

*John Docherty, June 21, 2015*  
**Psalm 63: 1-7 – “Desire: my soul thirsts for thee”**

The Mennonite Confession of Faith has this to say, in part, about Christian spirituality. It's taken from Article 18 : “We believe that to be a disciple of Jesus is to know life in the Spirit. As we experience relationship with God, the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ takes shape in us, and we grow in the image of Christ ... In loving and knowing God, we experience communion with God and allow more and more of our life to be conformed to the way of Jesus, his life, death and resurrection. We yield ourselves to God, letting the Holy Spirit mold us into the image of Christ ...”

... we grow in the image of Christ ... and the Holy Spirit molds us into the image of Christ ...

This is our confession of faith : we say that we believe that somehow, as we reach out and enter into communion with God, we are being transformed; we say that we believe we are becoming more and more like Christ with each passing day.

I suspect that if I were to ask for a show of hands (which I am not doing ...); if I were to ask for a show of hands of those of us who feel we are becoming more and more like Christ with each passing day, I suspect my view of the back wall would be fairly unobstructed.

And, so as not to single out the group in the middle section, I suspect my view of the side walls would be equally unobstructed.

I know I would think twice before raising my own hand.

Hopefully, we're better people today than we were last year, or a decade ago, but it think it would feel like the height of arrogance for any one of us to claim that we are more Christ-like than we were a year or a decade ago.

And yet ... we probably all hope that we *are* becoming progressively more faithful in our embrace of what God calls us to be; that our daily experiences, and our choices around how to respond to those experiences, are part of the process of molding us into something better.

As I've said before, in other meditations, our “Confession of faith in a Mennonite perspective” is not quite a creed. It's not a collection of truths that we must adopt in order to be Mennonite. It's rather a collection of declarations of faith that we believe to be true.

Now, that might sound a bit like saying the same thing in a different way, but what I mean by it is that I think our confession of faith, in large part, is an aspirational document. It gives voice to how we understand God to be at work in the world, and it gives voice to how we see ourselves in relation to God, but it also gives voice to how we *aspire* to be in relation to God.

I think Article 18 definitely falls into the “aspirational” category.

We hope and trust that each of us is faithfully seeking out God’s wisdom as we make our daily choices; as we struggle with the challenges of life; as we adopt behaviours that affect those around us.

When Article 18 says that we are in the process of “... letting the Holy Spirit mold us into the image of Christ ...” it is definitely aspirational in nature. You’ll note that it doesn’t say “... the Holy Spirit has molded us into the image of Christ ...” (present perfect tense indicating a completed action). It recognizes that there is still work to be done; that none of us is a completed piece. There is no one we can point to and say “Now there goes a perfect incarnation of how Jesus would have lived his life”.

And yet, the confession of faith *does* anticipate that faithful discipleship is built on this desire to be made into the image of Christ. It suggests, by even discussing Christian spirituality, that we are all, in some way, seeking communion with God, and it offers a number of ways we might do this.

In the article itself it lists prayer, study of Scripture, reflection on God, corporate worship, singing hymns, simplicity, witness, and service.

In the commentary on the article, they further list other traditional disciplines such as fasting, keeping a journal, and alms giving.

All of these practices are meant to create a space where we can seek, or be sought out by, God; or simply to create a space where we can live out our call to discipleship. They are spiritual disciplines, exercised by spiritual people.

I once heard MFM described as a “secular congregation”. The description comes from someone who knows MFM quite well, and who likes and respects us as a worshipping group. The description was not at all meant as a criticism, or as somehow suggesting that we are not Christian enough. It was offered simply as an observation.

I'm still trying to figure out what exactly was meant by the comment, but I think it may have had to do with how we at MFM tend to express our faith. We don't tote our Bibles around quoting chapter and verse to all and sundry. Most of us don't, for example, tend to pepper our speech with phrases like "Praise the Lord!", "Hallelujah!", and "Amen, sister!"

No, we tend to be a little more reserved in our speech where God is concerned.

And some of us probably tend to be perhaps a little wary of overly spiritualising our personal interactions and our life experiences. We may have been hurt by people who have used this kind of language and this causes us to shy away from what feel like superficial expressions of piety that hide an underlying aggression or an unhealthy mindset.

