

Sacrament and song

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May 11, 2008

Acts 2:1-13

I Corinthians 12:4-13

When the day of Pentecost had come, all the Mennonites were together in one place. And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a non-resistant wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages as the Spirit gave them ability.

Now, there were people from every nation under heaven living in Washington. At this sound the crowd gathered and was bewildered, because each one heard them speaking in the native tongue of each. Amazed and astonished, they asked, "Are not all these who are speaking Russians and Swiss Germans from Indiana and the great state of Kansas? And how is it that we hear, each of us, in our own native language? German, English, Spanish, Indonesian, French, Italian, Kiswahili, Portuguese, in our own languages we hear them speaking about God's deeds of power. All were amazed and perplexed, saying to one another, "What does this mean?" But others sneered and said, "If they weren't Mennonites, we'd think they were drunk!"

Our congregation is approximately half "ethnic Mennonite." I use that term recognizing how limiting it can be. What does it mean? Does it include only the Swiss-German and Russian contingents? Was my wife Maria's Hispanic father 'ethnic' Mennonite? His parents were Mennonite, and he grew up in a Mennonite church. What about Indonesians of Phil's generation? There were already several generations of Mennonites in that country before he was born. Is Phil an 'ethnic' Mennonite?

My mother was an OTM — other than Mennonite. She discovered an unfortunate Mennonite habit early on when she started going to a Mennonite church. Someone would strike up a conversation, and the second or third question would be to find out her maiden name. It was Van Antwerp. Why is it that among Mennonites the wrong last name can become an absolute conversation stopper? Why should we have to be related in order to relate?

Fortunately, Hyattsville has a beautiful blending of people. Yes, we have the hopelessly inter-related ethnic Swiss-German and Russian contingent. In fact, Cindy and I figured out last week that we are third cousins once removed. Yes, my hiring was apparently nepotism. But we also have Mennonites from all over the world, and Mennonites with non-Germanic last names, and Mennonites who are Mennonite more because of conviction than comfort zone.

Within the book of Acts, one of the central tensions for the early church was around what the formerly Jewish Christians should do with their cultural traditions. We see in the Pentecost passage the beginning of a new openness. The Spirit led the gathered Christians to proclaim the word of God in languages other than their own. On through the book, and we see other cultural questions debated — unclean food and circumcision in particular.

Hyattsville still bears a number of cultural markers that reflect a traditional Mennonite heritage. Our four-part singing, our potlucks and our plain and simple building all speak to that part of our heritage. For me, these aspects of our congregation are a comfort and a joy (except for perhaps the plain building). What do they mean,

though, to someone who encounters Mennonites for the first time by stepping through our doors?

Each of these markers has the potential to become an idol, depending upon how we treat them. We can use them as definitions or as barriers. We could accept the temptation to say that these are the things that make a 'real' Mennonite. We could implicitly expect those who come to us to measure up to these standards.

I don't think we usually go that far, at least not explicitly. But I wonder what happens, for example, when we sing our anthem, 606. First of all, when we call it 606 we set a particular marker of who is in and who is out. Those who understand that in the 1969 hymnal the polyphonic setting of "Praise God from whom" was number 606 are "in." Those who flip to 606 in the current hymnal will be hopelessly lost. Even if they do find that what we are really singing is 118, what do we expect them to do when they find it? My experience is that we accept that the "in" crowd will sing exuberantly and proudly, and that those who are not "in" will listen politely. We secretly hope that eventually, if they hear it enough, they will pick up their part by osmosis and will someday sing along. When that day comes, we will know that they too are a real Mennonite.

I would suggest that there are healthier ways to deal with these cultural markers. I have no desire to shed most of those that we retain. As a church, we've already cast off some of the unhealthy ones, especially in regards to leadership and clothing. But we need to be careful that we don't allow our remaining markers to become tools of oppression. Instead, we can recognize them as gifts of a particular heritage that can potentially enrich our community into the future. We need to change our thinking from

“We do this because we’ve always done things this way,” and instead ask “how can this gift enrich the body of Christ here and now, and tomorrow?”

For example, how do we use our singing? If we sing a cappella and in four parts simply because it is our heritage, then our singing might be an idol. If we sing that way in order to feel superior to others, then it is an idol. If we use it as a marker of “in” and “out” in our community, then it is an idol.

If those are the reasons to sing a cappella and in four parts, then my education would have been wasted, my vocation misdirected, and my delight misplaced.

Fortunately, there are also good reasons to sing the way we do. This is a part of our heritage that carries not only cultural significance, but also spiritual and theological weight. First of all, it is a beautiful thing. (Yes, that is a spiritual and theological rationale.) I am grateful for the fact that the beauty of our singing has drawn many people into our worship and into this body. Second, singing in parts is a symbol (and perhaps a sacrament) of the body of Christ. No one person can create a whole hymn on their own — we need a community to make the song. People bring different gifts and different voices that we combine, creating harmony. This harmony can be a glimpse of the Kingdom of God. Additionally, a cappella singing makes a theological statement about our worship. We give the congregation “pride of place,” making the body of believers the primary instrument of worship. We honor the bodies and voices that God gave us. We manifest the songs of God in our physical being. When we use instruments, it is as an aid to the voice of the congregation.

Even as we accept that we have a good theological grounding for singing the way we do, we need to recognize that this is not the only right or Godly way to sing. In

fact, Dietrich Bonhoeffer insisted that unison singing is a better image of the unity of the Body of Christ. In our diverse congregation, we have people who carry dozens of different musical traditions. Each one of those, like the four-part a cappella tradition, has a rationale, and has the potential to enrich and expand our worship.

If we can embrace a style of singing as something more than simply tradition, but as something that is valuable and worth sharing, then we need to work towards singing inclusively instead of exclusively. If half of our congregation did not grow up with part singing, we can not assume that everyone will be able to join in. We can not assume that everyone can sight read music. We need to find ways to enable and invite people to join the singing. Occasionally, this will mean taking a few minutes during worship to teach the parts of a song. Previous generations had singing schools to learn new songs and to practice part-singing. Four hymns a week is simply not enough to sustain our practice. If this way of singing is important to us, we need to be a bit more intentional about it.

Back to 606, aka 118. On two Sundays in June, the 15th and 22nd, I'd welcome anyone who is interested to join me at 10 a.m. for some singing. Everyone is welcome, but I especially want to invite people who do not sight-read, those who are new to this way of singing, and even those who think they are tone-deaf. If you had an elementary school music teacher who told you not to sing because it would bother the other children and you haven't sung a note since, these times are for you, too. We will sing together with no performance pressure, and we'll work together on learning parts to some hymns, old and new. In particular, I want to offer the opportunity for anyone interested to learn the parts to 118. I don't assume that absolutely everyone wants to

take part in this style of singing — but I want to be sure that everyone who wants to has the opportunity.

Singing together can be seen as a sacrament — a point of contact between our community and God. Really, we could broaden that and describe all of worship — and perhaps all of our life together as a community — as a sacrament. And in turn, our community, the Church, is a sacrament for the world. We are a point of contact between God and the earth. Just as communion feeds us as the body of Christ, worship transforms us into the bread and wine that feeds a hungry humanity.

This is the story of Pentecost. The gifts of the Spirit were not for personal enrichment or for the singular benefit of the gathered body of believers. Instead, they are intended to transform us, and to redeem the earth. The Spirit comes not to be contained within an existing tradition, but to welcome all voices, all languages and all peoples into the body of Christ.