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January 2009, *Equipping* #92

Worship Resources for

Church Education Sunday

February 1, 2009

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Introduction

On Church Education Sunday we give thanks, pray for and emphasize the educational ministry of Mennonite Church Canada and USA through all of their partner schools from Kindergarten through to graduate school. For Mennonite Church Canada this includes: Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminary, Canadian Mennonite University, Conrad Grebel University College, Columbia Bible College, Menno Simons College, Mennonite Collegiate Institute, Mennonite Educational Institute, Menno Simons School, Rosthern Junior College, Rockway Mennonite Collegiate, Toronto Mennonite Theological Centre, United Mennonite Educational Institute, Westgate Mennonite Collegiate, and Winnipeg Mennonite Elementary Schools.

One of the goals of educational ministry in our schools is to encourage us to change and grow into faithful disciples of Christ. This growing happens as we pay attention to new information **and** to experiences of formation and transformation. The theme for this year's education Sunday comes out of Lois Siemens' recent experience as a graduate of Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminary. During her first semester, a professor casually remarked, "If you decide to come back," the professor said, "your identity will change." Lois did engage the risks that are part of learning and did come back; and her core identity was changed to that of a disciple of Jesus with a new sense of vocation. This change of her life's direction led her to wonder if learning could have shifted the way Jesus understood his vocation. Jesus' encounter with the Syrophonician woman, as recorded in Matthew 15: 21 – 28, suggests that this may be the case, and has therefore been selected as the focus of this worship resource. Lois is currently the pastor of Superb Mennonite Church, Kerrobert, SK.

Scripture Text: Matthew 15: 21 – 28, Psalm 119:33-40; Romans 12:1-2

Music Options selected from *Hymnal: A Worship Book* (HWB), *Sing the Story* (STS), *Sing the Journey* (STJ) and Bryan Moyer Suderman's CD, *God's Love is for Everybody*.

Gathering Songs: STJ 5 *Come and be light for our eyes* and STS 5 *Open my ears, open my eyes*

Praise Songs: STJ 13 *My soul is filled with joy*, STJ 72 *One is the body and one is the Head*

"For no one can lay any foundation other than the one that has been laid; that foundation is Jesus Christ." 1 Cor. 3:11

Faith Journey Songs: HWB 486 *God of our life, through all the circling years*, STJ 91 *Like a mother who has borne us*, STS 55 *Love the Lord your God with all your heart*, HWB 488 *Strong Son of God, immortal Love*, STJ 99 *You walk along our shoreline*, STS 54 *What does the Lord require of you?*, *God's Love is for Everybody: When You Learn to Follow Jesus (you will act a little strange)*, and *Disciples-In-Training*

Words by Bryan Moyer Suderman. Copyright 2001 Bryan Moyer Suderman, SmallTall Music. All rights reserved - lyrics reprinted by permission. From CD "God's Love is for Everybody," available from Herald Press and SmallTall Music (www.smalltallmusic.com). Music notation in "Song and Activity Guide for God's Love is for Everybody," available from SmallTall Music (www.smalltallmusic.com).

Response Songs: STJ 51 *As tranquil streams*, HWB 444 *Lord, I want to be a Christian*,

HWB 374 *O young and fearless prophet*, HWB 304 *There are many gifts*, STS 40 *We will follow*, HWB 226 *You are salt for the earth*

Suggestions for Visuals

In the foyer: You may wish to place several large obstacles in the foyer so people have to learn a different route to get to the sanctuary door. Jesus learned to see this woman in stages and as we make our way into worship we can get there in stages.

In the worship space: Placing a row of identical candles, and replacing one of the candles with a candle of completely different colour or shape or maybe a light bulb could symbolize the way the woman disrupted the flow of Jesus' day.

In the worship space: Along with the sermon option of telling stories, people could be invited to bring up an object or picture that represents a time when learning changed the way they thought of themselves.

Order of Service

OPEN MY EYES

Gathering/Call to worship

Use the call in HWB 735, or the following:

On this Sabbath day we gather with thankfulness for God's presence with us this week.

As we sat in the classroom or at the dinner table, as we stood in line at the bank or in front of the washing machine, as we prayed and wept, as we sang and cheered, God moved with us, teaching, guiding, prompting us to learn more deeply who we are, who God is and to follow Jesus with our whole being.

Our focus this morning is on Church Education. It is an annual Sunday where we remember our Mennonite Schools. Learning can be fun, and dangerous, even risky. When we act on what we learn it changes the way we think about ourselves. This morning let's begin by standing up and greeting each other by the major role that identifies us this year. E.g.: Hi, I'm a pastor; I'm a nurse; I'm a student; I'm an engineer; I'm retired; I'm a child, etc. (*congregation greet each other*)

The roles with which we identified ourselves have probably only been with us for a time. Throughout our lives we change roles for various reasons. Jesus grew up as a carpenter's son, but when he turned 30 his vocation changed and he started his vocation of being a Messiah. He called people who were fishermen and tax collectors to change and follow him with new vocations. Today we are going to explore education from the standpoint of how it changes us. Learning often leads us into new roles and situations that change us. We will meet the woman who may well have changed the way Jesus thought about his vocation.

Come and worship together with your brothers and sisters whom God calls friends,
to learn more deeply who we are
and what our true vocation is.

Prayer of Thanksgiving:

Gracious God, in this season of learning we are grateful for all those in our life
who have inspired us to learn,
encouraged us to go one step further and taught us new languages
or gave us mysteries to ponder.
Your Word is a light to our path, the glue that holds the atoms of the world together,
and the command by which we live.

