

Mennonite Heritage Sunday
October 2012

Theme: *Sharpening Convictions Not Swords*

Introduction:

In 1862 the American Civil War was raging, and after a year of bloodshed it was becoming clear in the North and the South that a speedy end to the conflict was nowhere in sight. The governments North and South, needing to feed their army's demands for fresh soldiers, began conscripting men by means of a draft in 1862; first the South and then the North. While Mennonites in the North and the South were affected by the war prior to 1862, conscription brought the war into still sharper focus for Mennonites North and South as they grappled with their response.

Our Mennonite forbearers were not fully united or uniform in their response to the Civil War. In the North and the South there were Mennonites who willingly joined the armed conflict, those who supported the war from the sideline, and many who resisted direct involvement in the conflict. There were Mennonites in the South who quietly opposed the dissolution of the Union, some who voted for secession, and others who felt coerced to support a cause they did not support. Mennonites North and South struggled with defining the lines between being good citizens and compromising their ethical convictions. There were those who, as civilians, suffered direct hardships brought on by the war as a consequence of the actions of Northern and Southern soldiers.

150 years later the legacy of the Civil War remains with us. It shaped Mennonite two kingdom theology and practice for generations to follow; and played a significant role in spurring Mennonites toward the formation of denominational structures as a means of both supporting and carrying forward their distinctive counter-cultural faith practices like nonresistance.

To remember the struggles of our Mennonite ancestors in such a divisive time in American history, is to also come face to face with the difficult question, how are we measuring up in our own engagement with the challenging divisions created by our current culture wars in quest to both discern the Spirit's leading in our individual faith communities while seeking to remain in communion with one another around the Lord's table as a denomination?

Suggested Biblical Texts:

Psalm 133 / Sirach 27:30-28:11 / Matthew 5:1-16, 43-48 / Romans 12:9-21 / Ephesians 4:25-5:1

Call to Worship:

(Option 1)

Reader 1: Why have we gathered here?

Reader 2: To remember.

Reader 1: Remember?

Reader 2: To remember who we are.
Reader 1: Who are we?
Reader 2: Mennonites *(or insert here another denomination or name of a congregation)*
Reader 1: Mennonites?
Reader 2: Children of God.
Reader 1: Children of God?
Reader 2: Followers of Christ.
Reader 1: Followers of Christ?
Reader 2: A people on a journey.
Reader 1: A journey where?
Reader 2: A journey back to remember who we are.
A journey forward to remember what we are becoming.
Reader 1: Who are you? What are you becoming?
Reader 2: A new creation. A people of peace.
Reader 1: Can I join you?
Reader 2: Yes.
Reader 1: How?
Reader 2: Listen.
Reader 1: Listen?
Reader 2: Listen, to the Story.
Reader 1: What story?
Reader 2: The one I am trying to remember.

(Option 2)

Reader: *How good, how pleasant
when kindred sit down together in harmony.*

*How beautiful, how delightful
when people create community.*

*In harmony and community God's blessing of everlasting life begins.
(from Psalm 133)*

Prayer of Confession:

(Option 1)

ALL:

God of Holiness,

Have mercy on us for we are divided in discerning the way of Truth.

God of Justice,

Have mercy on us for we are divided in discerning the way of Justice.

God of Love,

Have mercy on us for we are divided in our hearts one from another.

(Silent Reflection)

Christ of Holiness,

Bring us into the way of Truth.

Christ of Justice,

Bring us into the way of Justice.

Christ of Love,

Bring us into the way of Love.

(Option 2)

Leader: *God; we have spoken falsely.*

All: *Forgive us. Heal us.*

Leader: *God, we have severed ourselves one from another.*

All: *Forgive us. Heal us.*

Leader: *God; we have sinned in our anger.*

All: *Forgive us. Heal us.*

(Silent reflection)

Leader: *God forgives us;
And there is a way to make good of God's grace.
Before the sun sets let your anger die; and the peace of Christ come.
Forgive, and release one another.
Then give peace and make peace.
You are empowered by the Spirit to be God's children of peace.
Amen.*

(based on Eph. 4:25-32)

Prayer:

Our forebears struggled to be faithful to the way of Christ
In the face of civil division and strife.
For their commitment to remain in the Way we give you thanks.

Our forebears were drawn into the issues of their time
And struggled to discern God's Word guiding them.
For their commitment to remain in the Word we give you thanks.

Our forebears were imperfect in their witness as your disciples
And yet, your story of love, mercy, and peace was passed on to us through them.

God, grant that your love, mercy, and peace might be passed on through us
In spite of our imperfect witness to you.
In your mercy, and through your mercy – we pray for your coming Kingdom.
(The Lord's prayer)

Offering:

(Option 1)

God receive our gifts.
Christ renew the world through these gifts.
Spirit work your will of healing and peace with these gifts.
Amen.

(Option 2)

*God, bless these gifts.
May our past labors unfold through them into your peace, justice, and healing.
Amen.*

Children's Time:

(Option 1)

Christ Good lived in Virginia 150 years ago.
He lived in a place called the Shenandoah Valley and was a member of a Mennonite Church.
When the Civil War first began, Mennonites in the valley were not required to go and fight in the Confederate army, but as the war continued and lasted much longer than people had originally thought it would more soldiers were needed to fight the war.

