

What's in your hands? (Emmanuel Mennonite Church 10.16.22) MJCF Sept. 25, 2022

Exodus 4:1-5, John 6:1-14

“What do you have in your hands?” is the theme suggested for the International Witness Sunday scheduled for next month. It is a time when Canadian churches focus on various church ministries happening internationally. Since Rie and I are now serving here in Japan we were asked to submit a video where we talk about what's happening over here. In the short video I reflect on today's theme. Later in the message, we'll take a look. The two scripture passages that were read today are both parts of stories that connect with this theme statement. The first is from the Old Testament story where Moses is tending sheep, and God speaks to him through a burning bush. God calls Moses to go confront Pharaoh, the leader of Egypt, and lead the Israelites out of their slavery. Moses asks God, “What if they do not believe me or listen to me, but say, ‘The LORD did not appear to you.’” God then tells him, “What is that in your hand?” Moses replies that it's a staff. God tells him to throw it on the ground, so Moses does, and the staff becomes a snake. This would be the first of many miracles that God later does through Moses, in order to show everyone that God is ruler over the entire world, stronger than any human being, and more powerful than any of the so-called gods that the Egyptians believed in. There are different levels of meaning in this larger story, but I'd like to focus on meaning of the staff.

One thing it could signify is the strength and comfort of God. For example, in Psalm 23, the writer says “Your rod and your staff – they comfort me.” Shepherds use their staff to keep the sheep from going astray, and they can also use the staff to fend off wolves who would otherwise harm the sheep. We are like sheep and God is like the shepherd, taking care of us.

Another aspect of the staff is that it was something quite common, nothing special, often used as a walking stick. When Jacob cheated his brother Esau out of his blessing by deceiving their father, Jacob had to run away, fearing his brother may try to kill him. Years later, Jacob becomes prosperous, with a large family and many animals. In Genesis 32, verse 10 he prays, “I am not worthy of the least of all the steadfast love and all the faithfulness that you have shown to your servant, for with only my staff I crossed this Jordan; and now I have become two companies.” He started out poor, with his staff as his only possession, but now God had blessed him with prosperity.

So, getting back to the story of God calling Moses, we see God working through what Moses had with him. Moses needed no special equipment. He didn't need to go searching for all kinds of rare objects in order to magically channel (*focus*) God's power and do a miracle. God worked with the simplest most ordinary thing that Moses had – his walking stick, or shepherd's staff. It got me thinking, “What are ways that God might work with us?” God can work through even the things we see as ordinary, insignificant, or small. The story of God calling Moses is filled with Moses making excuses: You want ME to go confront the supreme leader of Egypt? Why would they believe me? And, I'm not even good at speaking! Can't you find someone else?... I can understand his reluctance. It seems as if God maybe chose Moses because he wasn't an amazing person with special abilities. That way, people could more easily see that it was God at work in him.

With the story of Moses, God works through an ordinary person and the “ordinary” staff he had in his hand. In the story of Jesus feeding the 5,000, what do the disciples have in their hand? Here, they find a boy who's offered his lunch of five loaves of bread and two fish. If that's all they could come up with to feed 5,000 people, it's pretty embarrassing!

Everything about the situation looks very insignificant. The loaves and fishes are offered by a boy. In the original Greek, the word could also mean “junior”. Whether the boy was very young, or if he was a young man, he still had lower status as someone labeled a “junior”. The loaves of bread would likely have been small, possibly like pita bread. They were made with barley. Barley was about 1/3 the value of wheat, and was grown more for animals than for people. Barley bread was the poor person's food. And, what about the two fish? They would not have been very big. The ordinary

Greek word for fish (Ichthys) is not used here. Instead, the word (Opsaria) is used, meaning “small fish” that are often salted and used as a relish and eaten with bread. So, these loaves and fishes were truly a small offering from a person of low status in society – not much to work with! But, Jesus’ gives thanks, knowing what God can do, and in his hands the food is multiplied.

Rie and I tried to think about what is happening here in Japan. What do the Tokyo churches have in their hands? In a moment I’d like to show the video we prepared for the churches in North America. I speak in English on the video, so before we see it, I’ll first share in Japanese what I’ll be saying in English.

