

# First Threshings

## First Mennonite Church

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“As a magnifying glass concentrates the rays of the sun into a little burning knot of heat that can set fire to a dry leaf or a piece of paper, so the mystery of Christ in the Gospel concentrates the rays of God’s light and fire to a point that sets fire to the spirit of man. And this is why Christ was born and lived in the world and died and returned from death and ascended to His Father in heaven...”

Thomas Merton (1915-1968)

God said “Let there be light” and there was light. God saw that the light was good,  
and then God separated the light from the darkness.  
God call the light Day, and the darkness he called Night.  
And there was evening and there was morning, the first day.

Genesis 1:3-5

Darkness has a bad reputation in the Bible. Starting with Genesis 1, darkness is right there with what is formless and void, covering the face of the deep. As creation unfolds, a wind from God sweeps over the face of earth, then God creates light, and separates out darkness from it. The light is good and darkness, not so much. The Bible continues this negative use of darkness from Genesis to Revelation. Darkness is deep and terrifying (Genesis 15:12), a place where the wicked will be cut off (I Samuel 2:9). In Matthew, Mark and Luke, darkness “came over the whole land” after Jesus died on the cross. And finally, in Revelation 16:10, the kingdom of those opposed to Christ is plunged into darkness.

We have now left the longest night, the longest darkness behind us for another year. The night between December 21 and December 22 was our longest night and I think most of us are glad to let this much darkness go.

But anyone who has felt the shimmering hot August sunrise over the dry horizon knows that in reality, darkness is *not* all bad: darkness also brings some relief. Breezes cool, plants pick themselves up again. Parts of our human physiology replenish at night. Darkness in the cycle of day and night is nature’s blessed cycle and we are glad for this, to be sure. The Bible’s strong use of light and darkness is vivid. We immediately identify with the symbol of light in darkness, but it is a symbol. It is meant to make clear the presence of resistance to God and God’s way. In real life, people in the Bible times needed night as well as day. Of course.

Using darkness as a way of talking about bad things – lumping all evil into one ball and calling it darkness – is especially uncomfortable to dark-skinned people or people with sight impairment. They tell us what we actually know: in their darkness they experience beauty. Further, in the moral, symbolic world of darkness and light, none of us is all one or the other, It is the mix that is so challenging. It is the mix of moral light and darkness that makes our need for God so strong. That makes the coming of Christ *in the darkness* such a gift. God is able to move within both. Psalm 139:12, “. . . even the darkness is not dark to you; the night is as bright as the day, for darkness is as light to you.” There is much learning, even for the tender soul, in times that feel “dark.” God leads us in our darkness.

January 2016

Jan Richardson has written a beautiful poem about the darkness, both physical and moral, saying that blessings are gathered in darkness in this time of year. May we receive her thoughts as a blessing for our lives as we set out in a new year, a new cycle of both light and dark.

*Pastor Susan*



### **There was no Ministries Council meeting in December.**



#### **January events**

1 **Happy New Year!**

14 7:00 p.m. Ministries Council meeting

24 Noon: Carry-in meal and annual congregational meeting



#### ***Advent with St. Francis: Daily Reflections by Diane M. Houdek***

As we approach the Feast of Epiphany, we might take time to reflect on the many gifts we exchange during this celebration of Christmas. Don't forget the intangible gifts of love, friendship, time spent with family and friends. Our material possessions are only worth as much as they bring us closer to God and to one another.

Once the mother of two of the brothers came to Saint Francis confidently asking for alms. The holy father had pity on her and said to his vicar, Brother Peter of Catania: "Can we give some alms to our mother? Francis was accustomed to call the mother of any brother his mother and the mother of all the brothers. Brother Peter answered him: "There is nothing left in the house that could be given her." And he added: "We have one New Testament from which we read the lessons at Matins since we do not have a breviary<sup>1</sup>." Blessed Francis said to him: "Give the New Testament to our mother that she might sell it to take care of her needs, since we are admonished by it to help the poor. I believe indeed that the gift of it will be more pleasing to God than our reading from it." The book, therefore, was given to the woman, and thus the first Testament that was in the order was given away through this holy kindness.

