



**Mennonite
Church
Canada**

Formation

Sermon

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What Makes Worship 'Mennonite'?

What makes worship Mennonite? You could go through some pretty serious contortions trying to answer this question. It's hard because Mennonites are a pretty diverse group of Christians, and yet they're part of a larger global church that we want to say is still somehow unified. A question like this asks us to identify a 'common distinctive': something that we all have that marks our particular character within a larger group identity. So on the one hand, the diversity within Mennonite congregations makes it tough to pin something down that's common to all of us. There are a whole lot of worship styles and practices even within the congregations here in our local area church. And then we have to look across Canada and into the United States - never mind around the world in all sorts of different contexts. By the time we've accounted for all the worship diversity in Mennonite churches, it's hard to know what's left that might be distinctively "Mennonite". Don't all Christians sing, praise, lament, read scripture and celebrate the Lord's Supper?

It may be that this is just a fine stalemate to arrive at. Because worship isn't something that's particularly Mennonite at all - it's a basic reality for all Christians. And I don't think we have to worry too much about finding a core distinctive that makes our worship different. It's a temptation for every minority and breakaway group: we find ourselves no longer Catholic, or Lutheran, or Anglican, or mainline Evangelical - and we feel this anxiety to show how we're different. We need to somehow justify all the schisms and splits that have made our existence possible. Mennonites are forever trying to identify core convictions, values and rhythms. And I suspect that these projects are sometimes driven by a lingering sense of anxiety. If we can't figure out what our

special contribution is, we might just disappear. And we're not about to let that happen. Take away that sense of anxiety and about the only thing we can say is that worship is Mennonite when it happens in a Mennonite church. In other words, worship is Mennonite when it's Mennonites who are worshipping.

Putting it that way maybe doesn't say much, but it does say something. Because the truth is that all worship draws on memories, traditions and understandings that have been shaped in particular ways by our experiences as communities of faith. All worship is embodied by a particular group of believers in their time and place. And Mennonite faith communities draw on particular sets of memories, traditions and understandings in their worship too. These resources may not all be the same from one congregation to the next, and we may struggle to find that common distinctive which holds us together as one faith family among others. But I think we are invited to explore what it means for this local community here to worship as a Mennonite congregation.

I had a teacher once who was often asked why being a Mennonite was so important to him. And his answer was simple. He'd say: Because 'Mennonite' is the only way I know how to be Christian! In the end, that may be the best reason to explore the particulars of any Christian tradition. Not out of an anxious search for common distinctives, but simply because it's here that we have discovered what it means to be a Christian. Why should we spend time investigating the 'heart of Mennonite worship'? Perhaps only because it is as Mennonites that we have learned to worship. So here we are, asking the question: "what makes worship Mennonite?"

Fortunately there are people smarter and more experienced than me who have given this question some thought. As a Mennonite Church Canada congregation we have a bi-national worship council with representatives from our denomination and Mennonite Church USA, which talks about the big picture questions when it comes to worship in our North American Mennonite churches. These are the folks who put together the materials and resources for this "Heart of Mennonite Worship" series we're presently working on.

This bi-national worship council has taken a stab at the question – they've identified five vital rhythms for us that they see at the heart of Mennonite worship. These aren't binding pronouncements, but are more like offerings that provide a starting point for conversation. And so the worship council has invited us to consider them, and to ask how they sound from within our particular community of worshipping Mennonites. Are these the same rhythms that pulse at the heart of our worship? Are there other rhythms that are important to us as well?

The Heart of Mennonite Worship: Five Vital Rhythms

1. Worship is our response to a loving God, known to us as Father, Son and Holy Spirit. In some ways this feels like a funny one to start with, because Mennonites don't talk a whole lot about God as Trinity these days. We talk about God as Creator, we talk about God taking flesh in Jesus Christ, and we talk about God with us in the presence of the Holy Spirit. But we don't think much about how the three persons of God are held together. We don't make a habit, as some churches do, of repeating early confessions like the Apostle's creed, which are built on Trinitarian affirmations. The places where we are most likely to name God as Trinity are in our hymns, and in some of our rituals. "Holy, holy, holy, Lord God almighty. God in three persons, blessed Trinity." Our hymns are marvelously rich theological treasure-troves, and they often keep us connected with forgotten parts of our theological traditions. Baptism is another moment when we formally recognize God as Trinity. We baptize believers in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit.

