

*John Docherty, 2013-09-22*

### **Navigating the waters of baptism**

I think this weekend has been a pretty amazing experience as we've been hovering around this theme of baptism.

We've heard a little from Lydia and Gary about the significance of baptism in the history of the church in general; how it has shaped the thinking of much of our civilization and our perception of "faithfulness" and the implications of Christian discipleship;

We've seen the impact a certain view of baptism has had in the history of western Europe; the mass baptisms of conquered peoples; the direct linkage between baptism, church membership, and citizenship; the political side of this ritual that dominated Europe for most of the last two millennia.

We've looked at some of the history of baptism in the Mennonite church in particular; the radical nature of this "believers' baptism" in the 16th century; the personal implications of embracing this new way of thinking about membership in the Body of Christ, and the dangers that accompanied the act of "re-baptising".

And we've had a pair of baptisms of our own – 2 young women who have chosen to take this step with *us*, the Mennonite Fellowship of Montreal.

We've had a transfer of membership for Bimal, an ecumenical former Church of Southern India – Methodist – Presbyterian – Quaker – United Church of Canada member who has chosen to board this Mennonite train after running alongside it for so many years. Bimal, I love that image.

And, in a few minutes, we'll be commissioning a young couple who are stepping into a new stage of their own individual paths of faith, and of their path together.

I think this is one of those weekends when one could easily say, "my cup runneth over" (and I'm not referring to the rain). It's been a full and, I think, a significant weekend. I think it's been a wonderful reminder of who we are, a reminder of *why* we are who we are, and an encouragement to seek to embody the promise of our own baptism.

But that embodiment of the promise of our personal baptism is a very unique thing for each of us. This personal voyage of faith that each of us takes has its own set of uncharted surprises.

Navigating the waters of our own baptism can be a tricky business, and most of us older members of MFM have been around the block often enough to know that navigation isn't always our strongpoint. We're not always sure we're holding the map the right way up sometimes, and our behaviours and choices in life might make some wonder what flag our boat is flying.

Navigating the waters of our baptism.

Part of the challenge of navigating the waters of our baptism is that these can be turbulent waters. Life will sometimes throw difficulties our way that require an incredible amount of strength and a steady hand.

The waters of baptism can be deep waters. We may sometimes find ourselves feeling a little adrift if our anchor doesn't seem to be able to gain any purchase.

The waters can contain hidden dangers. Risks that come from living the values we espouse, and that may alienate us from some in the wider society that we would prefer to keep on good terms with.

But you know, it seems to me that navigating any ship has to develop character on some level. The mariner who sets out onto the open sea has to do so with a certain trust that his or her competency is up to the task. He or she would be a fool to set out without the proper instruction and tools to permit a safe navigation.

We, as Mennonite Christians, trust that our baptism equips us for the task of navigating our way to our destination. In some ways we are all in the same boat. We're travelling in the same direction, certainly, but we all have our own voyage, and each of us has to navigate our own ship.

But, while each of us has our own trajectory, in our own little craft, and our own particular way of being faithful navigators, we have this crazy notion that we're actually somehow navigating together.

It's a little bit like the way our modern GPS systems work.

I was fascinated this weekend to watch James in action as he tried to verify whether or not we could incorporate a GPS component into the youth activity that was planned for yesterday afternoon. He was standing outside, waving his phone around, making comments like “okay, I’ve got 4 of 16 now; no, wait, now it’s 12 of 27; okay, now I have 13 of 19 ...”

If I understand it correctly, the idea is that there are these multiple satellites orbiting around the planet, sending out communication signals. The GPS unit in my hand picks up these signals, and by triangulating the relative positions of the various satellites, is able to pinpoint, within a certain degree of accuracy, where I am standing.

The more satellites I have, the more triangulating can occur, and the more precise my location coordinates.

And that, I think, is a little how we Mennonite Christians navigate. We have a map, this Book, so in one sense we’ve got most of what we need to find our destination. We have a compass, which I suppose could be those internal impulses, our gifts and passions, that push us this way and that way as we try to be faithful followers of Christ.

But we also have our brothers and sisters who act as our points of reference as we try to pinpoint where we’re at in our journey. We all interact with each other and help keep the internal compasses pointing to true north, rather than spinning all over the place as we get caught in the various magnetic fields of our work life, our family life, our personal relationships, our physical struggles, etc.

We matter to each other as we navigate these waters together.

And I think this is, for me, one of the real gifts of the Mennonite-Anabaptist tradition to the wider church : this notion that together we can find our way; not being led by the nose by self-proclaimed experts on theology; not being forced into hierarchical structures married to the powers that be; but simple, honest, seekers after truth who are willing to grapple with the issues of faith together.

Yes, there may be dark periods in our history when this romantic image of the “simple, honest, seekers after truth who are willing to grapple with the issues of faith together” has degenerated into a closed, oppressed and oppressive cell of

warped souls (we are human, after all), but I think there is still magnificent strength and power in this vision of a “priesthood of believers”.

