

# Receiving before responding

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**G**etting out into the natural environment is a ritual that rejuvenates our family. Each summer, we load up our tent-trailer and head off to do some camping. Getting everything ready takes time and effort, and packing involves an inevitable grumpiness. But when we finally arrive and settle in among the trees, we remember

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why we go to all the effort. Camping gives us life. We are nourished by fresh air and lakes, by the absence of phone and e-mail. My wife and I notice that our children learn to slow down and enjoy one another again, and we are all reminded of the simple gift of being alive together on God's good earth.

Like camping, worship for our family of faith marks a coming back to the place that gives us life; through it we return to the source of our joy and sustenance. But we still don't always find it easy to get there. Preparing takes work, and some of us have been

known to experience bad moods as we try to get to church on time. But when we've arrived and settled in, we remember why we make the effort.

## **The practice of noticing**

This year, I have been praying with the spiritual exercises of St. Ignatius Loyola, and one of the gifts I have received is a greater awareness of the currents of grace in my life. I've been learning to pay attention to the presence of God and to give thanks. God is indeed present and has always been present in the world and in my life. Spirituality is simply the practice of noticing. There is no magic formula or secret knowledge. The main thing is making the time to be still.

The whispers of the Holy Spirit become recognizable when we regularly set aside time to be quiet and listen. Letting all the extraneous thoughts die down takes patience. A large part of prayer for me has been learning to let go of my many thoughts. They seem so important at first, so serious and even holy, but I'm discovering that they are mostly a projection of the ego. They are a way of trying to hold onto myself. More often than not, they create interference for the still small voice of God's Spirit, who beckons me beyond my small self into a more gracious and expansive self in Christ.

Worship, like prayer, is about attending to the graceful presence of God. In worship we notice God's presence and we respond with praise, confession, and commitment. *But we need to receive the presence of God before we can respond to it.*

### **Jesus is not a Swiss Mennonite**

The biggest challenge in my own prayer life has been to simply receive. I always seem to need to do something. I can still doubt whether God will be present to me in the absence of my appropriate response. During one session of prayer, I entered into a conversation with Jesus and said to him, "Suppose I decided not to do anything. Would you still love me? Would you still choose to be with me?" The response I received was an overwhelming Yes!

To my Swiss-Mennonite ears, such an unconditional response sounds irresponsible. But my spiritual director reminds me that Jesus is not a Swiss Mennonite and that it would be a good idea to trust his voice and receive his company. It has been a deep learning to allow myself to simply sit and receive in prayer, apart from any effort on my own. I am coming to see that to be able to respond genuinely and freely, I must first of all receive.

For Anabaptists, a central theological contribution has been an insistence on the role of human response in the life of faith. We have always maintained that for faith to be real, it needs to be expressed outwardly, in our behaviour. Radical reformers such as Balthasar Hubmaier liked to quote the book of James, which notes that faith without works is dead. It is not enough to say we believe in certain doctrines. Menno Simons taught us that true evangelical faith is demonstrated in action; it feeds the hungry and clothes the naked. If we heirs of Menno are known for any-

thing, it is for our practical acts of service through agencies such as Mennonite Central Committee and Mennonite Disaster Service.

Theologically, we maintain that God saves us by grace, but in practice we spend most of our time and reflection paying attention to our response. What should we be doing? How should we be living? What would Jesus do, and what does that mean for us? Faith for Mennonites is generally summarized as following Jesus. We baptize adults, because only adults can respond with authenticity to the call to follow. Baptism is commonly described as the commitment that we make to God and to the church.

Likewise, the Lord's Supper is often framed in terms of our response. We have traditionally celebrated it as a pledge of our communal accountability and commitment.

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Menno Simons reminds us, "If you would be a proper guest at the Lord's table, and would rightly partake of his bread and wine, then you must also be his true disciple, that is, you must be an upright, pious and godly Christian. Therefore prove yourself. . . ."<sup>1</sup>

This theological conviction about the role of our response in the life of faith may constitute our greatest strength, but it is also our greatest weakness. For faith is only secondarily human response; it is first of all receptivity to what God is doing. When we focus so heavily on our response, we tend to minimize God's activity, even if we don't intend to. We pay too much attention to ourselves and ironically end up responding more to our own egos and insecurities than to God. If we are not careful (and we are not always careful), our life of faith is reduced to a rationally based ethical program, or to a generic experience of human community. We lose sight of what God intends faith to be: an ongoing relationship with a living and gracious Spirit.

### **Worship saves us from self-preoccupation**

Good worship is crucial for helping us avoid the pitfalls of our tradition. Good worship opens opportunities for us to consciously receive the presence of God. It saves us from our preoccupation

with ourselves and brings us back to the source of our life together. Worship is a welcome time each week to take a break from our own agendas and ideas. We are invited to recede into the background, to intentionally move out of the way and allow God to meet us anew.

What follows are a few simple suggestions for how we might experience this kind of worship more often.

***Proclamation of the Word.*** In Mennonite tradition, we have reacted against a sacramental understanding of the faith that sees divine presence conveyed through substance and ritual. We have agreed that God is present in the preaching of the Word, in the moving of the Holy Spirit within the human heart, and in our communal reflection on and response to the Word. As a result, our worship has been constructed more around the sermon than the Eucharist.

Recognizing that God speaks to us through the Word, we do well to ask ourselves how we are paying attention to this part of the service. How do we celebrate the intervention of the Word? How do we prepare for it? How do we receive it? On a recent sabbatical, I was impressed by the rubrics around the readings and the homily in more liturgical traditions. Dramatic signals and responses—processions, gestures, changes in posture—help people pay attention. They hear invitations to prepare and respond.