We take things as they come, and we try to keep things "real".

But maybe I'm projecting here. I've already confessed at other times that I don't think of myself as a mystic. I don't particularly seek an ecstatic experience of God, though I *do* seek a sense of God's presence.

I'm not quite like the psalmist, the author of today's Scripture reading, who writes "My soul is satisfied as with a rich feast, and my mouth praises you with joyful lips when I think of you on my bed, and meditate on you in the watches of the night ..."

But, that said, I'm not so unlike the same psalmist who also writes "...O God, you are my God, I seek you, my soul thirsts for you ... as in a dry and weary land where there is no water."

I'm enough of a mystic to acknowledge that I'm drawn to have some kind of contact with God. I'm most comfortable when that contact is in the form of subtle hints of the divine in the things around me:

- The gurgling laughter of an infant;
- The sound of kids playing in the ruelle;
- The warmth of the sun on your back;
- The smell of freshly cut grass as you glide by on a bicycle;
- The sense of peace, relaxation and energy that wells up as you push off on a canoe trip;

But those are the happy moments of contact with God.

There are other moments when we're in crisis; when we feel adrift; when we're reaching out for something intangible to help get us through.

And there may be other moments when we're not quite in crisis, but when we have this *longing* for something.

That longing, or drive, or passion, is food for any number of theories of what makes us who and what we are.

Freud had *his* theories on what makes us tick. Other psychologists have other theories.

I think it's safe to say that most of these theories have as their starting point an assumption that we start out as a more or less blank slate, and that our chemical make-up, and our environment combine to shape us in certain ways.

I think there's probably a lot of truth to that basic assumption. We *are* fashioned and formed by all of our life experiences and by our innate nature.

But what most of these psychological theories can't quite define is exactly how our environment forms us. There are just too many variables; too many life experiences; too many interacting forces that push and pull at us; and too many unknowns.

And what many, but not all, of these theories ignore, or take a somewhat condescending attitude towards, is the place of the spiritual dynamics that are at work in our lives; the place of forces outside the realm of the measurably physical.

When I was preparing this message, and reflecting on the psalm that was suggested, and the theme of 'Desire' that was attached to it, it made me think of the image of a "God-shaped hole" in all of us. I thought the image was a quote from St. Augustine, and it is, sort of, by way of Blaise Pascal.

Pascal is probably best known as a mathematician and scientist, but he was also a religious philosopher. The Encyclopaedia Britannica says that "Until 1646 the Pascal family held strictly Roman Catholic principles, though they often substituted *l'honnêteté* ("polite respectability") for inward religion." That is, I think, not an uncommon thing.

Pascal had something of a religious conversion in that year when his father fell seriously ill, and he began seeking a more experiential religious life. He was in crisis, and he wrote,

asking the question “What else does this craving, and this helplessness, proclaim but that there was once in man a true happiness, of which all that now remains is the empty print and trace? This he tries in vain to fill with everything around him, seeking in things that are not there the help he cannot find in those that are, though none can help, since this infinite abyss can be filled only with an infinite and immutable object; in other words by God himself.”

... An abyss in our very being that can only be filled by God ...

Some writers think he must have been thinking of Augustine when he wrote that. What Augustine actually wrote, in his ‘Confessions’, was "You have made us for yourself, and our hearts are rest-less till they find their rest in you."

I think this is what the psalmist is expressing on a very personal level in the first verse of Psalm 63: "... I seek you, my soul thirsts for you, my flesh faints for you, as in a dry and weary land where there is no water."

I'm not sure how much that describes *your* experience of reaching out for God.

I know how much that does, and doesn't, describe *my* experience of reaching out for God.

If I can return to where I started this meditation, and look again at our Mennonite Confession of Faith :

“... In loving and knowing God, we experience communion with God and allow more and more of our life to be conformed to the way of Jesus, his life, death and resurrection. We yield ourselves to God, letting the Holy Spirit mold us into the image of Christ ...”

This we believe : that the Holy Spirit is molding us. With each life experience; with every choice we make; we are becoming something new.

And the desire that has been planted in us to find a faithful way of making those choices is surely drawing us closer to the one who can fully meet the challenge that each one of us presents, and give us the wherewithal to live up to our calling.