

The first church I attended regularly was, at least initially, because of Susan. “Insistence” may be a bit strong of a word, but what she extended was definitely more forceful than a simple “invitation.” (Forceful, of course, in the good “peaceful” way that Mennonites tend to practice.) One of the things I liked most about AMF – that’s Atlanta Mennonite Fellowship – was that the time following the sermon for discussion, reflection, and engagement was called “Further Liberty” because, as one person pointed out, “The name ‘Further Liberty’ implies that liberties have already been taken, and that this is time is for going even further.” In that way, this is a sermon for AMF. Please consider that your first warning.

When Susan asked me to preach as a part of the “Gospel According To...” series, I felt a bit conflicted. I mean, I’ve been threatening to preach ever since I got back from Kansas City, so it wasn’t like I didn’t know what I’d talk about. But “gospel” – isn’t that supposed to be “good” news? I felt hard pressed to speak cheerfully about what I had witnessed. I agreed to preach anyway. And as I’ve written this, I’ve realized that there is good news in the story of my witness – for me, at least. As they say online, “Your mileage may vary.” Consider that your second warning.

But enough warnings – let’s get started. This is the Gospel According to the Mennonite Church USA Convention in Kansas City, or alternatively, Coming to Understand Myself as an Agnostic Disciple of Christ (All While Rejecting American Christianity.)

Now you have to understand – I didn’t grow up Christian. As a child, the few church experiences I suffered were because of my grandparents, who were devout AME (on my mother’s side) and Baptist (on my father’s). As I got older, I remember becoming more and more aware of the hypocrisy of religious people, and more and more annoyed by the deflections, obfuscation, and outright denials of those who would so enthusiastically support that lifestyle. I came to understand Church as a kind of club – one where you gained access to a variety of social, financial, and psychological benefits, all at the low, low cost of your common sense, self-determination, and moral integrity.

Susan wasn’t the first person I’d met who challenged this fundamental understanding of what it meant to be Christian; she was, however, the first to put up with my incessant questioning and pointed observations. More importantly, she was the first to admit that the Church **wasn’t** perfect, that she (and Christianity in general) **didn’t** have all the answers, and that she was often just as perplexed and frustrated by the behaviors of those who professed to follow Christ as I was, and for many of the same reasons. Speaking with her has been – and is – refreshing and intellectually challenging, and I think that over time my view of Christianity and the Church has become more nuanced, if not any less critical.

This ongoing discussion is what prompted me to volunteer to attend Convention in Kansas City.

Let me stop for a moment to expand on that. Since coming to Lancaster, I’ve participated in a lot of events associated with CMCL, MCC, and Mennonites in general. I attended a Damascus Road training, which opened my eyes to the thin, uppermost depths of American racism. I attended Fabulous, Fierce, and Sacred – an experience of how life-giving church could be, even when – perhaps especially when – done imperfectly. I spent time with the senior youth, talking about the dangers of telling someone else’s story. In February of 2012, I spoke at MCC Chapel about Black History Month, Valentine’s Day, and Mardi Gras – a sermon that, when I look back on it, is still amazingly relevant today. And later that same year – July, I think – I spoke here, about the implications of the trial of George Zimmerman – the trial that let him walk as a free man, after chasing down and killing a black boy – basically for the crime of being a black boy. I am painfully aware of the continued oppression under which many live on a day-to-day basis – including that of LGBTQIA+ individuals by the broad Mennonite church. So my journey to Kansas City wasn’t just about Susan – “hmm, she likes this Mennonite thing so it can’t be **all** bad” – it was also about investigating and understanding oppression. Who are these people that, on the one hand, say they believe in peace, justice, and spirituality, and build anti-racism trainings as part of that belief, yet on the other hand deny the basic humanity of their own children based upon a single aspect of their being?

So I went.

