

Sermon – Creation, Compassion & Reconciliation: MCC at 100

For 19 July 2020 [recorded on 15 July 2020]

North Star Mennonite Church, Drake

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Theme: creation, abundance, food, hospitality & reconciliation, MCC 100 years

Scripture: Genesis 1:1-2:4a, Mark 6: 30-44, 2 Cor 5:16-20

Resources: MCC Centennial resources

Greetings from MCC to the North Star church community! My name is Eileen Klassen Hamm, and I serve as the Executive Director for MCC in Saskatchewan, and as we live through these covid days, I am grateful that we have technological tools which allows us to be connected even when we cannot gather face to face. I welcome conversation about anything regarding MCC, and you will find contact information for me in the script available on the church website.

At MCC, we were planning for the year 2020 with much excitement. This is our centennial, our 100th birthday. In January, we began our celebrations with The Great Winter Warm-Up, and I know that several of you participated, along with thousands of others across North America, creating more than 9000 comforters to share around the world. And then came COVID-19.

This isn't the year of celebration that we envisioned as we approached 2020, however, it is turning into a year that is demonstrating the generosity and creativity and perseverance of the many thousands of people who make up the MCC community, here and in 52 other countries. The coronavirus is also teaching us, reminding us that we are so very interconnected with each other, all around the world.



Like any 100 year old, MCC has been witness to so many world events, including pandemics, and also generational and technological changes; we've celebrated beautiful births and grieved tremendous losses; we've experienced some aches and pains, some regrets and mistakes, and we've had so many opportunities to share God's love and compassion in the name of Christ.



Mennonite Central Committee (MCC), a worldwide ministry of Anabaptist churches, shares God's love and compassion for all in the name of Christ by responding to basic human needs and working for peace and justice. MCC envisions communities worldwide in right relationship with God, one another and creation.

Mission statement– a reminder of who we are/who we want to be - owned by you and other Anabaptist churches, supported by many more ...

If someone asks me what does MCC do? I could answer – what North Star Mennonite Church at Drake does ... we financially support partners in 53 countries to carry out activities like education projects and water security projects.



(Nepal)

We invest in food aid and food security development projects with Canadian Foodgrains Bank, because we are people of the land, and the smell of healthy earth in our nostrils makes us want everyone in the world to be well fed.



(Uganda)

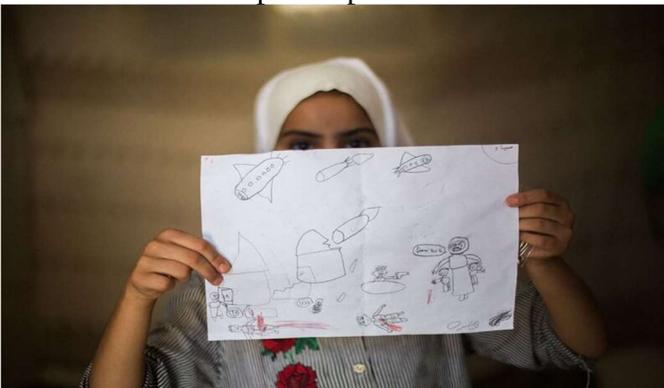
We send our own people to be Service Workers and SALT participants to walk alongside church and community partners around the world, because we believe that together with people unlike ourselves we will learn how to build healthy and peaceable communities.



We collect school kits and relief kits and sew comforters with our hands, for people we may never meet, because we hold this crazy notion that if we pour our love into these physical gifts, the people who receive them will know in some small way that they are not forgotten, they are not alone, even when they are facing displacement and great uncertainty.



We resell, reuse, repurpose our clothes and furniture and tools, and give all kinds of volunteer time and money to support our Thrift Shops, because we have learned over the decades that these Shops become community spaces where we learn to know each other, and where dollar by dollar we transform t-shirts and dresses and lamps and picnic blankets into funds for health clinics and trauma recovery workshops



(Lebanon)

and peace clubs



(Zambia)

and home reconstruction after earthquakes. We put on fun festival events like the Relief Sale and cook thousands of vereniki and sausage and gallons of smauntfat because we enjoy working together for a shared vision of a world where basic human needs are met and we can work together toward peace and justice. We support refugee families coming to Canada, walking alongside them as they enter our education and health and employment systems, listening to their stories and sharing our own, crying and laughing together as we recognize our common hopes and dreams.



(Canada)

What does MCC do? We do what North Star Mennonite Church people do, sharing God's love and compassion for all, in the name of Christ. We are so grateful for your generous partnership in this global ministry.

Why do we do these things? I'm going to offer three reasons this morning using three scriptures as starting points.



The first reason is our origin story. In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth – the light and the darkness, the waters and the sky, the land and the plants, the sun and moon and stars and

seasons, the birds and the fish, the animals and the humans. And God saw everything, and it was very good.

