

Opening Thoughts

For years, the pursuit of deeper spirituality has been a growing trend in Christian denominations and other religions around the world. Evidence can be found in the number of books, and periodicals focused on spirituality and spiritual practices. Upon “Googling” the word *Spirituality*, forty-seven million, eight-hundred-thousand hits arose. For the most part, an educated group of Anabaptists who have sensed this greater call to spirituality have turned to the ancient practices of the Catholic Church in this pursuit. As a part of my own Mennonite seminary experience, we learned to read scripture reflectively through the practice of Lectio Divina, learned centering prayer, and contemplative prayer methods. Though these practices were widely appreciated at the seminary level, students were often left wondering: How do we make this practical? When I attended a seminar on spirituality at the seminary during a pastor’s training conference, the leader offered several types of prayer methods designed to draw the individual closer to the heart of God. In the closing minutes, one brave pastor raised his hand and asked the question that many other pastors were thinking. “How can we take this back to our congregations? I would be thrown out of my church for teaching this Catholic stuff!”

Questions like the one offered by that pastor at the seminar have led many to wonder, “what form of spiritual practice have the Anabaptists pursued?” At first glance, one might consider these “Re-baptizers” to be a relatively shallow group when it comes to spiritual practice. It is my assertion, however, that the original Anabaptists had a rich and vibrant spiritual journey that revolved around living a life that resembled Christ’s own walk in this world. Anabaptists believed that they were

called to participate in the work of Christ as he taught and lived. Their form of spiritual practice presented itself in service to others, living apart from the world, and in self-sacrificing non-resistance to violence. Boiled down to its simplest form, Anabaptists practiced living in the ways of Christ as their form of spirituality. Their spiritual practice was active service and right living based on the life and teaching of Jesus Christ.

In this paper, I will attempt to support that assertion by looking particularly at the writings of Menno Simons. Menno Simons was a Dutch Anabaptist who is credited with leading a particular group of Anabaptists named, quite appropriately, Mennonites. I am a member of this group. Following the support of the proposed assertion, the paper will then contemplate the implications and ramifications of the spiritual life of Mennonites as it pertains to the world around us, including the Mennonite Church and its theology. Finally, the conclusion will reflect upon what this spirituality of life in the way of Christ means to this particular pastor's place of vocation and his life as a pastor.

Opening Excursus on Spirituality

The term Spirituality or Spiritual practice is a bit ambiguous and may mean many things to many people. In the author's best definition, spirituality is the pursuit of God, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit. A spiritual practice is an intentional attempt at creating space to meet and to know this trinity. Prayer and the reflective study of scripture are two popular forms of spiritual practice. A true encounter with God, an authentic spiritual experience, will lead to change or regeneration in our lives.

Spiritual practices must not be pursued in order to have an experience where we “feel gently warmed in our hearts” or even to have sparks fly from our ears simply for the spiritual high in and of itself. Spiritual practices are encouraged with the hope of meeting the triune God and being changed into an individual who is more like Christ.

Menno Simons: Who he was and what he said.

Who was Menno?

Menno Simon’s “was born to a Dutch peasant family living in the village of Witmarsum in the province of Friesland in the far northwest corner of Continental Europe.”¹ Today the village is part of the Netherlands. Consecrated at an early age by his parents to the priesthood, Menno was ordained into the Catholic church in 1524. During the time that other more popular reformers, the likes of Martin Luther and Ulrich Zwingli were wrestling with the Catholic Church traditions, Menno was beginning to ask his own questions. Menno wrote in his *Confession*, “During the first year the thought occurred to me as often as I officiated the Mass, that the bread and the wine were not the flesh and blood of the Lord. I thought the devil suggested this to me so that he might undermine my faith. I confessed my doubt, sighed, and prayed, but still it persisted.”² Menno engaged in conversations with others over cards and a bit of drinking, and, in his own words, he was “ridiculed,”

¹ Simons Menno, *The Complete Writings of Menno Simons*, ed. JC Wenger, trans., Leonard Verduin (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1984). Pg, 4.