It’s hard for me to describe what I experienced in a way that will make sense for someone who wasn’t there. Convention was a spectacle – in all senses of the word – and as such it can be difficult to distill it down to some essential essence. However, I find that my own understanding of what happened – and, more importantly, of what I carried away from it – is best described as three basic yet intertwined narrative threads.

The first thread took place in the delegate sessions. In particular, there were two things that I personally witnessed, and one that I heard about at length, that shocked me to no end. The first was the discussion surrounding the resolution on Israel-Palestine. Now, I will admit that I didn't really feel like I had a lot of skin in the game on this one. From what I understood, Mennonites had been spending decades investigating this conflict, and the resolution was the natural product of that. In addition, the resolution itself didn't seem to say anything particularly radical to me – I mean, it was a statement encouraging folks to read up about the conflict, a statement saying that military occupation is sinful, a statement to pray for everyone involved, and a suggestion to consider withdrawing funds from investments that directly profited from the fight. Seems pretty straightforward stuff for a “peace and justice” church, right?

Evidently not. There were many comments made about this resolution – a few were of support, but most were questions and concerns. The one that struck me most was from the pastor of a church in Peoria, Illinois. I don't remember exactly what he said, but basically he pointed out that many of his congregants worked at the Caterpillar plant there in Peoria, and what was he supposed to tell them if this resolution passed – to quit their jobs? And if they did, would the church support them and their families?

I was absolutely flabbergasted. I mean, the comment showed a pretty deep misunderstanding of what the word “divestment” means, and a particular ignorance about how similar divestment strategies put both economic and social pressure on South Africa's apartheid government in the 80's. But let's ignore that for a second. More shocking to me was the degree to which other folks started murmuring and nodding their heads – “oh yes, that's a good point, we hadn't thought of that!” So the delegates punted. They tabled the resolution until the 2017 Assembly in Orlando, Florida.

What does it mean when the professed followers of Jesus Christ – who died on a friggin' cross for our sins, as so many Christians love to rub in my face – what does it mean when these same followers balk at a personal change that could improve the lives of others, simply because it might lie outside of their comfort zones? What does it mean when Christians basically say, “Hey, you can wait on this. It doesn't matter that your children are dying, that your houses are being demolished, that you are being pushed out of your homes by a never-ending tide of greed and hatred. We are uncomfortable with the idea of losing something, so you wait.”

This is nothing new, of course.

“Frankly, I have yet to engage in a direct action campaign that was “well timed” in the view of those who have not suffered unduly from the disease of segregation. For years now I have heard the word “Wait!” It rings in the ear of every Negro with piercing familiarity. This “Wait” has almost always meant “Never.” We must come to see, with one of our distinguished jurists, that “justice too long delayed is justice denied.””

The words of Martin Luther King, Jr. are just as true today as they were in 1963; just as true about the West Bank and Gaza as about Birmingham, Ferguson, New York City, or Cleveland. “An injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere.” Amen.

Then there were the resolutions on Forbearance and the Membership Guidelines. Again, the comments around these resolutions stick in my mind – in particular, those from a Hispanic pastor speaking through an interpreter, and the pastor of a welcoming congregation on the West Coast. The first was a long rambling diatribe of threats and slowly escalating verbal violence – violence, of course, in the good “peaceful” way that Mennonites tend to practice. Basically, he stated – several times – that his church and the broader Hispanic community would leave the denomination if they didn't get what they wanted – the continued suppression and marginalization of LGBTQIA+ voices. In other words, we can all be One in Body of Christ – as long as that Body has a hand that's holding someone else's head underwater. And then he had the nerve to say something along the lines of, “And by the way, we don't like it when you say that we hate gay people. Stop saying that!”

The second – the welcoming pastor from the West Coast – was much quicker with her message: “Please, come and worship with us. Get to know who we are, through community and prayer, through fellowship and conversation.” I can still remember the two different tones – one petulant and angry, one open and pleading. What does it mean when the professed followers of Jesus – who broke bread and spent time with prostitutes and sinners – what does it

mean when they refuse the call to know and love their own friends and family?

