

Back in February, at the CMU Renew Conference, Ryan Dueck, Craig Janzen-Neufeld and I were sharing a car on our way back to where we were lodging, when Craig threw out a question for us all to ponder: “If you weren’t part of the Mennonite Church, what church tradition would you likely be a part of?”

We chatted a bit about what we knew about some of the other traditions and denominations that we either have experience in or just know about in theory. And I came away from that conversation confident ... or assured ... or, I don’t know if I really know the word - about the faith tradition I find myself today.

I think perhaps there are times we overstate the importance of personal, rational, conscious decision. The calling of Jesus’ disciples - that Jesus chose them, rather than that they are choosing Jesus - is a foundational claim of our faith. Yet, we are still convinced by many other stories of Jesus’ encounters that show the role of a fundamental choice before the presence of God - hence, our long-held, and, at times, life-threatening conviction of believer’s baptism.

So, it is with that - hopefully appropriate - amount of emphasis on choice, that I am glad that I chose to find a home in the Mennonite faith tradition many years ago. I have loved that in our tradition and denomination, there is room to breathe and explore and wonder and converse and hold tension and discover God in God’s fulness. And I think this is partially because we hold this beautiful - perhaps fragile - space between other branches on the Christian family tree - not quite protestant or catholic, as Walter Klassen has identified - but also somewhere between Evangelicalism (with a big E) and mainline Christianity. It is beautiful space.

But this was all what I came to eventually discover about the Anabaptism and the Mennonite Church. It isn’t quite what landed me in the company of Mennonites to begin with.

I am a Christian idealist. And so many years ago, I became captured by what I think is an even stronger Christian idealism that I saw being described by these Mennonites and Anabaptists. There was this conviction about what Jesus’ life, death and resurrection meant not simply for my afterlife, but for my present life - my earthly life.

I discovered Christians who were not only motivated to faith by the fear of a fiery eternal punishment, but by their simple obedience to the one who is their Lord and saviour, and their own love of God and neighbour. I read about these Christians who acknowledged and took seriously the forces of empire, of violence, of individualism. Their faithful following of Jesus meant that they could not be violent, they could not be coercive, and they needed to live out their faith in community. Following Jesus meant resisting ways of life we take for granted and living in ways that might seem very odd or even non-sensical.

These Mennonites were pointing to something I think I could sense, but didn’t quite have the words for. Something is not right here and now and around us. And following Jesus is not about just getting to heaven but bringing heaven to earth, even if it’s hard.

I'll give you a little taste of the kind of stuff I was reading that made me excited to be a Mennonite. This comes from Stanley Hauerwas' commencement address to the graduating class of Goshen College in 1992. He told them this:

(quote) "Mennonites, after all, refuse to buy the idea that forgiveness is simply a matter of being told that God had forgiven us. Mennonites have been about reminding other Christians that forgiveness is a community process that makes discipleship possible. Indeed, the nature of discipleship as the hallmark of Mennonite life was determined by people who had learned that forgiveness was a practice of a community committed to the truthful worship of God. Of course, the name you Mennonites have come to give this complex relationship among forgiveness, reconciliation, discipleship, and truth is *peace*. For your pacifism is not based on some abstract principle that all violence, whatever that is, is wrong in and of itself, but rather peace names those practices and processes of your community necessary to *be a people of truth* ... Mennonites know the truth of that because they know they are seldom in a position to know the truth about their sin until they have made their lives available to others in a manner that *they might be taught the truth about themselves* - particularly in matters where the wrong done cannot be made right - which in fact is the character of most matters that matter. That is why reconciliation is so painful: it requires us to be ready to confront one another with the truth so that we will be better able to name and confront those powers that feed on our inability to make our wrongs right." (End quote)

If that sounds really hard, uncomfortable, or even scary, perhaps this is why we really need courage to love.

I have now been attending Mennonite worship for around twelve years. Becoming a pastor certainly means that this beautiful idealism meets the truth and reality of live lived always in the present with human beings. If there was any doubt in this room, I'll be clear, Mennonites and Anabaptists do not have it figured out. We do not have Christ's peace figured out. We cannot truthfully claim that all of the Christian Church should look at us and do as we do. But looking at us should never be the point anyways, right?

But being a Christian of the particular flavour we call Mennonite - being Anabaptist - has allowed me the space, the encouragement, the historical resources, and more than anything, the *friendships*, to at least, seek this all out.

To be a Mennonite might not be to find oneself surrounded by a completely perfectly peaceful people. But I do think it is to find oneself surrounded by fellow human beings who take seriously the path to peace, as John the Baptist's father Zechariah so beautifully puts it in Luke 1. This peace - this reconciliation, and forgiveness, and truth, and love - this is life and death. And I am so incredibly blessed to face it with you all in our world today.