It's incredibly important that our worship begins here. Because we don't worship just any God. We worship a particular God whom we have known in the unity of these three. This is a God whose very being is made up of relationships, one to the other. And when God creates us in God's own image that means we are also creatures of relationship. We are created to be in

relationship with God, just as God exists always and forever in loving relationship. So we worship, opening ourselves to that relationship once more.

2. Our worship is rooted in, and shaped by, Scripture.

Here we're back on some more familiar Mennonite ground. We certainly understand ourselves to be a people of "the book." We try to take scripture seriously, and we encourage everyone in our communities to read the Bible. This year different church leadership groups at St. Jacobs Mennonite Church have been thinking about how we 'engage the text' well together as a faith community. At a time when we're more likely to gather over food, music or hockey games, how do we cultivate a community of biblical encounter and exploration? This scroll behind us has been a way of keeping our worship mindful of God's story in scripture and beyond. As God's people, we continue the scriptural story into God's future. We are shaped by the story of Jesus into the body of Christ. If our worship is not in living relationship with the scriptures, we forget who we are and who it is that we worship.

3. Worship creates a new community, uniting believers as the body of Christ.

This one is particularly challenging in generational communities like St. Jacobs, where many families can trace their roots in this congregation back a long ways. Sunday mornings can feel like a series of family gatherings – a time that keeps us connected with friends and relatives with whom we share some important interests. It may feel that way particularly to those coming from elsewhere, who don't have significant connections with the generations of this community. But the truth is that we gather in worship as a new community, a new family that's laid overtop of all the other relationships we may have had before. Jesus said that he came to set sons against fathers, and daughters against mothers. And the early Anabaptists of the 16th century knew this with painful certainty. The new community of believers in the body of Christ may not follow the contours of family or friends. We don't come to worship to hang out with like-minded folks. In worship we are gathered as Christ's body in an unlikely cross-section of motley characters. In worship we proclaim a new humanity of relationships made possible through the saving work of Jesus Christ.

4. Worship forms us as followers of Jesus.

Over the past number of years at St. Jacobs, we've tended to hook our Sunday School classes to our worship themes, and we've kept our eyes open for ways of spinning our worship out into related classes, activities and special events. I think this pattern follows from our own recognition of this vital rhythm – that worship is formative and

transformative. We have a Worship ministry here, as well as a Christian Formation ministry. But we've found that these groups can't help but work together. We've held joint conversations, joint programming and lots of back and forth.

In worship we discover who we are, and we are shaped into the people God calls us to be. One of the most obvious things that has marked most Mennonite communities over the years has been a commitment to non-violence in recognition and imitation of Christ's victory on the cross. This is not an easy witness to sustain in a world not only of violence, but of complicated grey areas. I doubt that many who have been witnesses to Christ's reign of peace would say that they are particularly peaceful people by nature. We know the temptations of righteous violence as well as anyone. A Christian witness in a violent world always begins with worship, and it has to go back there constantly. In worship we encounter the God of cross and resurrection once more. In worship we hear the promises of God who alone will bring about the peaceable kingdom into which we are called to live. In worship we are surrounded by brothers and sisters in the body of Christ who have committed to keeping us accountable to the people that we have become in Christ. It is worship that shapes and forms us as followers of Jesus.

5. Worship and life are intimately connected. This is maybe the fundamental Anabaptist insight about worship, and in some ways it holds all five of these vital rhythms together. We believe that faithful worship doesn't end when our church service does. Instead, worship spills over into all parts of life – into the other six days and the myriad of places of our everyday lives as Christians.

Worship draws us into a way of life, a discipleship of transformed character that leaves no corner untouched. In Acts 2 we read about the community of believers in Jerusalem in those first days after they received the Spirit at Pentecost. "All who believed were together," it says, "and day by day they spent much time together in the temple." That is, much time together in worship. And this abundance of worship carried over into all the ordinary things of daily life. They shared goods and sold possessions in support of those in need. They broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts. And they did these things, the text says, praising God all the while. And day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved.

We've been playing with the image of breath these last few weeks. We've imagined breathing in God's love in our worship and breathing it out again into the world. Breathing in and breathing out. We can't do one without doing the other. Worship is about mission. Worship sends us out. And at the same time there can be no mission, no sending, without a constant experience of worship. Worship that forms us as disciples, that calls us into a new community, that roots us in scripture, that draws us into communion with the triune God.

So what do you think? Are these vital rhythms that resonate with the heart of our worship here at St. Jacobs Mennonite Church as well? Are there any that you would say a little differently, or perhaps others that you would add to the list? This is an opening to conversation and exploration. An invitation to reflect on the heart of our worship - particular to this community of faith and yet united in the song of the whole church around the throne of God.