Finally, there was a Pink Menno action – a disruption of events in the delegate hall. I didn't witness the action myself – I spent a lot of mornings worshipping devoutly at Mattress Mennonite – but I heard a lot about it. And one detail of the delegates response – which, by the way, every single person I talked to verified had happened – still pisses me off to no end. From all descriptions, the overall delegate reaction to the interruption was not positive, to put it mildly. There may have been shouts, there may have been threats, there may have been physical violence – performed, of course, in a good “peaceful” Mennonite way. But what I found most shocking was that there was hymn singing. By the delegates. To drown out voices of the Pink Mennos.

Now, one of the things that I have observed about Mennonites is that hymn singing is a point of cultural pride. Mennonites aren't supposed to dance, or flaunt wealth, or relax – but **sing**? Oh, yeah. As an aside, one of the biggest disagreements Susan and I had when planning our wedding was the number of hymns. I'm pretty sure that she still bears a small grudge that I wheedled her down to just one. Saying that four-part hymn singing is a point of religious unity in the Mennonite church is like saying that water is a little bit wet. Even here at CMCL, which is pretty loopy-goosy when it comes to rules and regulations, we sing three to four hymns every week.

So what does it mean when professed followers of Jesus – the one who reached out to the most marginalized of his community – what does it mean when those followers sing songs of godly praise specifically to murder the voices of those most marginalized in their community? The irony of it would be hilariously funny, if it didn't hurt so much. And when I took Tim Siedel's place as a delegate in the very last session (because he had committed to leading at least one seminar), I found that I couldn't sing with them. Not with any integrity, or self-respect.

To quote Hubert Brown, circa 1976:

“The tragedy as I sensed it was that the church was neither what it professed to be nor what it was told it should be. [...] As I looked about me I saw the brokenness of humanity. I, too, experienced brokenness – a loneliness, a sense of not being affirmed, of not having my history, my past, and my experiences respected and acknowledged. [...] I began to see the church as nothing but a resolution-passing community that failed miserably in being a visible manifestation of God in the world.”

I cannot fully express how despondent I felt from what I experienced regarding the delegate sessions. I cannot fully express how furiously angry I was. Some of it sticks with me still today. But that's not an altogether bad thing – which brings me to the second thread.

There was more to the Convention in Kansas City than the delegate sessions; there were also seminars and speakers. In particular, I ended up attending a seminar led by Drew Hart entitled “Intro to Anabaptivism: Radical Reformation in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century.” I won't even try to cover everything that he talked about in the session; if you're interested in Anabaptivism, I would highly suggest that you join the Anabaptivist Exploration Group here at CMCL or read Drew Hart's column on The Christian Century website (appropriately titled “Taking Jesus Seriously”). Hey, you might even want to do both. However, one thing he presented was a description of Anabaptism that 1.) made surprisingly good sense to me, and 2.) looked absolutely nothing like what I'd seen from the Mennonite church at Convention or... well, basically **ever**. Suddenly some of the things that had seemed so perplexing – for example, the prevalence of the Martyr's Mirror – snapped into clear focus. Mennonites were once Anabaptist, and honor that history through their stories and self-description, but – again to quote Hubert Brown – “As I look into Mennonite Church history, I discover that the present-day Mennonite Community has lost much of its historical spiritual qualities.”

One of the most surprising things I took from Drew's presentation was an appreciation for a little bit of John Howard Yoder's theology. Now, I realize that there's a grievous danger in bringing up Yoder's name. And up until Drew's presentation, I didn't seriously consider spending any time whatsoever even thinking about the philosophical teachings of a man who tried to justify, using Scripture, what was effectively sexual assault. But I found myself faced with an idea that he expressed – an idea that resonated with my soul in a way that none of the other “Christian” ideas that I'd been hammered with had. I think that these two quotes capture the essence of this idea:

“But the cross that Jesus had to face, because he chose to face it, was not—like sickness—something that strikes without explanation. It was not some continuing difficulty in his social life. It was not an accident or catastrophe that just happened to hit him when it could have hit somebody else. Jesus’ cross was the price to pay for being the kind of person he was in the kind of world he was in; the cross that he chose was the price of his representing a new way of life in a world that did not want a new way of life. That is what he called his followers to do.”

