As is true many times when reading scripture, what we come to understand often depends upon where we start and where we end. As modern readers, we’ve taken the freedom to sometimes ignore context and pick our own starting and stopping points. And to a large extent, I’ve made that choice for you today. Mostly, I want to offer you words of encouragement in your life of discipleship, as individuals and as a congregation, so I’ve “picked and chosen” a bit.

What are some of the marks of discipleship as seen in the living church? I suppose we could identify such things as prayer, peacemaking, community, and accountability. We could find all these in the substance of our identity as a Mennonite and Anabaptist congregation. These marks aren’t necessarily unique to us as Anabaptist, Mennonite, Jesus-following people, but they are lived out in ways that are often given unique expression by us. And in our Anabaptist mythology, showing love to others, grace expressed in compassionate acts, and forgiveness regardless of merit, are high on our list of characteristics.

One of the most gracious and compassionate ways in which this has been expressed in our time is through the Mennonite Disaster Service. As some of us who have experience with MDS know, MDS is about much more than the removal of mud after a flood, the repair of a foundation after an earthquake, or the clean-up of debris after a hurricane or fire. MDS is about people ministering to people, about love shown in times of despair and hopelessness. It’s about grace expressed in compassionate acts and words to those who are homeless, often poor, and many times widows and strangers on the margins of their own communities. Less advantaged folks frequently live in places less desirable, more dangerous, with reduced access to services we mostly take for granted.

Years ago, historian Robert Kreider tried to define Mennonite Disaster Service: “There is something about MDS that is elemental, earthy, grassroots, celebrative, loving-accepting, confident, eager, Spirit-filled, and unsophisticated…It is like a third force in Mennonitism . . . We often talk about evangelism, witnessing, and social action . . .” [from, *The Hammer Rings Hope:  Photos and Stories from Fifty Years of Mennonite Disaster Service*, Herald Press, 2000, p. 173

To back up our mythology, and often our practice, our first impulse isn’t always to go to the Old Testament for examples of grace expressed in compassionate acts. And, although the prophet Zechariah didn’t know about MDS and therefore couldn’t use it as an example to illustrate his message from God, I think this is what he was talking about in chapter 7.

*"Thus says the LORD of hosts: Render true judgments, show kindness and mercy to one another; do not oppress the widow, the orphan, the alien, or the poor; and do not devise evil in your hearts against one another."* (Zechariah 7.9-10 )

A delegation had come to Zechariah to ask about the advisability of mourning and fasting according to the tradition which had begun with the destruction of the Temple. This was a fine tradition, a fine liturgy, a fine mythology if you will. The Temple was the place where the Lord met the Lord’s people. It was the place to offer sacrifices of repentance and receive forgiveness. It was the place to give praise to God for God’s many blessings. When the Temple was destroyed and most of the people killed, scattered, or removed into captivity, the whole system was upset and new traditions needed to be created. After 70 years of captivity, the remnant returned under the leadership of Nehemiah and Ezra to rebuild Jerusalem; meaning the wall around the city and the Temple.

Human beings need traditions to survive and thrive. When the delegation came to Zechariah to inquire about carrying on the long-held traditions, the temple was nearly complete. If Zechariah had been at an MDS conference, he probably would have just quoted back to the people something like a conference theme: **It's Time to Build!** What’s going on with these people? Why are they stopping to ask questions? **Build! Finish what you’ve started!** Here the Temple was almost finished and these people were wondering if they should be fasting and mourning like when the Temple was destroyed so many years before.

Zechariah was more diplomatic than I might have been. I would likely have told them to forget what’s past. It’s futile to let the past so dominate the present that what God is doing right now is lost to the memory of the past. No one is moving toward the future! Rather than telling them to forget what’s past, and to go out and help complete the current community building project, Zechariah listened and spoke the words given him by the Lord.

The answer consisted of three questions which were designed to provoke thought on the part of the questioners. And of course, questions require more thought. The people’s basic question was: "Should we continue to mourn and fast in the fifth month, as we have done for so many years?"

So, let's look at each of these answers one-by-one.

**Question: Should we continue to mourn and fast like we’ve done these many years?**

**Answer #1. Was it for me that you fasted?**

This is a question of motivation. Why have you been fasting all these years? Perhaps the fasting had become a rote ceremony that no one longer understood or knew how to infuse with relevant meaning. Even when in the presence of a nearly completed new Temple, a building that could engender new traditions and practices, the tradition of mourning for the old one persisted. Tradition empty of meaning becomes a manufactured occasion that reinforces a kind of numbness to the Spirit of God. Traditions often have a life of their own which defy explanation or understanding if examined closely. I assume we all have some kind of rituals / traditions / habits which inform our lives and who we are. How have these developed and why do you nurture them? Why do we honor such traditions if they no longer serve the purpose for which they were begun? Was it for me that you fasted?