² Simons Menno, *Menno Simons "Confession" And New Birth*, ed. Irvin B. Horst, trans., Irvin B. Horst, Mennonite Sources and Documents (Lancaster, PA: The Lancaster Mennonite Historical Society, 1996). Pg,10.

but this only encouraged him to dig deeper for answers. “Finally I thought that I would diligently examine that New Testament. Before I read very far, I saw at once that we were deceived.”³

Menno heavily relied on the Bible for his instruction and theological reflection. Yet he claims to have been influenced by Luther, Martin Bucer, and Hienrich Bullinger, who had been the successor of Zwingli in the Swiss Reformation. These reformers led him to consider and promote adult baptism upon a thoughtful confession of faith.⁴ Menno was deeply concerned about knowledge and following Christ with zeal and understanding of the Biblical witness. While he was influenced in a positive way by learned reformers, the early Anabaptists at Munster challenged him to move even more deeply into the study of scripture to travel the way of Christ. The Munsterites, attempted a violent revolution that tarnished the already radical image of the early Anabaptists. To Menno the Munsterites displayed a form of reformation that had zeal, but lacked biblical wisdom and knowledge.⁵

Menno's intense study of the New Testament emboldened voice and empowered his ministry. “I began in the name of the Lord to teach publicly from the pulpit the Word and true penance, to point the people to the narrow way, to reprimand with the support of scripture all sin and impiety as well as all idolatry and false religion.”⁶ Harold S. Bender, a Mennonite historian and theologian states that Menno's pursuit of everything scriptural began in 1528. Yet he did not immediately

³ Ibid. Pg 10.

⁴ Ibid. Pgs 11-12.

⁵ Ibid. Pg 13.

⁶ Ibid. Pg 16.

leave the Catholic priesthood at that time.⁷ He left the priesthood closer to 1535. At this time he was becoming a steady force in the Dutch Anabaptist movement still reeling from the violent events in Munster. Menno served in his role as a leader of the movement until his death in January of 1561.

Bender writes of Menno's significance to the church, "The greatness of Menno Simons lies in three factors of influence, his character, his writings, and his message. His character was steady, heartening, building influence in the long, hard years of persecution and struggle from 1535-1560, based on deep conviction, unshakable devotion, fearless courage, and calm trust. His writings, though they seem at times, as gathered together in his complete works to be repetitious and insignificant, included some admirable tracts for the times, pointed, plain, well adapted to their purpose. They reached the right people at the right time, and were powerful agents in the building and strengthening of the church and in winning new adherents. But most of all it was the message of Menno Simons which made him a great leader in a great cause. He built no great system of theology, nor did he discover any great new or long-lost principle; he merely caught a clear vision of two fundamental Biblical ideals, the ideal of practical holiness, and the ideal of the high place of the church in the life of the believer and in the cause of Christ."⁸

Practical holiness drives Mennonite spirituality. Mennonite spirituality is basic, practical, and even at times hard to see, but it is there. As stated earlier, this paper will look closely into the practical spirituality of service as taught by Menno.

⁷ Menno, *The Complete Writings of Menno Simons*. Pg 6.

⁸ Ibid. Pg 29.

Menno on Service

In the pursuit of all things scriptural, Menno, discovered First Corinthians Chapter three, verse eleven. “For no one can lay any foundation other than the one already laid, which is Jesus Christ”(NRSV). This scripture in turn became the foundation for Menno’s biblical theology. He believed that every tradition, new idea, or way of living must be tested by the life and teaching of Jesus Christ. Christ alone is the foundation of one’s faith. Therefore, if Jesus Christ were indeed the foundation of one’s faith, it would be unfathomable to think that this faith would be anything but clearly visible in the life of the faithful.

To be a follower of Christ, one’s faith must surely lead to a changed life – a life transformed or, as Menno would have said, a life regenerated into Christ-likeness. In his article on *True Christian Faith*, written in the year 1541, Menno writes, “The just shall live by faith, say the scriptures. For the true evangelical faith which makes the heart upright and pious before God, moves, changes, urges and constrains a man so that he will always hate the evil and gladly do the things which are right and good.”⁹ The pursuit of spirituality was found in the life faithfully lived following the commandments and practices of Jesus, the foundation, to the very best of one’s abilities. Menno goes on to say this of believers: “They seek the doctrines and sacraments commanded them of Christ, that religion which is taught in the scriptures, and that pious and blameless life which is from God. For by faith they are changed in the inner man, converted and renewed, and have a sealed and assured conscience which bears witness to them that God is, that he is righteous