“The disciple's cross is not a metaphor for self-mortification or even generally innocent suffering; if you follow me, your fate will be like mine, the fate of a revolutionary. You cannot follow me without facing that fate.”

I'd never heard Jesus presented in this way. Oh, I'd heard, “Accept Jesus as your lord and savior!” and “Jesus died on a cross for your sins!” and “The only way into Heaven is through Jesus!” I'd heard people say that they were “Jesus’ disciples,” or that they were “called to follow Jesus,” but never any clarification on what that actually meant. From the way most of those people behaved, I generally assumed it meant acting like a thug – beating people up – albeit intellectually and emotionally instead of physically – until they broke down and joined the gang. That’s what “following Jesus” represented, based on what I'd observed: a kind of bully’s bravado, a cowardice masked by making other people miserable. A cowardice of telling the oppressed and marginalized that they can wait. A cowardice of threats of emotional violence when faced with desperate need. A cowardice of using the spiritual to crush the soul. What thinking, feeling person would want to follow that Jesus?

But John Howard Yoder’s description – that resonated with me. It could fit both with what I already knew of Jesus’ story and with my own sense of moral compass. In this description, Jesus wasn’t crucified to redeem our sins – Jesus tried to demonstrate a better way, and was crucified because his actions made us uncomfortable. In my opinion, if we humans are suffering under any single communal sin, it wasn’t the Fall of the Garden of Eden, it was the crucifixion of Jesus. In killing him, we, as a species, rejected the possibility of Heaven because we couldn’t imagine existing without a social stack with a top and a bottom. We killed Jesus for trying to upend that stack, and we killed the first Anabaptists for the same reasons. What Christians today are risking death to live and act as Jesus did? What would that even look like?

Which brings me to the third thread. This thread actually starts well before Convention – in fact, it started before I'd even decided that I wanted to go. I've been struggling with recent events for quite some time. So many news reports, each one describing in gruesome detail how a black man, woman, or child had been brutally murdered – walking down the street, standing at a store, playing in a park, talking on the phone, sleeping on a couch, worshiping at church. It’s been a continuous, never-ending stream of reminders of what it means to be Black in America – of what it means for your life to have no value, despite the plaintive cry that “Black Lives Matter.”

I ended up reading an article in the New York Times called [‘White Anxiety and the Futility of Black Hope’](#); within it I found a reference to Derrick Bell and the concept of “racial realism”. I ended up buying his second book – “Faces at the Bottom of the Well” – and that book accompanied me to Kansas City. There, I read it on benches between sessions and in the dining hall while people talked around me. I read it in the bathroom late at night while Susan slept, and I read it outside of the delegate hall, when I could no longer stomach being in the midst of so much hypocrisy. I cannot hope to summarize the entirety of this book in single sermon, much less a small portion of one. I will say, however, that I think it makes an excellent argument as to the permanent nature of racism – and indeed, oppression in general. Human nature demands social order – and someone always needs to be at the bottom of the stack. In Jesus’ time it was the Samaritans and prostitutes; in the Anabaptists’ time, it was the peasants; today, it’s the blacks and the queer. So what would it look like to live life the way that Jesus did? Derrick Bell lays it out for us:

“We can listen carefully to those who have been most subordinated. In listening, we must not do them the injustice of failing to recognize that somehow they survived as complete, defiant, though horribly scarred, beings.”

