

Kern Road Mennonite Church

Northwest Elder Group

Reading report #1

September 14, 2008 – Who are we as readers of the text?

- we are diverse (chronologically, geographically, culturally, educationally, perspectives); service-oriented in personal & professional lives (students, persons with international experience)
- we like to gather around food,
- we're middle class,
- we're experienced in Bible study,
- we're interested in the church/spiritual life,
- we're open to hearing diversity in understanding of Scripture,
- we have various levels of interest in peace and justice issues;
- there's much we don't know about each other in this group;
- our group includes people who are new to this congregation and those who've been here a long time,
- some of us come from non-ethnic-Mennonite groups and some have ethnic-Mennonite backgrounds.
- we are people with a good sense of humor.

September 21, 2008: What do we hear in the text?

We opened with a hymn and a prayer. People in the group had a chance to share about an object that represented something about themselves. We read Luke 23, the crucifixion account, and were asked to write down a word or phrase that struck us. We then changed positions in the room, listened again and wrote down a question the text posed, or more information we'd like to have. We listened again and wrote down an invitation we sensed God giving us through this text.

Words/phrases that caught our attention:

- forgive them, he kept saying forgive them,
- he was crucified with the evildoers,
- "save yourself,"
- the people became still,
- innocence versus guilt,
- the place called "The Skull,"
- if he saved others let him save himself,
- they don't know what they are doing.

Questions this text raised for us, or more information we'd like to have:

- how often did crucifixions like this happen?
- how many people were there?
- we are now constantly surrounded by acts of violence (also see on the news) so that it becomes common place. There it struck them and they became still.
- what kind of people were there?
- what is the crucifixion? This passage doesn't really tell us.
- why three of them? Why Jesus with these guys? Was that random?
- who made the final decisions? Jews? Romans?
- why was Jesus in the middle?
- why didn't the gospel writer give more graphic details about the crucifixion?
- is "King of the Jews" a taunt, or did they believe it in some ways?

- is Jesus anticipating a resurrection? What's going on in his mind?
- why did they say "save yourself?" A taunt? Is the gospel writer trying to tell us something about salvation? Were they looking for a sign so they could believe?
- was this kind of taunting common place?
- are some of the people hopeful that he could pull off a last-minute miracle?
- were they bringing things beside sour wine? (vinegar an anesthetic)
- they didn't know what they were asking. What if he would have saved himself?
- why was Jesus' death required? Was it required?

Invitation we heard through this text:

- saving yourself from the surrounding evil.
- a need to understand God's purposes through suffering.
- I need to be more careful of what I ask of God.
- try not to be a person who is critical and judgmental, doesn't get caught up in crowd mentality.
- to be a forgiving presence in the midst of evil.
- to be on the journey of resistance/confronting evil like Jesus that took him to the cross.
- an invitation to become still, to ponder, to watch and listen.
- to be genuinely forgiving of people who are intentionally doing evil.
- the way we "save ourselves" is by giving ourselves for others.
- to not avoid suffering. Questions of chosen/unchosen suffering. Not called to be victims, but not try to insulate ourselves from suffering.

September 28, 2008: What's the experience of living in the text?

We opened with singing and Tom led in prayer. We went around the circle introducing ourselves and saying one thing we enjoy about this time of year. Several of us shared an item that represents who we are and our faith. We reviewed our conversation from last week about the Luke passage: phrases that caught our attention; questions we had about the text; and what God is inviting us to. Tom asked about further thoughts we've had since our conversation. Tom and Melanie shared that last week's conversation generated a 45 minute discussion on why Jesus died, theories of the atonement, how that relates to what the church has taught to people suffering (especially women in abusive relationships). Homer shared an experience of someone who rationalized his cooperation with a possible injustice by saying "my time has not come to suffer."

We read together a reader's theater version of the gospel story. Then we divided into five groups, each group taking a different character from the story: evil doer #1 and #2, the soldiers, the rulers, and Jesus. Each group was supposed to imagine the character's "back story" (What was the person's life like up to this point? What influenced them? etc.)

Each group reported back:

Evil doer 1:

Was Jewish. Angry at Jesus for not being the Christ he was hoping for. Not just an ordinary thief, an insurrectionist, maybe a Robin Hood, maybe a terrorist, a member of Al-Quida.

Evil doer 2:

Probably Jewish as well. Knows that he has earned his sentence. Not clear what he has done. Knew that Jesus was innocent. Insightful. Maybe two criminals and Jesus held in the same cell, talked with each other, overheard prison guards. Repentant. Strong sense that an innocent person should not be mocked. Does he truly believe Jesus is Messiah, or is his request a last ditch effort when he has nothing to lose?