I remember hearing about one conference in Canada that would close a church if the membership dropped below 65. In Japan, the situation is very different than in North America. The Tokyo Area Fellowship of Mennonite Churches are a group of five churches with the largest being about 30 members while the smallest is about 5 members. Like the story where the boy offered his 5 loaves and 2 fish when 5,000 people needed to be fed, it seems almost embarrassing. What can be done with so little? In Japan, Christians are a tiny minority. Many people are fearful of religious groups, including Christians. Almost every month we hear in the news about different religious groups committing fraud. To be Christian in Japan is to be vulnerable, and it’s even more vulnerable to be a Christian leader. The Tokyo churches have aging pastors, many who suffer with various sicknesses. And, because we are too small to be registered with the government, pastors are not able to receive pension or health insurance, unless they are able to receive it through work outside the church. To become a church leader in Japan often carries the assumption that he or she will not be rich, but rather closer to poverty.

But, we sense that God is at work. In God’s economy, small things can be significant. There is hope for the future. It’s amazing that the churches have faithfully continued in spite of the challenges. Pastor Inamine has led the Minuma church group for almost 40 years! He will soon be turning 83. Although he suffered a stroke a while back, he and his wife continue to lead, even with his limited energy. At the Honancho church, Mr. and Mrs. Ohno have faithfully travelled, by public transit, the 2 hours each way from their home to church every week to worship, for at least 30 or 40 years. They have served the church in many ways, through things like teaching peace, and leading music. Mr. Ohno also spent many years organizing a collection of Anabaptist resources in the library of the Tokyo Anabaptist Center. He is now struggling with cancer, and is waiting to enter a nursing care facility. Although the churches are small, we see the Spirit of God at work in the faithfulness of the leaders and church members, such as the Ohnos and the Inamines.

Although we just moved to Tokyo in November of last year, we have the privilege of continuing to serve in Tokyo, building on relationships we began when we first served here, about 25 years ago. One of the big resources we have are the connections that have already been made between retired mission workers and people in Japan. The prayers of many people continue. Connection is important for these small congregations. How can we connect?

The video is about four minutes, and includes some random slides to give you some image of what it looks like here...< MC Can story video>

In the video I shared about the Ohno’s and the Inamines, but I could also stories about the Yokouchis, the Tadas, the Lees, and the Kojos, and many other people. There was a time when I looked at the size of our congregation and wondered about what God was planning for us as a church. I remember when we were averaging 30 or 40 people, and at that time I was wondering how we might grow further. Then, we experienced a number of challenges, and many people moved away. Finally, the pandemic hit making it difficult to meet in person. God opened up a way to for us to connect online and we’ve

been deeply blessed through new online connections. Blessings have also come through lots of work to keep in-person gatherings possible. We may often feel small and insignificant, like the “junior” who offered his lunch for Jesus to use. But, Jesus works with the ordinary, small and seemingly insignificant. I continue to see evidence of the Spirit of God at work, in small ways. Of course, we have lots of room to grow, not just in numbers, but spiritually. We’ve learned together through times of worship, sharing and prayer, and through Bible studies led by Yoko, and through our connecting with different people whom God occasionally brings into our fellowship.

God could have saved the Israelites from slavery without Moses. Jesus could have fed the 5,000 without the disciples, but God chooses to work together with us ordinary people. Isn’t that amazing? If we work to keep our focus on letting Jesus Christ into our hearts to work within us, God can take the ordinary of our lives and make it significant, just like God worked through Moses and his staff, or through the boy who offered his lunch. Let’s pray.

O Lord, we confess that at times we get caught in thinking that we are just small and insignificant. Help us to see where you are at work in the small and ordinary. Thank-you that you are present, that you take whatever we offer to you and make it significant. Forgive us for holding back, thinking that we have nothing to offer. We pray for the courage to let go of our selfish pride, in order to allow you to challenge us, working work more and more within us. Help us to give control over to you, knowing that as we trust in you, those around us can be blessed, though Jesus Christ, our Lord, Amen.