

## Sharing the Gospel & Ourselves

-that is Living in a Relationship of Love

In the wider Protestant world – the last Sunday in October – each year, is known as Reformation Sunday. How fitting that we, too, recognize today as a benchmark in the life of our Emmaus Road Mennonite Fellowship! It was on October 31, 1517, that the young theology professor priest, Martin Luther, posted his famous Ninety-Five Theses on the door of the Castle Church in Wittenberg, Germany. It was October 7 of last year (2007) that a group of 20 or more of us met at Bernie and Marie’s home to “wonder aloud” about the planting of a new Mennonite Church in our community. Nearly 500 years separate these two actions, yet each are intricately and dynamically related to the other.

We might consider October 31, 1517 as the beginning of the Christian Reformation. However, as with all history-changing movements – much more than one single moment, or one single individual are involved. We might consider October 7, 2007 as the beginning of the Emmaus Road Mennonite Fellowship, but as we know – as ones at this time and place in history - our birth as a fellowship was and continues to be simply an outwardly visible sign of movements and leadings that have been stirring for a very long time.

The very birth of Christianity – the birth of Jesus – carries this same dynamic. Jesus’ life among us changed the world forever – but his life was lived in a very real geographical place and at an actual time in history. The proclamation of Jesus as Lord spoke a revolutionary word in the day when Caesar was the only one who was lord! The oppressive rule of Rome readied the Jewish people for the coming of the Messiah. Jesus entered into history – at just the right time, at just the right place! Clumsy as they might have been in their understandings, persons seeking meaning, freedom and hope recognized in Jesus the way of salvation.

Martin Luther, as well, lived in a real time and in a real place. He didn’t “father” the Reformation; he lived as a child in the “age of reformation!” By the Middle Ages, the Church – was losing its political clout. In contrast to local and regional rule, nations were being built, The leaders of these states were monarchs not popes! Sociologically, the population of Europe was on the rise again – after its decline during the famines and plagues of the 1300’s. (Europe is thought to have lost 2/5 of its population during the 14<sup>th</sup> century.) The later Middle Ages brought the beginning of a money economy – and the Church, like society at large became caught up in this “commercialization” with all the risks inherent with wealth and greed! At the same time, this growth capital led to the founding of universities and colleges. The development of the printing press around 1450 and ways of making cheap paper allowed for the growing literate audience to have access to information and knowledge. (Prior to the printing press and production of paper, one Bible required scribes to fill 170 calfskins or 300 sheepskins.)

Luther is quoted to have said that “the Reformation was the work of God’s Word.” Yet, he also acknowledged that the printed word made it possible for “a little mouse like Wittenberg to roar like a lion across the length and breadth of Europe!”<sup>1</sup>

Emmaus Road community, I believe that just like the revolutionary time of Jesus, just like the reforming time of Martin Luther, just like the radical time of the our Anabaptist ancestors of the 1520’s...that we are part of a transformational time in history. I believe that our emergence as a congregation is much more than a mutant motion on the actions of just a few of us. I sense that our congregation is a small but very important part of a history-changing movement like that of the Reformation of the 16<sup>th</sup> century.

A bit about our time and place in history: a time of real risk and struggle -

- Unprecedented global population
- The growing “equity” gap between the “ultra –rich and extremely poor”<sup>2</sup>
- An epidemic of fear of one another and the future
- The realization that the USA is no longer “ the hope of the nations”
- At the same time, the every growing availability and use of the world-wide web

These are times with the potential for great harm, but also the promise of great hope. For into this swirling stew of possibility and peril an incredible awareness is growing. Across the world there is an emerging understanding among followers of Jesus- in all traditions - that the Kingdom is here! God is with us– not only in heaven – but on this good earth, in every imaginable circumstance...

As a congregation we have been entrusted with a special way of being. We spring from the tradition of the radical reformation – from those who were unkindly called the Anabaptists or the re-baptizers. For these early Anabaptist believers, to understand that God’s kingdom is in the “here and now” would be nothing new. Loving God, caring for neighbor, friend and enemy alike was what it meant for them to live as followers of Jesus. To be knit into a community of faith, to bear one another’s burdens, to share possessions and gifts, to follow Jesus’ example of forgiveness and reconciliation, this was not simply their belief it was their way of being. Our brothers and sisters of the wider Christian world are inviting us – as Mennonites – to share this treasure which we’ve received – to share the Gospel as we share our very selves...

In this time and place, we are called “to love the Lord our God, with all our heart, soul and mind.” This call is to a life of loving integrity, for “to love God with heart, soul and mind,” **is** to notice that others are suffering. It **is** to care that many of our actions are destroying the earth. “To love the Lord our God, with heart, soul and mind” is to be drawn ever closer to our true allegiance to the God’s kingdom. This deep commitment of

love shared between us – with God - guards us from the temptation of nationalism and its resultant militarism. To “love the Lord our God with our total being is to “do justice, to love kindness and to live humbly.” Micah 6 It is “tend to the matters of justice, mercy and faith.” Matt. 23:23.

In the course of history – when the going got especially rough – it has been humanity’s tendency to look beyond this world for the solution to our problems. Apocalyptic visions and writings give us a glimpse of humanity’s longings through the ages for One who could lead us out of this troubled land. Our Anabaptist ancestors also yearned for a better place...beyond, but at the same time, they were gifted with the understanding that the Kingdom is God is already among us - here. May we, too, remember...the body of Christ is found in every current situation and circumstance. He lives among us, between us and through us.. We are invited to receive the nurture and care that each of us - yes each of us- so desperately has need of. By the Spirit of Christ, we are able *to minister to and to be ministered to* by the hands and feet of Jesus – our brothers and sisters -.

To love God is for us as Emmaus Road Mennonite Fellowship “to be followers of Jesus Christ, and, by the power of the Holy Spirit, to grow as a community of grace, joy and peace, so that God’s healing and hope flows through us to the world. To “love the Lord our God with all our heart, mind and strength...is simply this...in this time and place...in the history of God’s world...to love our neighbors as ourselves.

Singing together as words of commitment – “Here in this Place” WB#6

*Here in this place new light is streaming, now is the darkness vanished away.  
See, in this space, our fears and our dreamings, brought here to you in the light of this day.  
Gather us in – the lost and forsaken, gather us in – the blind and the lame.  
Call to us now, and we shall awaken, we shall arise at the sound of our name.  
We are the young – our lives are a mystery, we are the old- who yearn for your face.  
We have been sung throughout all of history called to be light in the whole human race.  
Gather us in – the rich and the haughty, gather us in – the proud and the strong.  
Give us a heart so meek and so lowly – give us the courage to enter the song.  
Here we will take the wine and the water, here we will take the bread of new birth.  
Here you shall call your sons and your daughters, all us anew to be salt for the earth.  
Give us to drink the wine of compassion, give us to eat the bread that is you.  
Nourish us well, and teach us to fashion lives that are holy and hearts that are true.  
Not in the dark of buildings confining, not in some heaven, light years away, but here in this place, the new  
light is shining; now is the Kingdom, now is the day.  
Gather us in – and hold us forever, gather us in – and make us your own.  
Gather us in – all peoples together, fire of love in our flesh and our bone.*