<sup>1</sup>Prayer book



If we are going to live as disciples of Jesus, we have to remember that all noble things are difficult. The Christian life is gloriously difficult, but the difficulty of it does not make us

faint and cave in, it rouses us up to overcome. Do we so appreciate the marvelous salvation of Jesus Christ that we are our utmost for His highest?

*Oswald Chambers*  
(1874-1917)

**"I'm serving God by serving others – that has been my adult life."**

*Getting to know Jeff Wintermote*

Jeff was born in El Dorado, Kansas and lived there and in Potwin most of his young life: his father worked in road construction for Butler County and his mother was a housewife. He has an older brother who lives in Washington state and a sister who lives in El Dorado.

I asked Jeff what his main interests were while he was in high school and he said, "I was really big into CB (Citizens' Band) Radio and was a charter member of a CB Radio club which also was a civil preparedness team, so we did storm-watching and that sort of thing. That kept me very busy. Electronics was my interest and it was an up-and-coming thing at the time. I thought it might take me somewhere so I went to Hesston College to take electronics."

"Why Hesston?"

"I went there because they had an electronics program, and I wanted to go to a Christian school – and one that wasn't too far from home. I had never been away from home and being that close allowed me to come home for holidays. I was wanting something hands-on but it turned out I had to take a lot of math and theory; that just didn't really do much for me at that time in my life. I also took a lot of Bible and business classes, and ended up with a generic liberal arts degree."

I asked about his church background.

"When I was young my family attended the Assembly of God church in El Dorado."

"How is that different from the Mennonite church?"

"It's much, much, much different: they emphasize speaking in tongues and really push you into that. They say that every believer should speak in tongues: that is the evidence that you have the Holy Spirit in your life. But what I saw them teaching didn't add up to what I was reading in the Bible, and they wouldn't answer my questions. In my teens, I started going to a country Baptist church where I discovered pacifism. And the pastor there allowed us to ask any questions, and we would study and find out what the Bible said. It was very significant for me: we'd ask things like what Jesus meant to love our enemies. And that would've been at the end of the Vietnam War."

While in high school, he worked as a meat-cutter in the local IGA store and then at the IGA store in Hesston while he was going to college.

Jeff met Tammy his second year at Hesston College and they got married the December after he graduated. "After I graduated jobs were pretty scarce – I took a job at the meat-packing plant in Hutchinson and worked on the pork line; it was a moving table and you don't stop because it messes everyone up. It's very difficult and dangerous work. I did that for a couple of years then Tammy and I decided we wanted to go into Voluntary Service.

"We applied through the Mennonite Board of Missions and chose to go to Freeport, Illinois. The arrangement was that, after a certain number of years, local congregations would take responsibility for running missions; many of the members of this congregation were farmers, and we were in VS there when farming was going through a very difficult phase, so the congregation felt they couldn't sustain the program any longer.

"We wanted to continue with VS so we applied with MCC and went to Saskatoon, Saskatchewan. We were house parents for 12-16 year old boys – we were to provide them as much of a home setting as possible. We had five at a time but, in the two years we were there, we had 22 different boys. We had some that were native children who had grown up in the bush further north in Canada and, because there weren't schools there, they would have to come to the city. Everything was different for them; oftentimes they would get in trouble with the law because they didn't know the rules of the city. In their communities, if they wanted something to eat and didn't have any food in their home, they could just walk into the neighbor's house and get something. That doesn't work so well in the city!" Jeff gave a short laugh. "Other children had been adopted and when they got to their teenage years they had an identity crisis. We had some children that didn't have parents and nowhere to live. We had glue-sniffers and Magic-Marker-sniffers, and gas sniffers. Oh, you wouldn't believe all the things we had to work with." He laughed rather sadly.

"Do you proselyte?"

“You don’t proselyte but the idea is that you model Christianity.”