⁹ Ibid. Pg 337.

and true, gracious and merciful. And therewith they desire and seek and do nothing, either inwardly or outwardly, but that which they know through the word of Christ Jesus with his holy apostles has commanded and taught them.”¹⁰ To Menno spirituality was found only in doctrine or sacraments not handed down by Christ. Menno’s emphasis is on living all of life as a spiritual pursuit of Christ. Spiritual practice was and is for the Mennonite found in the faithful living that is only made possible by God’s grace. The emphasis is on living a life that is inherently spiritual because it is focused on Christ; this idea may appear daunting. It sounds like hard work. Yet Menno believed that life of following Christ would be filled with joy and the presence of the Christ.

“For this is the greatest delight and joy of believers: that they in their weakness my walk and live according to the will and word of the Lord. For it cannot fail that where the unfeigned, pure love of God dwells, there must also be the willing, ready service of that love, the keeping of his commandments. The book of wisdom says, “They that put their trust in him shall understand the truth, and such as are faithful in love shall abide with him.” Wisd. 3:9 This is what Paul says, “in Jesus Christ neither circumcision availeth anything, nor uncircumcision; but faith, which worketh by love.” Gal 5:6¹¹ A faithful life of service and following Jesus leads one to the place where God’s love dwells. What greater joy can there be than to live in God’s love?

He develops this point further by stating that love drives parents to sacrifice for their children; love encourages a married couple to serve one another. “So also

¹⁰ Ibid. Pg 341.

¹¹ Ibid. Pg 338.

is the nature and property of holy, divine, love. For all those who by faith are one with the Father and with His Son Christ Jesus in love and spirit, through the true and genuine knowledge of the afore-mentioned favor, these do not have to be admonished to serve the Lord, to seek the Kingdom of God, to use baptism and the Lord's Supper according to the ordinances of scripture, to exercise control over heart and tongue, to ponder the law and will of God with all earnestness, to obey Christ and follow him; and not to love gold and silver, money and possessions, wife and children, life and death above Christ and His Word. For the natural result of the ardent love of God, which is of a pure heart, good conscience, and unfeigned faith, urges and constrains, moves and operates in their hearts so effectively that they are prepared with body, soul, possession, and blood, to do what He has commanded and to leave undone that which He has forbidden as we may see (God be praised) and hear in great plainness and power daily in many pious hearts."¹² To Menno, one who has received the love of Jesus Christ and Father God will without hesitation live a life of service and righteousness.

Menno was never concerned with pomp and circumstance. His faith was not reliant upon the belief that Jesus lived in the bread and the cup of the Lord's Supper. He faithfully prayed and read scripture, and reveled in the love of God. Spirituality boiled down to its purest form meant following the acts and teaching of Jesus, empowered by His love and grace. To the Mennonite, that meant never making an oath, as Jesus advised in Matthew chapter five. The true Christian will love his or her neighbor, act for peace, turn the other cheek when struck, avoid

¹² Ibid. Pg 338.

lawsuits, care for the sick, pray reverently in the home or quietly at church, give with joy, and act for reconciliation. The words of Menno and those of Christ, particularly in the Sermon on the Mount, planted a seed in the hearts the Anabaptists following this particular stream of theological thought. They were to be “doers” of their faith. How has this form of active spirituality focused upon “doing” what Christ taught and did, influenced or formed the Mennonite Church?

Implications and Consequences – So What?

A Church Informed by Menno the Community of True Believers

Menno's teaching and that of other Anabaptists had a profound affect on the understanding of church (Menno was not a Mennonite, but an Anabaptist.). The Anabaptist movement began with a group of Ulrich Zwingli's followers who did not feel that the reformation was being taken far enough. As many of the reformers were, the first Anabaptists were deeply influenced by scripture and wanted to set the church apart from the government.

This separation of church and government is essential for understanding the church during Menno's life and leadership. The Catholic Church baptized all infants and everyone instantly became part of the church. To the Anabaptists, this was not the church at all. The government structure and church were married to one another and this gave the church great power, but where was the faith made evident by good work? To Menno, the church was to be a community set apart by the way that it lived and worshipped Jesus. It was the service, the love of neighbor, the life lived in righteousness according to scripture, and the following of Christ that

made the church visible. The church was intentional. One only entered the church through baptism by water after making a conscientious decision to walk in the footsteps of Jesus.