Through your Word we learn what it is to be a disciple, a servant, a Christian.
Breathe a longing to be taught into our hearts
Turn our eyes toward all that is good and true
Move off the page into our life, our neighbourhood, our world,
that we may learn to pay attention and act on what we know to be true,
despite fear, despite ridicule, despite resistance.
For Your Sake and the sake of the kingdom. Amen.

TURN MY HEART

Children's worship

Option A: Learning something new. Invite a younger child to teach you something. It could be a hockey term, how to tie a particular knot, something that doesn't take too long or take too many props. Have the person teach you, then talk about your fear about learning something new. This is normal but hopefully you won't let being scared of something stop you from trying new things. It reveals to the children that anyone of any age, status or class can teach us something.

Option B: Interview someone from the congregation about what they learned this week. Preferably someone whose role in the congregation is not visible – like the janitor, or the person who unlocks the doors every Sunday or turns on the heat.

Prayer of Confession

Use the prayer in HWB 697, or the following:

Hearing God
We confess this morning
that our hearing this week has not been so good.
We have not heard your call to love our neighbour,
we have not heard your call to pay attention,
your call to pray
to obey
to turn toward your grace.
We pray for mercy and ask for your forgiveness,
knowing you are ready to pardon
while calling us to be accountable to the body of Christ
and learn from our failures.
Keep calling us O Lord
Keep calling us by name....so we may remember who we are
Keep calling us to learn....so we may find our way

Keep calling us to risk....so we may learn to trust
 Keep calling us to expand our vocation....so we may become disciples of Christ,
 Attentive to your word,
 Open to love
 Freed to serve.
 In Jesus' name, amen.

ENCOUNTER JESUS

Hearing Scripture: Set the context of the scripture in a few sentences. Because the way Scripture is read includes an interpretation of it, encourage Scripture readers to immerse themselves in the text beforehand; considering the emotions behind each response (see guiding questions in option 2) so their reading of it will draw others into the text as well. Consider these options for presenting and hearing God's Word:

Option 1: An individual, or a group, memorizes, and presents the story to the congregation. If memorizing is too challenging, it can be read, but readers should be familiar enough with the text for the story to come to life.

Option 2: One leader and the congregation present the text. With this method, the leader will invite the congregation to enter into the story by giving them the context and ask the congregation to repeat their lines with the same volume and intensity that the leader speaks them. The leader will read the whole text and motion to, or look at the groups as they are about to speak their lines, and will reflect the emotions of the different characters for each sentence. For this the leader will need to reflect on the following: How did Jesus enter the district of Tyre and Sidon? With what emotion will Jesus respond to the disciples? Is Jesus reacting to the disciples' reaction, to the woman's cries or his own feelings? How does a woman plead for the health of her child as she is trying to get Jesus' attention? When she has his attention but his reaction seems different than what she has heard? As he finally pays attention to her plight?

Divide the congregation into the following speaking parts:

- 1) Three or four women sprinkled throughout read the words of "**the woman.**" Invite them to imagine their only child is dying and they heard a healer has come to town and this is their only hope.
- 2) A large section of men or a group of teenage boys, who are sitting relatively close together, read the words of **Jesus**. Invite them to imagine that they have been given a job to do and they are going to do it – no matter what.
- 3) Everybody else reads the words of the **disciples**. Invite them to imagine how frustrated, tired, hungry and scared they are feeling as they travel in "enemy/gentile" territory.

Sermon Suggestions:

Option 1: Explore the text and Jesus' response. He slowly took the risk to engage in conversation with this Gentile woman. In the process, Jesus learned that his vocation could be broadened to include Gentiles before its scheduled time. This has some similarity to his Wedding in Cana experience where Jesus felt it was not the right time to begin his ministry – and yet he did. Teachers in the congregations may have felt like this when students have surprised and challenged their neat course outlines with new ideas or new approaches to take.

Jesus took a risk by engaging this woman in conversation. If Jesus felt called solely to the 'lost sheep of Israel' at this point, how might he feel about broadening his ministry to include Gentiles? Would it divert him from his calling to Israel as he responded to other needs?

How is this like the challenges our schools face as they seek to live up to their mission statements and respond to the Spirit's leading? As part of the sermon, invite a student and a teacher to share from experiences of taking risks and learning something new. How did they encounter God in these challenges? What were the risks and costs? What does it mean for a disciple of Christ to be open to the challenges and opportunities of this day and age?

Option 2: Explore the importance of learning for spiritual formation and our view of God. As Christians we are called to look for and learn from signs of God in our everyday experiences, to pay attention to God, and to seek first the kingdom of Heaven. What practices can help us learn to listen to God? In our schools? In our families? Our work? Our worship? (See Chapter 6 in John Ackerman's: *Listening to God: Spiritual Formation in Congregations*. Available for loan at www.mennonitechurch.ca/tiny/801.)

Option 3: Explore identity-shaping influences (media, others' expectations), etc. How do we find and nurture our identity as disciples? The woman had definite obstacles to overcome to receive what she hoped for from Jesus. Because she knew Jesus could heal her daughter she was persistent even when he spoke harshly with her. Eugene Peterson's description of this kind of faith is, "a long obedience in the same direction." How can we persist in keeping our focus on Jesus when many distractions and people call us to follow other ways?

GROW INTO DISCIPLESHIP

Response options to the sermon

Option 1: Encourage a tactile response that gets people moving, such as inviting them to knot pieces of string for all the fears associated with learning, and unknitting them as you acknowledge together the courage it takes to face those fears.

Option 2: Lead in a prayer where everyone begins by holding their hands in a fist. Invite them to silently or orally name the things they struggle with and find fearful or risky as they learn. Then, invite them to open their hands as they silently or orally name the things and people that give us hope, courage, faith.

Benediction/Sending: *Sing the Story* 158