This story, at the very beginning of the bible, frames our understanding of the world and of God and of all the stories and invitations that follow. The world has a Creator. That Creator God is interested, not only in humans, but also in light, water, land, stars, trees, fruit, birds, cattle and fish. The created world bears the imprint and likeness and presence of the Creating God. The created world is interconnected. We all breathe the same air and drink the same water. The created world is God's world, and is good, is full of God's love and abundant goodness.

The creation story is one of the foundational stories that shapes our MCC ministry. We are moved to act by God's love, the Love that created the world, that continues to create in the world, the love present in people everywhere created in God's image.

There are incredible stories unfolding in our created world every day. Some of them are beautifully generous, reflecting the goodness of creation. Some are horrifyingly violent and ugly. Many stories are full of anxiety and unknowns, like the spread of the coronavirus through countries and communities.

And in the midst of these stories, just like 100 years ago in South Russia



where people were starving, we are called to be the church. What does it mean to be the church in our world that is both created in goodness and also full of broken stories?



(Syria)

This is Rev. N, pastor of the National Presbyterian Church of Aleppo in Syria. When Aleppo was under siege, Christians and Muslims died defending each other's places of worship, Rev N says, "This shows how we are living together, and how we are suffering together . . . during the crisis people forgot their religion and remembered one thing: we are all human beings." The building of N's church was destroyed in the siege of 2012. Yet through the siege church members continued to worship and to reach out to the community around them. Today, N's congregation continues to distribute monthly cash allowances and shipments of blankets, hygiene kits and warm clothes from MCC coordinated by the Fellowship of Middle East Evangelical Churches.



This image is an example of a kind of Japanese artwork called kintsugi. It is the art of repairing broken pottery with gold. The mended piece is believed to be more beautiful, more valuable, and stronger, because it has been transformed through suffering. The damage is actually made more visible, by filling the cracks with gold. Something that has a history, has suffered damage, can become more beautiful. Sharp shards can become beautiful and treasured, if they are cared for.

In so many ways this speaks to the activities that we have been able to do together over the decades through the presence of MCC. Together we have been glinting gold. We, ourselves, are wounded people, broken in various ways, but also mended, healed and full of grace. Together we have seen glinting gold in others. In Matthew 25, Jesus speaks about the least of these – the hungry, the thirsty, the strangers, the incarcerated ones, and invites us to see his face in their faces. And we have, again and again, seen beauty in pain. We’ve seen Jesus. We stand with the least of these because that is where we belong. The world may be broken but it is also our beautiful home, and God is here with us, love is here with us, loose in the world, flinging hope around.



Our second scripture story this morning (Mark 6:30-44) is the only story of Jesus that is recorded in all four of the gospels. It must be significant. We often call it The Feeding of the 5000, though that is a bit of a misnomer, because the number only refers to the men. With the women and children there may have been 15-20 thousand people! Let’s look at the story ...

It begins with an invitation to rest. Jesus invites his disciples to a quiet place, a solitary place. They’ve been pouring themselves out, haven’t even had a chance to eat. Does that ever happen to you? Jesus knows the importance of the rhythms of work and rest, of renewal and service.

But in this story, the retreat is short-lived, because the crowds followed. And, I love what it says in vs. 34, Jesus “had compassion on them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd.” That word “compassion” is a beautiful word. A powerful word. The root meaning of the word is “gut reaction.” Compassion means you would do anything for someone, it means you’re all in. Jesus’ head may have been calculating some minutes of sleep, but his gut/his heart is with the people. The heart/gut doesn’t calculate. You can’t dabble in compassion.

So, sit with this for a bit. Jesus had compassion on these people, Jesus still has compassion on people. Our Creator is a compassionate God, and you/we are the object of this compassion. God is all in for you, for us. Let that feed your soul. And maybe, we also need to be reminded of the power of compassion in our own lives. If God has put someone or something on your heart, give yourself to that. Compassion is one of the clearest signs of God at work.

Back to the story, which is taking on more urgency now. A massive crowd has gathered, it's getting late, the people are hungry. And Jesus says, "Give them something to eat." Well, the disciples start calculating ... "We'd have to work for a year to feed this crowd." But Jesus isn't interested in calculations. He isn't interested in what they don't have. He wants to work with what they do have. "How many loaves do you have? Go and see." "Five loaves ... and, um, here's two fish." More than just bread. They are learning about the mystery of God's abundant compassion. There's always something more, if you are willing to look for it. And now ... the miracle happens.

5 loaves plus 2 fish divided by thousands of people = 12

This is the math of God's compassion. It is the economics of God's kingdom. The final, beautiful touch of this story is the leftovers – "12 baskets." The baskets mentioned here are small personal baskets/containers that Jewish men were known for always having with them - like backpacks for school children. The story ends with this tidbit – that each of the 12 disciples – who had worked for so long, who had been hungry and tired when this started and then just kept on working to serve others – each of these guys got their fill of the meal too. There's enough for everyone. God's creation and compassion is enough.