Menno said it in this way, “In this it is evident that where sincere and true faith exists, the faith which avails before God and is a gift of God, which comes from hearing the Holy word, there through the blossoming tree of life all manner of precious fruits of righteousness are present, such as the fear and love of God, mercy, friendship, chastity, temperance, humility, confidence, truth, peace, and joy in the Holy Ghost. For where a sincere, evangelical, pious faith is, there also are the genuine evangelical fruits in keeping with the Gospel.”¹³ Where the fruits were present and the Word of God followed, that is where the church was found.

C. Arnold Dyck claims, “The Anabaptists had come to a stunning conclusion that may well have sounded blasphemous to their contemporaries. They were convinced that when the living Spirit of God in believers worked to bring them together by the outward signs and ceremonies of their unity (as ordained by Christ), the result would be the establishment of the very Body of Christ in the world, visibly working through its members.”¹⁴ He continued to say that the true sign of the church was not found in the sacraments properly administered by a priest, but in the presence of God who alone could “accomplish the work of faith, trust and obedience of believers.”¹⁵ This profound understanding of church was certainly offensive to

¹³ Ibid. Pg 342.

¹⁴ C. Arnold Snyder, *Following in the Footsteps of Christ: The Anabaptist Tradition*, ed. Philip Sheldrake, Traditions of Christian Spirituality (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2004). Pg 109.

¹⁵ Ibid. Pg 110.

the Catholic Church and even to many of the reformers. This may be stated too simply, but for the mainstream church leaders, part of the problem with the Anabaptists was that without the baptism of infants and the need for priests to administer sacraments, leadership would never be able maintain control. Therefore, the Anabaptists were persecuted on all sides, by the Catholic church and protestant reformers alike. The church made visible by its pursuit of Christ held dearly to their conviction that faith and action empowered by grace were inseparable, even if the final act of faith included martyrdom.

Fast-forwarding to the church of today, the lines that once separated Mennonites from the Catholic Church and even other Protestant Denominations have been blurred. For the most, this once radical group is just like everyone else and the concept of the visible church is no longer a theme of which we take ownership. Mennonites and Anabaptists are no longer persecuted in the ways that we once were. For this, we are thankful. Our theology is now more of an interesting oddity than something to be destroyed. Theologians and ethicists are simply intrigued by Mennonite theology. It sounds very nice, this radical following of Christ that leads some to pacifism, but does anyone really believe that God might call a person to a life of loving enemies and neighbors as one's self? It is the radical, active faith of Mennonites that has brought attention to the church in the past and in the present; however the zeal of Menno's time certainly appears to be missing.

The Mennonites are known around the world for their service and care for the marginalized of society. Mennonite Disaster Service is widely recognized as an

organization that is welcomed into countries ravaged by anything from fires to tsunamis and hurricanes. Mennonite Central Committee is an organization supported financially not only by Mennonites but by a spectrum ranging from Catholic Christians to evangelical Christians for their work in bringing food, health kits, and educational materials to third world countries. Mennonite leaders can be found at the forefront of peace organizations seeking conflict transformation in war-torn countries, as well as protesting war of any kind. This Hymn found in the old Anabaptist hymnal called *The Song of the Ausbund* says a great deal about the active spirituality of the church in the past and in the present.

Hymn 56 – The Ausbund
What about the neighbor?
When Gods will is done,
Love of God and other,
Two loves become one.
Jesus asks the question,
We dare not ignore,
“Will you be a neighbor?”
“Do you love self more?”

What about the neighbor?
Do we know their needs?
Do we seek to meet them,
With both words and deeds?
He did not divide
Love for God and others.
Both stand side by side.

What about the neighbor?
God requests reply.
Though we claim to love them,
Do our acts belie?
No matter what others
May do in return,
They're our sisters, brothers,
Our equal concern.¹⁶

¹⁶ *Songs of the Ausbund : History and Translations of Ausbund Hymns*, (Millersburg, OH: Ohio Amish Library, Inc., 1998).

