

The Road to Emmaus: Expanding Our Circle

Luke 24:13-35 by Patty Friesen, April 23/23

The Road to Emmaus is a beloved resurrection text. As the New Interpreter's Commentary says, The Emmaus story is so full of wonderful material for theological reflection, preaching, and discussion that the natural temptation is to try to deal with too much at one time. One fresh insight well developed always seems more significant than a list of ten or twelve possible meanings. The Emmaus story, therefore, is a rich mine to which one should return again and again, bringing out one cartload of ore at a time.

So here is our cartload of ore today. Jesus still appears in the midst of our conversations when we are open-hearted and seeking. The story warns us, however, that the Lord may come to us in unfamiliar guises and unfamiliar people, when we least expect it, to open our minds and burn our hearts and expand our personal and congregational circle. We've been gathering around a fasha meal at church monthly to have our eyes opened and our hearts burn by conversation with someone who is different and not so different from us in sharing their life story - as we have opportunity to gather again this Wednesday at 5:30 with Lois Miller speaking about being gay, married and Mennonite. Conversions happen in relationships.

I'd like to introduce someone who has opened my eyes and burned my heart lately to expand my circle of understanding with regard to Mennonites and race. Slide - Sophia Samatar is an American Mennonite poet and author. She comes from a Swiss Mennonite Somali Muslim background. Her mother was an American Swiss Mennonite missionary in Somalia and her father, at great risk, converted to Christianity, married her mother and they moved to the US. Samatar, in her new book *The White Mosque* examines the challenges of her hybrid heritage of Mennonite mission and race relations.

“Somali and Swiss Mennonite? No one can make it work. If to be a Mennonite and a writer is to be a cultural hybrid (of the world and not yet of the world) and to be Somali and Swiss is to be an ethnic hybrid and to be a Mennonite granddaughter of a Muslim sheikh is to be a religious hybrid, then I am not so much a hybrid as a Rubik’s cube.” P. 131.

Samatar continues: I’m in Akron, Pennsylvania 2001. I’ve taken my puzzle of a self to a Mennonite Central Committee orientation, preparing for three years of volunteer teaching in Egypt. It’s time for the antiracism training, established to address institutional racism in MCC and the church... We divide into groups at round tables to talk about our experience of white privilege. A hitch, a pause, a prickle of dismay, a frozen moment. The leader is quick: he remembers that not all the volunteers are white. And so a handful of us, perhaps four or five are seated together and instructed to discuss how we do *not* experience white privilege. My husband and I exchange a rueful glance before walking to our different tables. Already I have a vague sense of having failed the assignment. At my table I sit between a Sudanese man and a Black woman from Philadelphia. It’s all too weird, our sudden isolation, our separate circle. Our experiences are so varied we don’t know where to start, and even if we could, we don’t understand what’s supposed to happen. (p. 131)

(Slide 2 - Mennonite woman). This is how the Nazi ethnologist Friedrich Kreiter lauded Mennonites - as the pure Aryan race because we had only intermarried with our own ethnic German kind. Unfortunately, this is still how most North Americans see Mennonites as an inbred ethnicity. Samatar says: Anyone who is waiting for a critical mass of Mennonite people of colour to transform Mennonite identity will wait until Judgement Day. This is because identity is not a question of numbers. It’s a question of storytelling. Even though the majority of

Anabaptists are now in Africa and Asia, they are still framed as *receivers*, rather than *creators*, of Mennonite stories, history and identity. (p. 133).

Samatar continues: My friend says, “So what if Mennonites think they are God’s gift to the world, if they teach someone English or build a damn, that’s what matters.” I can’t explain that the notion of white generosity to a dark and undeveloped world not only affects us abroad, it affects us at home, it infuses our schools and churches, it makes kids of colour at Mennonite colleges feel like interlopers, like charity cases.

How often I’ve been told that every Mennonite will look like me, once time has ushered in the blessed, post racial kingdom. Yet in my family’s experience Mennonite mission at best was unsuccessful in Somalia as there are no surviving churches. Islam is so intimately bound up with Somali identity, it’s almost impossible to separate the two. We might say ethnic Muslims, as we say ethnic Mennonites. So if you become Christian, as one convert explained, you are totally not Somali. You’re out. The extreme dislocation caused by conversion made it a rare occurrence. Previously, missions were planted in the colonial system trying to make Somalis more like us - more white and more Christian and more Mennonite, what the poet Patrick Friesen calls soft armies of missionaries. Now there has been a shift in Mennonite attitudes toward other faiths, causing a change in practice, from battling Islam to working with Muslims for peace. This is why, when you examine the history of Mennonite work abroad, a kind of split personality appears.