In my congregation, I have begun to introduce the scripture readings with a silent prayer which invites the congregation to be still and await the reading. We are reminded to anticipate God's presence in the Word. This silence creates a small space of emptiness in which we remember that we are not the source of grace: it does not come from us. Then we hear the readings, which are best received when they have been rehearsed beforehand and are conveyed with loving clarity. After the reading of the scripture, we generally sing an Alleluia or a Gloria. Through these observances, we prepare and give thanks for the good news that comes to us as a gift. Again after the sermon we spend a few moments in silence before responding by singing a hymn.

The point of these rituals is encounter with God's presence through the Word. This part of worship is our weekly corporate meeting with the divine! Although early Anabaptists stressed human response, they also emphasized the grace of God that is

present in the reading and preaching of the Word. It is the Spirit that illuminates the scripture and grants the gift of faith. “It is the Spirit that makes us alive,” says Balthasar Hubmaier, “and the Spirit comes with the Word.”<sup>2</sup> Menno describes the “preaching of the word in the power of the Spirit as the only right and proper Seed from which truly believing and obedient children of God are born.”<sup>3</sup> Our very existence as a community of faith and any response we offer to God flow from God’s initiative toward us through Christ. We love one another only because God has first loved us.

Although the Word is theologically central for Mennonites, in our common worship practice it is often lost in understatement and stumbling. We experience the readers’ proclamation as routine or boring; there is little drama in it. Some people peruse the bulletin during this time. But if the readings are handled carefully; if there are gestures, preparation, and response; and if the sermon follows with an orientation toward the text and God’s initiative, then this time in the service can become sacramental in the best sense of the word. It can open a space for the Spirit to touch and transform us.

In our congregation, we have been following the readings from the Revised Common Lectionary, for a couple of reasons. First, the fact that the texts are given offers the discipline of focusing on

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something other than our own favourite themes. Second, the readings connect us with the wider body of Christ, reminding us that we are part of a larger whole. We need all the help we can get in being drawn beyond our limited perspectives.

*Sharing joys and concerns.* Too often in Mennonite worship, the communal sharing time rivals scripture reading and preaching for

the place of greatest importance. What is the center of gravity in your congregation’s worship? Which elements of the service radiate the greatest energy and attention? When are people most alert and engaged? If we answer that it is during sharing, we must ask—from a theological perspective—how this time helps us attend to God’s presence. How does it serve the purpose of worship?

Such sharing has value, and we certainly experience God in the events of our lives, but sharing time can also have a way of subtly drawing attention away from God and onto ourselves. Once again, we are wrapped up in our own concerns and worries, the very things that constitute the greatest obstacles to contemplative prayer. It's not that such concerns are wrong, but we need to notice where they focus our attention.

In our congregation, we invite people to bring joys and concerns just before the congregational prayer, placing these matters within the setting of a communal prayer addressed to God. When sharing is disconnected from prayer, it becomes an exercise in catching up on community news. If we are to thrive and grow as communities of faith, the focus in worship will be on God and not on us. We must keep this basic issue of focus before us as we plan and lead worship.

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**Baptisms and funerals.** Sometimes our baptismal services spend more time reflecting on the candidates and their response to God than on the gracious movement of the Spirit in their lives. Testimonies may recount activities and achievements, as if to vouch for the candidate's worthiness. When this happens, we let our response to God eclipse the gracious activity of God in our lives.

Funerals may also slide in this direction. Instead of celebrating the currents of grace in the life of the deceased, instead of proclaiming the hope we share in Christ, funerals can become celebrations of the departed sister or brother, complete with a listing of all their achievements. The activity and purposes of God are unwittingly marginalized.

**How worship begins.** Whenever we gather to worship, a call to worship or an invocation enables us to begin most effectively, by signalling the appropriate focus. Because we live most of the time in a culture preoccupied with the ego and the small self, we all need to be reminded of how the culture of Christian faith is different. Each week, we need to hear once again why we have come. We need words that are direct and concrete to usher us into an alternative time and space.

In worship we come not to succeed or to be noticed, not to achieve or to prove ourselves. We come rather to lose ourselves. We come to die to all our petty concerns and fears and to be submerged once again into the being and the story of God, so that we may rise to new life in Christ. We come to return to the source of true joy and sustenance. The call to worship is a weekly ritual reminder. It is the bell that beckons us home again, to our true selves and to the eternal kingdom, which is present but still hidden. A simple and sincere prayer—addressed to God, accompanied with music or silence—is most appropriate. The resonant tones of a bell may also move us to the appropriate focus.

## **Conclusion**

Christian worship is a counter-cultural activity, and it requires clear signals and rituals if it is to draw us out of the culture of narcissism. Preparing ourselves for worship requires disciplined work. To the outsider, it may seem a strange and unnecessary activity. Like packing up for camping, it sometimes gets laborious. We may even feel grumpy about it, when it asks us to make an effort to step out of ourselves and our ordinary activities. But when we finally arrive and settle in, we will surely remember why we have come.

## **Notes**

<sup>1</sup> Walter Klaassen, ed., *Anabaptism in Outline* (Kitchener, ON, and Scottdale, PA: Herald Press, 1981), 209–210).

<sup>2</sup> C. Arnold Snyder, *Anabaptist History and Theology: Revised Student Edition* (Kitchener, ON: Pandora Press, 1997), 231.

<sup>3</sup> Russell L. Mast, *Preach the Word* (Newton, KS: Faith and Life Press, 1968), 2.

## **About the author**

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