**Question: Should we continue to mourn and fast like we’ve done these many years?**

**Answer #2: Do you eat and drink only for yourselves?**

Eating and drinking is just the flip side from fasting and mourning. Eating and drinking satisfy human need just as fasting does. Fasting can make you feel good or at least bring relief from guilt, somewhat like eating and drinking and the accompanying celebration. Satisfaction of self is not an adequate reason for fasting and mourning, or eating and drinking. Both have a larger purpose.

Remembrance of loss or significant events should provoke a larger response than satisfaction of self. Just like mourning, celebration helps to keep a balance in our life. One of the purposes of celebration is to remember those things which motivate us, rather than simply to make us feel good in the moment. Fasting and mourning, eating and drinking, have larger purposes.

Do you eat and drink just for yourself?

**Question: Should we continue to mourn and fast like we’ve done these many years?**

**Answer #3: Haven't you heard the answer already . . . many times . . . long ago?**

The name, Zechariah, means "God remembers," or "God has remembered." The implication of this answer, "Were not these the words that the Lord proclaimed by the former prophets?" is that we should, like God, remember as God does.

The issue in chapters 1-8 is the completion of the Temple. The people are asking about fasting in remembrance of the old Temple. And God responds, "Don't you remember why the old Temple was destroyed? Do you remember the original reason for the mourning and fasting?

The prophets have been clear. Listen again. *Render true judgements. Show kindness. Do not oppress. Do not devise evil in your heart.* The Temple was destroyed because of fundamental moral and religious failure with regard to the issues enumerated by God through the prophets.

Pope Francis put it quite succinctly this past week. “*The 86-year-old Argentine acknowledged his point, saying there was “a very strong, organized, reactionary attitude” in the U.S. church, which he called “backward.” He warned that such an attitude leads to a climate of closure, which was erroneous.*

*"Doing this, you lose the true tradition and you turn to ideologies to have support. In other words, ideologies replace faith,” he said.*

*“The vision of the doctrine of the church as a monolith is wrong,” he added. “When you go backward, you make something closed off, disconnected from the roots of the church,” which then has devastating effects on morality.*

*“I want to remind these people that backwardness is useless, and they must understand that there’s a correct evolution in the understanding of questions of faith and morals,” that allows for doctrine to progress and consolidate over time.* (unquote)

The people of Zechariah’s time were remembering only part of the past. They were remembering without context and understanding. And the traditions established to provoke and enliven the memory were becoming ideologies. Zechariah is really telling them that a proper understanding of the past can bring renewal.

Remembering the form of the tradition isn’t enough. We can intellectually know the words, "Forgive others as God in Christ has forgiven you," or "Love one another," or "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you," or "Service in the name of Christ." We can mimic compassionate actions, but until we understand and translate that understanding into compassionate love by our acts, we’re promoting empty tradition.

In Katie Funk Wiebe's book, Day of Disaster, one story she tells is of the June 9,1972 flood in Rapid City, SD. Marie McKieman speaks of truly compassionate actions graciously given to her and her family.

“The flood hit us like two by fours," Marie said, "and then the raindrops came down in torrents so that you could not see three feet away. Soon we had water rushing into our home and business. Where there had been twelve supports in our basement, there were in no time only three. We were helpless, despairing."

“Sid Reimer and his men found the McKiemans, 'at the end of our rope,' as Marie put it. 'They tied a knot in the end of it, and we were able to hang on. All they did was roll up their sleeves and give us their hearts.’” . . . “At the end of the summer, the McKiemans gave Sid and Helen Reimer two candles. One had been used the night of the flood. A note attached said, ‘This candle was used during the flood. It is given in memory of the spiritual darkness we have lived in. You Mennonites have lifted us out of this darkness. That was your greatest gift. May God be with you always.’”

Extreme circumstances offer an opportunity to examine motives; be that a return from exile and rebuilding of the community or a flood or fire that fundamentally destroys a community. Deep inside we realize that we can’t cope alone. We need someone to tie a knot at the end of our rope. Zechariah used the three question / answers to tie a knot for his listeners. Check your motives. Make sure what you do is motivated by purposes larger than self. Remember the essential obligations of scripture; to “render true judgments, show kindness and mercy to one another; do not oppress the widow, the orphan, the alien, or the poor; and do not devise evil in your hearts against one another."

God tells us today to not let service and compassion and expressions of love become rituals empty of the Spirit. We’re called to remember what God has done in the past, both for us and others, and to act in the present in ways that exemplify the love of God. We’re called to roll up our sleeves AND give our hearts. We’re called to be the knot at the end of the rope for those around us; not for our own satisfaction but because this is the desire of God for us as modeled by Jesus Christ.

Bill Braun

“The knot at the end of our rope”

September 3, 2023

Reedley First Mennonite Church

Zechariah 7:1-10

Adapted from:

11 February 1996