This split is actualized in the programs of the two major Mennonite organizations at work in the world: Eastern Mennonite Missions, which emphasizes evangelism, and Mennonite Central Committee, which pursues relief and development work. Mennonites have moved away from proselytizing and church-planting...to the extent that at a peace conference in Somalia

supported by Mennonite Central Committee, where various Somali factions were brought together to draft a new constitution, the drafts all stated that Islam would be the only religion permitted in Somalia, prompting Chantal Logan, a worker with Eastern Mennonite Missions, to worry that Mennonites were completely forgetting Somali Christians. Mennonite theologian J. Denny Weaver wrote, “Somalia has placed Mennonites in a difficult position, a theological mess. With Somalia, we are caught no matter what we do - whether we evangelize or develop in a religiously sensitive way. Maybe we shouldn’t have been there in the first place.”

Samatar continues...“If you asked me to name the strength of the Mennonite Church, I would say it’s the patchwork of people brought together in such different ways, by birth and faith and thirst, to build a house of effort and care. Yet ethnicity is a knot that’s hard to sever. When I look at Mennonite communities, it seems clear that those who are joined by blood retain a means of attachment even if they no longer have faith. (They may still call themselves Mennonite.) But those who are joined by faith alone can be detached by faith’s disappearance (and are no longer Mennonite.” It leaves a provocative understanding of what does it mean to be a Mennonite - faith or ethnicity? How can we separate the two? Let’s discuss that over the coffee hour.

Slide 3 – Mennonites of colour now outnumber white Mennonites in the world and like Sophia Samatar are changing the whole definition of Mennonite and Anabaptist worldwide. In our Canadian context of race relations, Sylvia McAdam, one of the co-founders of the grassroots Indigenous-led movement Idle No More is a law professor at the University of Windsor who is from the nēhīyaw Nation. She says she has developed a close connection with Steve Heinrichs, who held the Mennonite Church Canada Indigenous-Settler Relations position prior to the recent changes. McAdam is not a Christian and has deep concern about the way ongoing church

mission work continues “shattering Indigenous cultures.” At the same time, she sees a need for Mennonite church involvement with—and commitment to—Indigenous peoples. She did not always feel this way. One thing that changed her perception of the Mennonite church was participation in a Community Peacemaker Teams delegation to Colombia three years ago. It was a transformative experience for McAdam, and Heinrichs was the one who encouraged her to go.

There was a time when McAdam wouldn't have listened to Heinrichs. She was suspicious of Heinrichs when she first encountered him, but he kept showing up at Idle No More rallies and speaking at events. Slowly, over a period of years, McAdam warmed up to him. “He created a level of trust He created a Mennonite bridge that I have not been able to [build] with any other church,” she says. “He witnessed firsthand the incredible violence Indigenous people face by standing with us on the front lines. . . . He stood with us. . . . He stood in prayer.” “His work as an individual and as a representative of the Mennonite church has resounded gently and powerfully across these lands,” McAdam says. “Steve will always be my brother (Canadian Mennonite, June 6, 2022).

We are in a new era of mission and race relations where we realize we've got more to learn from people of colour than we have to offer. It is a time of humility and zipping our mouths and opening our ears and like Steve Heinrichs and Lois Miller, putting ourselves on the frontlines as allies. This is why several years ago our outreach committee changed their name from Mission and Service to Community Connections and has tried to bring education and conversation and awareness building as an important part of their work on the Emmaus Road. May we continue the journey of courageous relationship building in the months ahead.

Let us pray: Dear God, we open our minds and hearts to your healing presence as you journey with us on the Emmaus road, seeking peace with you in our souls and understanding and

reconciliation with our neighbours here in Canada and around the world. We are mindful of our communal sins related to racial superiority. We confess to God what has wounded us personally and has brought injury to others, that we may receive mercy and become for each other ministers of God's grace. Amen.