As we look back over the 100 years of MCC's ministry, we humbly recognize so many moments of God's abundantly providing enough, as God works with what we do have.



(Some of you have probably heard me tell this story before, but I find it such a profound one.) Fawzia is an ethnic Yazidi woman in Iraq. They are a religious minority who have been targeted by ISIS and have moved out of fear of their lives. Fawzia is a participant in an MCC-supported beekeeping project. She received five bee boxes 2 years ago and now has 16 bee boxes which provide her livelihood. And not only that, she has taken two displaced families (25 people in total) into her home. When asked why she was willing to set aside so much of her home, her answer is simple. "Where would they go if I don't accept them?" Compassionately sharing food and shelter with others created in the image of God on this good earth.



This is our scripture card at MCC for this centennial year, from 2 Corinthians 5 which is our third scripture for this morning. The apostle Paul wrote these letters to the new Christians in Corinth, almost 2000 years ago. The group, interestingly enough, is made up of both Jewish and Greek converts to Christianity, two communities that didn't logically interact. The Jews prided themselves on their religious group identity and the Greeks just naturally knew they were superior to everyone else. But all these folks had somehow become intrigued with the gospel of Jesus Christ which Paul says is calling them to reconciliation across divides.

Now today some Christians have put Paul into a pretty small box and insist on interpreting his words about reconciliation within an individual, spiritual realm, as though his concern is only for our eternal souls, and not for our everyday lives in our very real and complex world. But when we look at Paul's words within his own historical context, we can see how courageously Paul is challenging the political and social structures of his time. Paul has experienced the Spirit of God moving and making deep connections across differences. The ekklesiai, the church, is to be a witness to a "beloved community" which crosses and challenges lines of race, and class, and gender. Everyone is invited. Everyone can belong.



(Germany, Peace House)

One of the Mennonite congregations in Germany runs the Peace House which supports refugees. Women from this congregation together with Muslim women refugees are forming friendships and quilting together, making blankets which MCC sends to Syria where these women are from.



(Saskatchewan)

When the COVID outbreak began in Northern Saskatchewan, the Office of the Treaty Commissioner put out a call for handmade masks to share among the northern communities. Randy Klassen, our Indigenous Neighbours staff person, put out a call to our blanket makers and sewers, and within 2 weeks, we had 1500 masks to share with northern communities.



(Saskatchewan)

Refugee sponsorship and newcomer settlement create new communities with an amazing diversity of languages and cultures, as you know well. This photo is from our summer day camp called Raise the Peace, which is intended to give children opportunities to build peace skills together, across quite an array of differences, to build communities of compassion & reconciliation.



As we look forward to MCC's second century of ministry, may we continue to build strong relationships beyond ourselves, creating compassionate and gentle spaces. And, like the children, it won't always be perfect, but it will always have the potential to witness to God's Spirit of amazing goodness and reconciliation.

These words of reconciliation from Paul continue to be a really radical message today in our own divided up world. Boundaries and borders created by people crumble when the Spirit of God blows through our lives and our world. Our small lives are redeemed into a large and expansive story of God's grace for all. Don't be afraid. It's God's world and God is making all of us new.



<https://mcccanada.ca/mcc-webinar-series>

For more stories from MCC, I invite you to join us for our monthly webinar series, featuring a wide variety of stories from projects around the world. Each month we explore a new topic, ranging from the impacts of our material resources to how MCC is responding to COVID-19. Experts in the field give us a behind-the-scenes experience, sharing their own stories. You are welcome to register for upcoming webinars and browse through past recordings. On Wednesday this week, we heard from our colleagues in South Sudan.



mccsk.ca/go-100

And, if you're missing the opportunity to support MCC through the annual Relief Sale, we've cooked up something unique for this year called Go!100 to encourage creative fundraising for families, individuals, and church communities and to help us replace some revenue lost with the temporary closure of our Thrift Shops. Check it out!

Friends, this is God's created world. And it is good. And in this good and broken world we are invited to receive and offer compassion and reconciliation. Thanks be to God.

Let's pray together:

Creator and Creating God, we give you thanks for this good day and for this beautiful church community in Drake. In these pandemic days, we are made more aware of our global interconnectedness, and we invite your Spirit to accompany us as we find creative ways to continue to reach out to vulnerable people here and around the world. Even as we physically distance, we hear

your call to share our loaves and fishes with all who need sustenance. Even as we care for our families and communities, we hear your call to reach across borders and barriers, perhaps now virtually or financially, to build caring relationships. Be with us, today and this week, as we live out our days as your followers. May your grace and peace be our guide. Amen.