The church has clung to the belief that we are called to love our neighbor and show that in all of life. We still believe that we are the hands and feet of God, the Body of Christ. Yet inevitably, time whittles away at even our faith and convictions. The church lacks the urgency of the time of Menno. The sense that we are a people set apart by a faith worth dying for has dwindled. The church is a model for mission, yes, but I wonder if Mennonites have been as successful at loving God as the original Anabaptists?

Just as the Mennonite proficiency for “doing good” as a sign of loving one’s neighbor, it has also drawn a sharp negative critique as well. Theologians, beginning with Martin Luther himself, have accused Menno’s followers of “working” their way to heaven. They believed that the motivation that led Anabaptists to active service was the fear of living eternity separated from God. Of course, these claims are ridiculous. Menno’s statement that our work is only possible by God’s grace magnifies the mistake in the accusations. Mennonites understand that it is only by Grace that they are saved.

Menno was motivated by love, the love of God for God’s children and his children’s reciprocal love for God. What are the motivating factors that drive the active faith of the Mennonite church in year 2009? My own critique is that we have become so good at service that the sense of spirituality is missing; the act of service as love for God has dwindled. Many humble Mennonites consider themselves to be anything but spiritual people. They claim to be humble and hard-working, but not spiritual. What has been lost? Are we missing Menno’s original motivation for an active faith of following the life and teaching of Christ?

It is difficult to generalize the motivations for service within the church, and possibly slightly irresponsible. Each individual may point to his or her own reasons for loving a neighbor, feeding the poor, healing the sick, or working toward peace. I would argue that many do mission because the Bible says we should, service is what is expected of us; it is good for us, and it is what everyone else is doing. Maybe we serve because it feels good. Competition may even become the motivator in certain instances. Which church can top the other with the greatest amount of doing? These motivations are not all negative or, but they do not appear to be as spiritual as Menno would have desired.

Like a marriage that has been on cruise control for twenty years, churches go through routines and obligations dutifully. This is not to say that moments of great joy and spirit-moving are completely absent, but there must be times of reflection, renewal, and remembering who we are and why. If those initiatives are not taken seriously, any relationship will lose a bit of spark. What has happened to the passion of the church that once sent martyrs willingly to the stake on behalf of faith? In Menno's article on *Faith* in *The Complete Writings* he said that our service, righteous life, and avoidance of anything ungodly was driven by the love that God has for us and we have for God. That is a beautiful spirituality, and one that I would love to own for myself and for the church that I serve. The question for the church and its leaders in 2009 is this: How do we rekindle the love? How do we turn our service into a response of love for God once more?

Love, Service, and the Young Adult World

For the reflection on our culture, I am choosing to consider the youth of the Mennonite church and our community, Northeastern United States. Why this particular demographic? As the pastor of an aging church, it appears to be an important point of reflection.

Konrad Kanagy is a Mennonite historian and sociologist. He recently published a book called *Road Signs for the Journey*, which takes an in depth look at common trends in the Mennonite church. He notes concern for the future of the Mennonite Church. “The mean age of Mennonites today is 54, five years older than in 1989. While the aging of Mennonite Church USA parallels national and global trends, the pace of the aging is more extreme than other denominations in the United States.”¹⁷ For many pastors this trend is a major concern; the youth are the key to the future of the church.

In the previous section on church I argued that the church has taken for granted its spiritual sense of love for God and therefore turned service and the pursuit of everything Christ into something less than that which motivated the early Anabaptists and Mennonites. Are there connections to be drawn between the perceived spiritual sleepiness of the congregations and the loss of its youth? Certainly there could be, but at the moment I am not ready to perform the necessary studies to find out for certain. I am going out on a limb and drawing on my own experience through conversations with young adults at Zion to make the

¹⁷ Konrad Kanagy, *Road Signs for the Journey*(Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 2007). Pg 55.

assumption that there is a correlation. Can this crisis situation be turned into an opportunity for renewal and reform, or as Menno would have said, regeneration?

As argued in the opening paragraph, our culture is yearning for spiritual renewal. It has been my experience that Mennonite young adults are at the forefront of this longing for deeper spirituality. The young adults that I have encountered are deeply searching for a church with “real” faith, a church that pursues spiritual practice and meaningful ritual.