Soldiers:

How did they get the position? Who appointed them? Probably each has his own story, his own background. Were the soldiers mimicking the rulers, or were they mocking on their own initiative. Not the lowest of the low. Were they ones that crucified Jesus? Or were they there to guard?

Rulers:

Are they Roman or religious rulers? Probably religious rulers. Irony of their comment: He saved himself. Are they acknowledging that he healed/saved others? What are their messianic expectations? Imagined the power structure. Their comments were more to the people than to themselves. They were saying: Hey people. You trusted this guy, but you see what happens to people like this.

Jesus:

He had the power to come down. What would have happened if he would have come down? How was this like other temptations he experienced? Why did he not do that? Was he being submissive to God? To the people? Many other times he could have been caught and crucified, but he disappeared, slipped through the crowd. This was an appointed time. Did he know that he would rise from the dead? He knew he would be with God eventually. Told other evil doer he would be saved. A role model for us to hold our faiths. Give up ourselves.

Discussion about looking at the text by imagining the “back story”:

- In scripture so often there’s more that’s not said than what’s said. So much of the back-story is what you fill in with your own story – it becomes your story.
- I’m struck by how much I assume I knew about this story that’s not in this particular version. Is it in the other gospel versions? Is it something I read in Bible story books? Did I just imagine it? Examining the scripture closely.
- I find it helpful to actually read the scripture. In my cultural context they always dramatized this story and tell it in a particular way. Reading the scripture closely is helpful
- We have different perspectives on why Jesus died. Was it because of what he did? Was it part of a grand cosmic design?
- I wonder how this story would look from people who are in prison?
- How would the story read if the criminals on either side of Jesus were really detestable (like a serial killer and a rapist?)

We sang together “O God, your word is a lamp to my feet”

October 5, 2008: What might our lives look like through the filter of this text?

We went around the table introducing ourselves and sharing our “quest” for the afternoon (there were 17 of us today). We read the scripture, Luke 23:32-43 translated from the Greek by pastor Rachel Miller Jacobs and Mary Schertz, NT Professor at Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminary. We looked at the story from the perspective of a quest: a story in which someone is seeking something vital for human well-being, there is an obstacle, it is overcome or not. We spent a few minutes individually reflecting on this story from the perspective of a quest.

Then we were asked to reflect on the question: what actions might this text call me/us to? (especially when read through the lens of the great commandment—love God and neighbor). If there is no evident call for action from the text, how might it serve as a lens for seeing our situation and evaluating our attitudes, beliefs and actions?

We shared together:

- Jesus’ quest is to fulfill his destiny to save mankind by sacrificing himself. The obstacle was that he had the power to save himself if he would have wanted.
- This was a temptation.
- Quest was death – evil doers, Jesus. Obstacle: the power to defy death, call to save himself. Forgiveness was how Jesus overcame the obstacle.
- I thought of it from the side of Jesus’ humanity. The obstacle was Jesus not wanting to die. He overcame it because he went through it.
- The quest to die with grace and dignity, to remain respect for all. Obstacle was constant mockery. He maintained attitude of forgiveness. For Jesus, the quest was to remain forgiving even in the face of injustice. For the second evil-doer, the quest was to not allow injustice to be perpetrated against others without speaking out.
- Jesus’ quest was to endure crucifixion and to stay faithful. The obstacle was physical pain, being abandoned, the taunting. He overcame the obstacle through love and forgiveness.
- Jesus faced the obstacle in the garden. Reaffirmed his mission. Overcame the obstacle already in the garden. Those who desired to kill Jesus and put his mission to an end failed.
- Only time Jesus’ speaks in this story is “Father forgive them,” and promising that the evil-doer will be with him in paradise. Don’t see the conclusion of either. Maybe it’s okay to be on a quest and not have the final answer.
- When you ask, who is the character that changes the most? That’s who the story is about. That was the second evil doer, who was seeking forgiveness. His own shame and pride were the obstacle. He fulfilled the quest by asking forgiveness from Jesus.
- Contrast between the two sinners.
- In all these perspectives, forgiveness is at the heart of our answer.

What actions might this call for from us?

- Can’t love without forgiving. Then need to share about the Savior who forgives. If you don’t feel God’s forgiveness, how can you possibly forgive others?
- Interesting, however, that Jesus doesn’t actually forgive. He asks God to forgive in a prayer. Why?
- Maybe it expresses even the difficulty that Jesus had in forgiving in this really hard time.
- In the trinity, the Father also suffering.
- These people were not asking for forgiveness.
- Be a presence of love/forgiveness. Be with Jesus in the kinds of things that got him into this situation.
- Striking how little Jesus says in this story. If Jesus is on this mission, why isn’t he interpreting this for people? He’s not preaching. Response only to one person who spoke to him. The one person who saw what was happening. The biggest challenge is this patience.