In other words, Jesus’ true brilliance wasn’t found in his death on the Cross; it was found in the way that he lived – offering grace and friendship to those most marginalized by society, without judgment, scorn, or expectation of ‘thankfulness’. His brilliance was in his commitment to treating those at the bottom of the stack with the humility, compassion, and respect due to them as human beings. And his brilliance was in committing himself to being engaged and active for their benefit – even in direct defiance to institutional systems dedicated to upholding the status quo. Again, to quote Derrick Bell:

“Both engagement and commitment connote service. And genuine service requires humility. We must first recognize and acknowledge (at least to ourselves) that our actions are not likely to lead to transcendent change and may indeed, despite our best efforts, be of more help to the system we despise than to the victims of that system whom we are trying to help. Then, and only then, can that realization and the dedication based on it lead to policy positions and campaigns that are less likely to worsen conditions for those we are trying to help and more likely to remind the powers that be that out there are persons like us who are not only not on their side but determined to stand in their way.”

This, then, is what I discovered at Kansas City: following Jesus isn't about participating in the institution of church, in passing resolutions that oppress others, or in protecting one's own privileged position in the social stack. Following Jesus is, at its core, turning one's back on the traditional order, undermining the systems and institutions of the social stack, and seeking to improve the conditions of those most crushed by its weight. And this action comes with great risk – the risk of discomfort, the risk of poverty, the risk of persecution, the risk of death.

“ 'In other words,' I suggested when she looked up, 'we're a race of Jeremiahs, prophets calling for the nation to repent.' ”

'Exactly!' Geneva said. 'And you know what nations do to their prophets?'

'I do. About the least dire fate for a prophet is that one preaches, and no one listens; that one risks all to speak the truth, and nobody cares.' ”

I don't know if you consider it “good news” if the **best** case scenario is that your efforts are met with apathy. Me? I found Jesus – a Jesus that doesn't demand that I give up my conscience and moral compass. A Jesus that's not focused on rewarding blind obedience and encouraging obsequious worship. A Jesus that's not into arbitrary, capricious, and excessive punishments for “those other folks”. A Jesus that's not an invisible, magical, wish-granting friend. No, I met the Jesus of the early Anabaptists. A Jesus whose choices I can respect and try to emulate. A Jesus that acts with honesty, integrity, and compassion. A Jesus that stands up for the little guy, even when it would be easier to roll over and surrender. A Jesus that I can actually imagine following – even unto death.

There's a lot more that I'd like to say – about why I still consider myself Agnostic. About the conversation I had with God in that hotel room in Kansas City and what She said that I found particularly vexing. About the intrinsic existential Absurdity of being Black in America. About the inherent insanity of the American Dream, always focused on going – doing all of the running we can to stay in one place, pushing ourselves twice as fast to inch a little bit forward – without considering, or even caring, about where we might eventually end up. We can't help it – “We are **all** mad here.”

Oh, and about the blonde-haired, blue-eyed American Christ and his worshipers – they're the main reason I still refuse to call myself a Christian. About Donald Trump – did you know that in many ways he exemplifies the American Christ? It doesn't surprise me at all that he's so popular among American Evangelicals – truly, he embodies the values of the God that they worship. Oh, and don't get me started on folks who say that Jesus is the center of their lives, then immediately turn away from His examples – usually to quote Paul, or one of the books of the Old Testament – whenever they find it convenient or necessary to reinforce someone else's position below them on the social stack. Cherry picking the Bible for fun and profit? Why not? After all, the Bible says you have to listen to me – just look at Habakkuk 3:3, which is printed on the cover of your bulletin. “God came from Teman, the Holy One from Mount Paran...” (I even learned about that particular verse while I was in Kansas City – during a fortuitous conversation with another delegate... As U2 sang: “the Spirit moves in mysterious ways”.)

But I've gone on too long already. Perhaps it's for the best that I have so much more to say. After all – I may be asked to preach again in a couple of years. I'll certainly make sure that I'm ready to take further liberties.