***Singing with Our Ancestors: Radical Reformation Sunday***

**Co-Pastor Susanne Guenther Loewen**

**NPMC – October 27, 2019**

*Scripture: Deuteronomy 6:1-9; Hebrews 12:1-3*

*Hymn: HWB 407 - We are People of God’s Peace*

Have any of you heard of Jeremy Dutcher? He is an Indigenous, two-spirit classical tenor from the Tobique First Nation in New Brunswick who has recently won both the Polaris Prize and a Juno award for his first album. So what is so special about this album? Well, it was inspired by 110 year old recordings of his ancestors on wax cylinders that Dutcher found at the Canadian Museum of History. Dutcher spent several years transcribing these songs in his traditional Wolastoq language and composing his own contemporary interpretations of them. And each song contains a selection of the original wax cylinder recording of the song as well – meaning that this is an album on which Dutcher is literally singing with his ancestors, his own, living voice blending with these voices from over a century ago. It’s a powerful work of art, and an act of love for the Wolostoq language, which is on the brink of extinction. And Dutcher himself is wonderfully articulate in interviews. When he talks about why he made an album like this, he talks about it in terms of the past and keeping history and traditions alive, but he also, interestingly, speaks about the future. In his words, he writes music “to honour those who have gone before, and I lay the footwork for those who have yet to come.”[[1]](#footnote-1)

Today, as you may know, is Reformation Sunday, but for we who are part of the Anabaptist-Mennonite tradition, our roots are found in the Radical Reformation. Dutcher’s approach to music struck me as profoundly relevant for how we approach our own spiritual tradition and our own relationship with our ancestors in the faith. What are the ways that we too continue to sing with our ancestors, as it were? And what are we doing to teach those songs to the generations that follow?

Our Scripture passages for today also have this kind of double vision that looks back at history and forward to the next generations. In Deuteronomy, we have talk of God as “the God of your ancestors” honouring the promises made to those who have come before (6:3), alongside the responsibility of teaching the commandments and ways of God to the “children and children’s children” (v.2, 7). So we hear “The Shema” (named after the first words of it in Hebrew) which is the central prayer of the Jewish faith: “Hear, O Israel: The Lord is our God, the Lord alone. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might.” These are the words which the Israelites are to keep in their hearts, bind on their bodies, write on their doorposts, and, of course, “Recite them to your children and talk about them when you are at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you rise” (v. 6-9). These words – loving God with all one’s heart, mind, and strength – are to be before the Israelites at all times, steeping their lives in God’s call to love. That is the way that faith gets passed down to the children – not by accident. The word tradition comes from a root meaning “to hand down.” So when we think of our relationship to our faith tradition, we can think of what we hand down or pass on to the children in our lives.

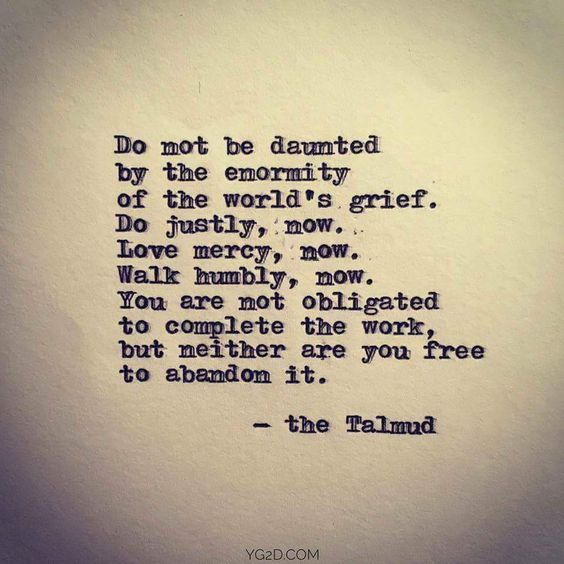
Sometimes we speak of this as “passing the torch” or “passing the baton” – which brings us to our second Scripture passage. Hebrews 12 famously compares the life of faith to a race, speaking of “run[ning] with perseverance the race set before us” (12:1b) (and this, by the way, is probably the only time you’ll hear a sports analogy in one of my sermons!). The apostle Paul here has this famous and beautiful image of those who have gone before as a “great cloud of witnesses” that surrounds those of us currently running the race. The analogy is of our ancestors in faith as a great crowd in the arena, cheering us on! What a comforting and encouraging way of thinking about the ongoing presence of those who have gone before us. And maybe I can stretch the analogy a bit and speak of this cloud of witnesses also as a choir of ancestors that surrounds us as we take up singing the song of faith today.

Now this morning we are quite literally singing with our ancestors. As you may have noticed, the words of the hymn, “We Are People of God’s Peace,” were written by none other than Menno Simons, after whom our Mennonite tradition is named.[[2]](#footnote-2) So when we sing these 500-year-old words about our identity as people of peace, we are singing with our ancestors in the faith in ways that still shape who we are and how we live. And I love the line about “Jesus Christ, the Prince of Peace, confidence will give us … Christ will never leave us.” To me, that resonated with Paul’s image of the cloud of witnesses – those who surround us and encourage us on our way.

But I don’t want to suggest that carrying on a tradition is a simple matter of imitating the past or thinking that those who came before had all the answers. It’s more complicated than that. To use Menno himself as an example, if you read his writings you notice that at times, his attitude is painfully anti-Semitic. Are we, as Menno-nites, to simply follow in his footsteps and carry on that aspect of his legacy? No, of course not! So we see that carrying on a tradition actually means carrying on the best of a tradition, that which continues to be life-giving, rather than repeating the mistakes of those who have come before us. This more complex dialogue with the history of our faith tradition is actually how we best honour our ancestors, not by unthinking repetition of the past, glaring mistakes and all. Think of Jeremy Dutcher, who didn’t just repeat what he heard on those old recordings, but composed something brand new out of ancestral songs, in continuity with and yet beyond what his ancestors did.

Maybe this way of looking at it makes us uncomfortable, and maybe that’s because of what it means for our own legacy with the children in our lives. It makes it a really vulnerable thing to hand down this faith tradition as we understand it, knowing that those who come after us may change it, or see mistakes in how we lived it, or make it their own in ways we can’t foresee or control. And that happens already with so many other aspects of parenting or caring for children, doesn’t it? Healthy parenting is not ultimately about controlling or micromanaging children, but rather empowering them to become their best selves and make their own choices. When it comes to faith, we can speak to what we find meaningful and life-giving and difficult in the faith tradition and encourage them to participate in the community of faith, but as they grow, we also have to be willing to listen to them, to be shaped by the experiences, insights, and critiques of their generation. This is one of the gifts of the church, which remains one of the few institutions in our society in which inter-generational relationships and community are possible. And our life together is enriched by that ability to be vulnerable and genuine with one another across the generations.

So as we remember the songs of our ancestors in faith, and take up singing with them today, perhaps we can think of it as singing in harmony with them, perhaps not in unison. We remain in continuity with that great cloud of witnesses who came before as they continue cheering us on. And we look to the children among us for their strength to take up the song and their wisdom to know how to sing it in their time – time which includes grappling with such things as the climate crisis and how to foster right relationships between Indigenous and settler peoples, as we heard from the youth.

 I want to close with a quote from the Talmud, the Jewish biblical commentaries, which I have used before. It speaks of the way we do justice and love mercy in continuity with those who have come before and entrust those who come after to continue where we leave off:

AMEN

1. <https://www.cbc.ca/news/indigenous/national-jeremy-dutcher-interview-polaris-prize-wolastoq-1.4820825> [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. See *Hymnal: A Worship Book* # 407. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)