Yesterday, I mentioned that I had Mennonite friends in High School, but that I could never quite distinguish them from Mormons and Jews, and Gary asked me what I, as a teenager, would have liked to hear from these friends that would have allowed me to better understand what these Mennonites were all about.

I should maybe say that my ignorance of Mennonites was really just an example of my Catholic upbringing. I couldn't distinguish Mennonites from Mormons and Jews, because in my world, you were either Catholic or non-Catholic. Hindus, Buddhists and Sikhs were clearly different, everybody else was just some kind of protestant as far as I knew. Even the Jews – since Jesus was a Jew, I figured Jews must be in the family somehow.

I think what I would have like to hear from my friends is that Mennonite Christians have been at their best, and been truest to their baptismal vows, when they have embodied that part of Menno Simons' “true evangelical faith” that recognises our responsibility to feed the hungry, clothe the naked, visit the prisoner, etc.

I'm sure I've bored you all to tears with my description of my father ...

I think that has been important to me because Mennonites are not a people who have been in positions of direct political power, but have nonetheless recognised that you can't find peace unless you ensure justice, and you need to work at justice by working at the roots of injustice.

Earlier this week, Bimal circulated a recent interview with Pope Francis. I haven't read the entire interview, but I did skim through it to see what kinds of questions were put to him. I hit on one paragraph that gripped me, because it is so out of step with how the Catholic church has usually acted over the centuries. It also, curiously enough, fits in nicely with what we discussed yesterday about Constantinian Christianity.

“We must not focus on occupying the spaces where power is exercised, but rather on starting long-run historical processes. We must initiate processes rather than occupy spaces. God manifests himself in time and is present in the processes of

history. This gives priority to actions that give birth to new historical dynamics. And it requires patience, waiting.” (Pope Francis)

I think this is a very Mennonite-Anabaptist approach to power : the church not seeking to occupy the seats of power directly, and declaring policy or legislation, but setting in motion a *way* of being that will help shape the decisions of those who *do* occupy the positions of power.

Setting a tone, if you like, for the discussions that will result in decisions that affect society and how we choose to treat each other,

- how we choose to deal with conflict,
- how we choose to acknowledge and address inequities,
- how we take up our own responsibility for playing a part in seeking justice.

I see the baptisms yesterday as an early step in following the path of that vision of a different way of being in the world. It’s not the first step on the path, it may not even ultimately be the most dramatic step on the path for either Nicole or Wivine – they have both been following Jesus before yesterday, and there may be future choices, future gestures, future decisions, future events, that have a more obvious and “life-changing” impact on them :

- the choice of a career
- the choice of a life-partner
- there may be a choice to have children, and those children will leave their own mark on their lives
- there may be a choice to *not* have children, and that, too, will have its own impact on their lives
- there will be losses of persons close to them, and choices around that
- there may be decisions around political questions that have direct and undeniable effects on their lives.

All of these things may well appear to affect their lives in ways that may be much more obvious than this quaint quiet baptism, conducted in a small, rustic camp, in the rain, surrounded by a few close friends, and family.

And yet I suspect, and I suppose I should also say I hope, that all of their future decisions, all of their future choices, all of their future gestures will be informed by this odd ceremony of water baptism, this practice that anchors them in a tradition thousands of years old.

I should also say, in case any of you are wondering, that the choice of the mode of baptism, full immersion or pouring, was left up to each of the girls to determine which mode they'd prefer, or be more comfortable with.

To my mind, there's a slightly different symbolism to the two modes. Sprinkling evokes more of a sense of the washing away of sins, and the purification of the candidate for baptism, a participation in the atonement of Christ's death, and a fresh start, with a fresh slate.

Full immersion carries with it more of the image of dying and being buried with Christ, leaving behind the old life, and coming out of the waters of baptism to enter a new life. Being newly born, to engage a fresh start, with a fresh slate.

Their baptisms were, in part, their declaration that they are prepared to embrace this new way of being; this *'Way of Jesus'*, and that this is, for them, the start of a new life.

In a few minutes we'll be having a commissioning for Emily and Tyler. They're a little further along on their relative voyages, and this new stage for them is, I think, an expression of the fruit being borne of their respective decisions to follow Jesus. I'll let them speak to that themselves.

Bimal's transfer of membership is another declaration of embracing this particular Way, as embodied by Mennonites. It's very certainly not the start of Bimal's voyage. He has a long, varied experience of different forms of Christianity. More, much more, varied than most of the rest of us. He has a long history of navigating his own baptismal waters, and he's not shy about pointing out where he sees rocks below the surface. Thanks Bimal.

I said that I thought I have found in the Mennonite church a family of people who have struck a balance between the personal element of faith and our responsibility to be acting in this world in a way that is honoring to God.

I know we're not perfect. I'm not perfect. I know we have our dark side, and we don't always get it right.

But a pair of baptisms, a young couple heading out to work with MCC, and an old Tamil who has chosen to spend his latter years being a part of our GPS network gives me hope that we may yet get to our destination.