Mennonite young adults are not only interested in finding a real and present faith through spirituality; they are intimately concerned about the world around them. As more and more of our young people are being educated at the University level, their collective worldview is broadening. Young adults as a whole are showing more compassion for injustice in the world. They want to be a part of a missional church where God is alive and present, where the faithful do live a life of active service and pursuit of Christ motivated by love and grace. They want to be part of a church that acts locally and thinks globally, that puts faith into action.

Kanagy argues that the Mennonite church must work at reaching out to the young members of the congregation that have quietly disappeared from the church seeking alternative communities, while at the same time continuing to nurture the youth that are in our sanctuaries.¹⁸ If we hope to respond to our current cultural crisis of faith in young adults, it is time to utilize our strengths and work on our weaknesses.

¹⁸ Ibid. Pg 63.

The strength of the Mennonite Church is an active faith that pursues mission, the elimination of suffering, violence, hunger, and pain in the world. The weakness as argued in this paper, is our perceived motivations for our faith. To work on the weakness, we might invite a deeper sense of spirituality through participation with Christ in the plan of salvation. We are talking about making service into more than “that which we are supposed to do,” and making it into a spiritual practice that draws us nearer to the heart and love of God. Could we possibly renew the spirituality of our churches and create a space for our young adults through the spiritual act of service? I say, yes! Before we can make that leap, it would be a Mennonite imperative that we test the theology of this theory. Is this good theology?

Theological Reflection

Is it “good” theology to consider service as spiritual practice? Mennonites lean heavily upon the Sermon on the Mount for their understanding of service and mission. Jesus invites the disciples to be the light of the world in Matthew five, verses fourteen through sixteen. But this is not where service in the Bible begins.

Adam and Eve were invited to serve God in the Garden of Eden, to subdue and have dominion over the earth with God. After the fall from grace, God called upon Abram in Genesis twelve to be in a covenant of mutual service. God would bless Abram and his children, if they would only be a blessing to the world. God states, “In you all the families of the earth will be blessed.”(NRSV)

Of course, the biblical witness chronicles the failures of those chosen children of Abram, until the time of Christ. Jesus was the one true human that got it

right. His life and teaching invites his disciples to participate in the original plan of blessing. In the seventeenth chapter of the Gospel of John, Jesus offers his purpose statement in a prayer to God. That purpose was to glorify God and to make God known among the people. To know God was to have eternal life. His prayer goes on to invite the same relationship that was between God and Christ to be initiated between the disciples and God. This invitation is to a deep personal relationship of knowing that goes beyond anything that we can truly understand. Not only did Jesus pray for this relationship to be passed onto the disciples, he prays in verse eighteen that the disciples would be sent into the world, as Jesus was sent to do his work of glorifying God and making God known, so that others might have eternal life.

The theological implications in this prayer are monumental, unfathomable, and truly wonderful. As followers of Jesus we are invited to participate with him in the work that he began. Any parent or mentor of young children knows that there is no greater joy for a child than to “help” with what the mentor is currently doing, even if it is putting out the trash. It is in our nature to help. We are the children of God looking on as Christ calls creation back into relationship with God and we are allowed, no, encouraged to participate.

When we take time to participate, to act on our faith in service, we enter into the work of Christ, and draw near to Christ’s passion. In mission, we walk in Christ’s shoes, share his joy, his sorrows, and his very mindfulness. Fuller Theological Seminary professor David Augsburger says it this way, “This focus on concrete service prizes work done with a gentle and humble spirit in mutual and

reciprocal ways that may be benevolent and sacrificial when necessary, and sees it all as participating in the way of Jesus. It assumes that the servant can truly walk in the steps of the greatest servant, that service and worship can be one, and that service should rise out of the gratitude of spirituality and that the two can meld.”¹⁹

That paragraph would surely make Menno smile!

