Gideon,  
Barak,  
Samson,  
Jephthah,  
of David and Samuel and the prophets--

<sup>33</sup> who through faith conquered kingdoms,  
administered justice,  
obtained promises,  
shut the mouths of lions,  
<sup>34</sup> quenched raging fire,  
escaped the edge of the sword,  
won strength out of weakness,  
became mighty in war,  
put foreign armies to flight.

<sup>35</sup> Women received their dead by resurrection.

Others were tortured, refusing to accept release,  
in order to obtain a better resurrection.

<sup>36</sup> Others suffered mocking and flogging,  
and even chains and imprisonment.

<sup>37</sup> They were stoned to death,  
they were sawn in two,  
they were killed by the sword;  
they went about in skins of sheep and goats,  
destitute, persecuted, tormented--  
<sup>38</sup> of whom the world was not worthy.

They wandered in deserts and mountains,  
and in caves and holes in the ground.

<sup>39</sup> Yet all these,  
though they were commended for their faith,  
did not receive what was promised,  
<sup>40</sup> since God had provided something better  
so that they would not, apart from us, be made perfect.

Let's try an experiment. A bit of free association. I wonder if you can describe Winnipeg in 5 words or less. Have a try. What about Jubilee? How would you describe Jubilee in 5 words? In three? Ok. Now what about Mennonite? Can you get that one pinned down in as many words—and no fair using German. It's not easy is it? There is a lot of complicated notions involved here. Ideas that we want to get across.

Entrepreneurs have a discipline they call the elevator speech. In theory you should, by conventional wisdom be able to explain what they are investing themselves in the most effective, meaning-filled way possible, ideally the time it takes to ride an elevator. If you can't make it make sense in that amount of time, you have some more work to do to understand what it is you're trying to sell. While I am very much loathe to take theological advice from the assumptions of Madison Avenue, I do think it is telling that it can be a struggle for us to do the same when it comes to our faith, especially as Anabaptists. Our beliefs, our ideas are just too complicated and interwoven into who we are on so many levels and layers that it can be hard to know where to begin in accurately describing who and what we are to ourselves, let alone anyone else who might be looking from the outside in. I will readily say that my appreciation of history and story doesn't help. I am too inclined to tell way more of the story than anyone needs, or wants to actually hear. While I would be last person to say that we need to have a simplistic 'elevator speech' version of who and what we are, I do think we can easily become overwhelmed with the particularities of who and what we are and the way that they are lived out, that we can become detached with the root understandings of that we are trying to describe. Layer on top of that the particularities of traditions here and ethnic identity as well, and you have a lot to work with.

Over the next couple of weeks I want to spend some time considering the essential elements of what makes us, us. We are Anabaptists, people who baptize on confession of faith. We might well be ready to say that "well, so long as we can figure out Christian, what much does the particular flavour matter?" This is a fine and worthy place to start. We must always remember that this is our ultimate identity. Yet, we are who we are and we believe what we believe, and we do well to consider what it is that lies at the core of these beliefs, and how we might come to understand all of this. Ours is a particular way of being Christian and one which,

frankly, is drawing more interest of late. Many are finding themselves attracted to the notions of faith being lived in life with consequences for the here and now. For our own sake of reminding ourselves of what is truly core, and for the sake of better understanding for those who may ask, I think we do well to sit with makes us who we are. For the record, while there are significant differences in practice between the strains that make up Jubilee in Mennonite and Mennonite Brethren traditions, they are not so important as to need to be teased out on the level we are going to be approaching here. They hold the same theological centres with different ways of relating to those centres. We will be working on finding our centre, not particularly on defining our edges. So when I say Anabaptist or Mennonite, I am not being overly specific, but talking about our family in general, so don't try to keep score too much.