Christ Good was forced into service in the Confederate army - even though he believed it was wrong to kill another person.

(Why do you think he might have thought it wrong to kill? Allow for open discussion.)

Eventually, Christ Good found himself confronting Northern soldiers in battle. His captain ordered all the soldiers to shoot.

(What should Christ do? What might be the consequences of from the choices he faces?)

Christ refused to shoot his gun.

For a second time Christ found himself in battle.

His commanding officer ordered all the soldiers to load their rifles, aim, and fire them at the Northern soldiers. Again Christ refused to shoot.

After the battle was over his captain came to him and asked, "Did you shoot?"
Christ answered, "No, I didn't see anything to shoot at?"

His captain asked, "Why, didn't you see all those Yankees over there?"
And Christ replied, "No, I saw people. We don't shoot people."

One 150 years ago Christ Good had to make a very difficult choice under very difficult, life threatening, circumstances about what was the right thing to do to follow Jesus.

Some Mennonite men found themselves arrested and imprisoned in Richmond, Virginia for their refusal to participate in the Civil War. While they were in prison they wrote a poem about their experiences and why they were there. One of the stanzas of the poem explains why they would not join in fighting in the war.

*We know it is God's holy will,
Our fellow men we should not kill,
But we should lead a Christ like life,
And not spend all our days in strife.*

(Hartman. Reminiscences of the Civil War. Pg. 16)

How might we honor the memory of Christ Good and other Mennonite young men both North and South who faced difficult choices about how to best follow the way Jesus in a time of war?

We are not being forcibly conscripted into the military, but what and how are we being challenged in our time to carry forward the call of Jesus to be peacemakers?

(Option 2)

Bring in pictures of the earliest founders of the congregation, or artifacts from the beginning of the congregation. This could include an old communion cup or an old picture of the church. Tell the children about the earliest history of the congregation they are a part of and how the congregation came into being. One might tie this story back to the importance of remembering as a means of discerning where you are going.

(Option 3)

Read a children's book or tell a story from a children's book that touches on the theme of peacemaking and / or reconciliation. Some possible resource options for this might include:

Cornrows. By Camile Yarbrough.

A little girl learns about her African American culture and history while her grandmother braids her hair. This is a good book for dealing with the subject of slavery with children. It is beautifully illustrated.

Creativity. By Joe Steptoe.

Two boys and their experiences of learning about ethnicity and diversity. A good resource for conversation about being different and accepting differences in others.

How My Family Lives in America. By Susan Kuklin.

This book offers voice to children whose parents were born in different countries.

This is an excellent resource for Mennonite Heritage Sunday for talking about our ancestors who immigrated here, what it must have been like for them, and linking their experiences back with today's experiences of immigrant families.

I Hate English. By Ellen Levin.

This book tells the story of a girl's coming to America and having to adjust to the culture and the language. It can serve as a good story telling bridge between present immigrant experiences and what it must have been like for Mennonite immigrants of earlier generations.

The Big Book for Peace. Edited by Ann Durrel and Marilyn Sachs.

Several short stories about peacemaking for children. In this collection, "They that Take the Sword" by Milton Meltzer tells the story of a Quaker during the Civil War conscripted into the Southern Army.

For additional resources and ideas for a children's time:

www.bluffton.edu/lionlamb.

The Lion and Lamb Peace Arts Center is a great resource for working with children on peace and justice making.

"PeaceParts Toolkit" from MCC. More information and available at www.peace.mcc.org.

This resource might be used as a Christian education resource and follow up to the morning worship.

Sermon Starters

(Option 1)

Among the main-line Protestant denominations the issue of slavery had divided churches North and South prior to the war. In contrast the Civil War served as a catalyst for Mennonites of North America in moving them toward the formation of stronger denominational institutions and structures in part as a response to the pressure to conform to expectations of Mennonites participating in the military, and in part as a response to the diversity of opinions and responses to the war among individual leaders and congregations in different regions of the country.

One might reflect on this development and how denominational structures support congregational life.

(Option 2)

One might tell the story of John Brunk and John Brenneman, who played important roles at this time in articulating Mennonite teaching on peace and nonresistance, and through their writing and efforts.

(See: Lehman and Nolt. *Mennonites, Amish, and the American Civil War* for more details.)

(Option 3)

The Civil War framed a theological crisis for Christians and the Church as a whole both North and South. The war open up questions about the interpretation and authority of scripture with both the North and the South turning to the Bible to justify their positions on slavery. Likewise, the war open up difficult questions about the providence of God as both sides sought to discern and claim God's purposes in the war. The wider Church in North American has responded to the difficult theological questions raised by the Civil War in different ways, and as Mennonites we have not been insulated from those responses. An historical and theological reflection on the legacy of the Civil War might prove to be illuminating.

Recommended Reading:

Mennonites, Amish, and the American Civil War. James Lehman & Steve Nolt. C2007.

The Civil War as a Theological Crisis. Mark Noll. C2006.

This Republic of Suffering: *Death and the American Civil War.* Drew Gilpin Faust. C2008.

God's Almost Chosen People: *A Religious History of the American Civil War.* George Rable. C2010