As we know Christ and therefore know God, we have eternal life; we have love in the intimate relationship with God. In that relationship and moved by love we seek to participate, and in the participation we draw ever nearer. In its truest form, serving our neighbor is much more than “doing the right thing.” Loving our neighbor is a powerful spiritual practice; we walk in the footsteps of our Lord. Augsburg says it well, “Are a spirituality of the feet and a spirituality of the knees inseparably welded into one? The tripolar spirituality espoused by such groups as the Anabaptists believes that we follow the path of service simply because it is the way of Jesus, and we go into service because that is where we truly meet Jesus. We know the three places where Jesus can be found – where two or three gather in his name (Matt 18:20), where walls come down in reconciliation (Eph 2:11-22), and when we serve one another in need (Matt 25:40). Because all three of these are concrete forms of service, we can say with certainty that authentic Christ-encounters happen not only in the desert or the closet or the place of retreat, but also as we serve.” This is joy to my soul. There is hope for the spirituality of Mennonites found in the practice that is already near and dear to our hearts!

¹⁹ David W. Augsburg, *Dissident Discipleship : A Spirituality of Self-Surrender, Love of God, and Love of Neighbor*(Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2006). Pg 167.

What does this study mean to the pastor of Zion Mennonite Church?

Tying together the words of Menno, the Bible and the churches needs, I am filled with hope. At times I have hesitated to speak of certain Catholic forms of spirituality such as Lectio Divina and the Prayer of Examen for this, hard working, do-it-yourself congregation. A new opportunity has been opened to me as pastor when I consider the implications of service as a means of falling in love with our creator. I can teach service as participation in the passion, compassion, and mission of Jesus.

Spirituality guru Richard Foster says it better than I can, “The result, then, of this daily discipline of the flesh will be the rise of the grace of humility. It will slip in upon us unawares. Though we do not sense its presence, we are aware of a fresh zest and exhilaration with living. Although the demands of life are as great as ever, we live in a new sense of unhurried peace. People whom we once only envied we now view with compassion, for we see not only their position but their pain. People whom we would have passed over before we now “see” and find to be delightful individuals. Somehow we cannot exactly explain how – we feel a new spirit of identification with the outcasts, the “offscourings” of the earth.”²⁰ He speaks of putting on the mind of Christ.

As if that were not good enough, Foster continues, “Even more than the transformation that is occurring within us, we are of a deeper love and joy in God. Our days are punctuated with spontaneous breathings of praise and adoration.

²⁰Richard J. Foster, *Celebration of Discipline : The Path to Spiritual Growth*, Rev. ed.(San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1988). Pg 131.

Joyous hidden service to others is an acted prayer of thanksgiving. We seem to be directed by a new control center – and so we are.”²¹ Foster paints a vivid picture of life changing spirituality and faith found in service and mission.

This is a spiritual practice that every member of Zion Mennonite Church would find attractive; it is what we do well. Service is a spiritual practice that could attract our young adults on dual levels. They have the opportunity to meet a real and living savior that is concerned with suffering in the world. By participating in mission, they will see the complexities of life, be invited to consider difficult questions and discover ways to trust in a God of love, peace and justice.

The challenge to the pastor is find ways to move the congregation away from “doing the right thing,” to seeing service as participation with Christ in a way that leads to Foster’s deeper understanding of Christ and his love for us, to a new level of knowing and, therefore, receiving eternal life. What are concrete ways that I can work at this?

It all starts with my own life. I must question my own motives. Do I look at weddings, funerals, and pastoral care visits as fulfilling my job duties? It is important that my own attitude be renewed. It might be helpful to start with journaling, reflection during spiritual direction sessions, and taking time in my daily prayer to consider where I have participated with Christ and how that felt.

Service as participation in the life work of Christ is a theme that must find its way into sermons coming from every angle possible for the benefit of the entire congregation. Sunday school classes also offer the opportunity to challenge

²¹ Ibid. Pg 131-132.

members to think differently about service. A board development assignment would be helpful in developing the core leaders of Zion.

What of the young adults that are out there searching for something more? A Bible Study offered to the community could focus on service. Facebook posts to all of my “friends” may be a good hook to encourage discussion. One possible line might be, “Why do you serve your neighbor?” Another place of focus would be the young adult Sunday school class that is currently meeting. Instead of meeting for Christmas parties they could find ways to serve the community together. Encouragement should be given to invite friends outside of the church as well as other generations into these activities. At a church that places such a high priority on mission, the opportunities abound.

Jesus is in our service. He is calling and inviting one and all to the knowledge found in participation with him in the work that is “Building the Kingdom of God.” He is calling us to a faith that is active. Jesus wants us to take part in his purpose, to glorify God, to know God, and to be in relationship with God.

Amen

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