I think Mennonites in particular, and Anabaptists in general are especially prone to the curse of over description. Unlike many of our brothers and sisters, we have not been given a handy creedal owner's manual for our faith that we can recite by way of explanation, nor anyone outside the membership itself to really say who is an Anabaptist and who is not. From day one almost 500 years ago, we are a widely variant group of believers who's origins have been all over that map, and a nasty habit of splitting one from another whenever we see the line, whatever we perceive it to be, being pushed too far. With all of our lines in our heads, we want to make sure we are clear of who is us and who are them.

We are given to describing and defining ourselves often by our most specific characteristic first—I am a German Russian Mennonite/Mennonite Brethren Anabaptist Christian as much to avoid confusion about who we do not want to be mistaken for. It is kind like the system of Biological names-- Kingdom, Phylum, Class, Order, Family, Genus, Species, Sub-Species-- the different categories for the various classification of plants and animals. These are all those Latin names that we all have forgotten long ago, naming from the most general to the most specific. Only with us, we have developed the habit of emphasizing our individual traits and stripes over against those with whom we do not want to be confused, that we do it the other ways around and describe from the most specific (and often the least consequential) to the more and more general, and the most broadly relevant. Add to this the various historical and cultural

assumptions that we apply related to who came from where, when and what type of food they eat and we have a real confusion.

I grew up right on the edge of the largest settlement of Amish in the world in Ohio. The number one tourist draw in the state is a hilly county of stunning beauty populated by our Anabaptist cousins. I had a couple of jobs making promotional films of the area as a freelance producer, and I learned exactly how well anything that could be even remotely called Amish sold. You describe anything as Amish—fruit, vegetables, recipe's, novels, tools—and it is guaranteed to sell. I have long thought it would be fascinating to set up a road side stand on some back country route with a hose underneath a table, some crocks, and a ladle. I would dress up with the appropriate attire and spend an afternoon selling Amish water for a dollar a sip. I am sure there is a fortune to be had here.

Just like there is nothing Amish about a Peach because it happened to grown by those who live simply (maybe if there was a lack of mustache within the fuzz), many of the traditions and trappings of those things that we call Mennonite there is little core connection to what makes an Anabaptist faith real and vibrant. Many times we can mistake our traditions for our faith, and misunderstand our ethnic culture for a church. Many times, we have failed to see our brothers and sisters of faith, even in the same family of faith for the kin that they are simply because we were blinded by our own particular traditions and our own preferences. We must have our vision corrected, and re-order our thinking once again to see that there is more that we have in common within the body of Christ in general and the Anabaptist group in particular to see again the core that connects us not just one to the other, but to the whole church, and those important ways of being that make us who we are.

We must do this not because we need to better understand how to isolate ourselves, or because we need to be more pure, but because ours is a unique tradition within Christianity with rich gifts to offer the rest of body of Christ. At the end of the day, what makes us, us is one thing and one thing only: the faith that we share the calling that we pursue. We have our ways of doing things for specific reasons. But we must be able to think deliberately and critically about what for us is tradition, those things that we do out of our particular way of doing things and as a

consequence of our peculiarities, and those core identities that lie at the center and make us who we are and tie us together within our family of faith. This takes some hard work to do the sorting between those things which are important, but not critical to our core and those things and those things which connect us to the larger whole and give us life, the things that are truly are the gifts that we have to offer the whole of the body as our piece of the life of Faith.

In the coming weeks, we are going to be doing exactly that. It is my hope that this is not my simply reciting facts to be recalled, but that this can be a conversation about what is really important to us, to our faith and to our identity beyond the superficial trappings of who we are often thought to be. I invite you to think and speak along with me about what are our core issues, and where those core convictions might call us to new life, and where we might continue to struggle with those things that lie in the center.

By faith, we are who we are. We must always remember that. This is where we start. This is where we end. As quick as we are to begin our explanations of our particularities, we must always start from the largest first: we are followers of Christ, a sinner of God's redeeming, and a servant of the Kingdom of God. Within that frame we become our more particular selves, living God's call as we follow the one we call savior, Lord, and Friend.