“Then we came back to Kansas for four months. Then we went to Homestead, Florida.” He laughed. “That was a big contrast with Saskatchewan. We spent three years there in a migrant camp. There were usually three or four other young adults that were living with us in the VS unit.

“When the VS unit was begun, the majority of the migrants were white and the main reason for having a unit there was to have a day-care center so the children wouldn’t be out in the fields which were a pretty dangerous place for them to be.

“In the late ‘80s, the migrant camp that we lived in was predominately Mexican. There were two other migrant camps – one was predominantly African-American and the other was mainly undocumented workers. Conditions (for the latter) were appalling: trailer houses – no windows – no doors – no electricity. And the African-American camp was right beside Homestead Air Base so they had a lot of hearing loss issues with the Air Force jets taking off and landing. We attended the Homestead Mennonite Church.

“Tammy worked for the day care center in our camp and I was working with youth outreach for the church and then, later on, I worked part-time as a social worker assistant for Metro-Dade County in an African-American community where unemployment was 75%. Crack cocaine was sold openly on the street – there were prostitutes all over.” Rather grimly, he acknowledged, “We had a wide variety of experiences in our three years there. Then we came back to Kansas.”

I asked about the VS stipend and Jeff raised his chin as he thought. “Our first year we got \$25 a month apiece. Each year it increased and by the time we were in our seventh year we got \$75 a month apiece. The Mission Board paid for our housing, utilities, food and medical so it wasn’t too bad. We had a car: they’d reimburse us for our mileage but if we took a VS car for personal trips we would have to pay them mileage. It was discouraged for family to send money. We really enjoyed that lifestyle.

“The last month that we were in VS we were house parents at a home for pregnant teenage girls. The couple that ran the home were ‘black bumper’ Mennonites from PA – and we became very good friends with them. So, when they needed someone to take care of the girls, we were their assistants.” Again Jeff laughed as he acknowledged that, wherever he and Tammy went, their jobs included sidelines. “You jump in where you see a need,” he said.

“Then we came back to Kansas and I decided to enroll at Bethel College. I double-majored in Bible

& Religion and Social Work; then we went to Eastern Mennonite Seminary.

“After Seminary I took a job as Youth Leader in the oldest Amish Mennonite church in America – in Lancaster County – for one and a half years. Then, for six months, I went back to meat-cutting in the largest IGA store in the world.

“After that, I was Pastor of Youth & Christian Education for four years in Archbold, Ohio. Youth work is who Jeff is,” he smiled. He leant back in his chair, obviously enjoying his memories, then added, “But I’m too old for that now” and he continued with his life story by saying, “We came to Turpin Mennonite Church in Oklahoma – it’s small, about 75-80 regular attenders. That was my first solo pastorate and we were there for six years.” We discussed the Dust Bowl days and he said, “Farmers mostly do no-till now so, while they still get dust storms, they’re not nearly as bad as they used to be 100 years ago. They still get a lot of tumbleweed – some are as big as a car and it piles up so high sometimes that people can’t get into their houses.”

From September 2008 to August 2014 Jeff served as pastor of Trinity Mennonite Church here in Hillsboro. Currently, he’s working for St. Francis Community Services as a Kinship Support Worker. “What that means,” he explained, “is I work with the families of children who are in the custody of the state, who have been removed from their homes for any of various reasons. The families that I work with are most generally the grandparents or other relatives of the children. The preference is to place the children with family members rather than in a foster home. Because these family members aren’t licensed for foster homes, we give them an extra layer of resourcing. And the parents are given the task of going to marriage counseling, drug and alcohol treatment or mental health therapy – those types of things – with the hope that the children could return to their parents.

“I have babies taken right from the hospital,” he added, “all the way to six siblings in one home; we take them up to 18 years of age. I’m doing a lot of the stuff I’ve done other places: everything ties together. I’m serving God by serving others – that has been my adult life.”

Jeff is extremely busy all week: his territory stretches from Newton to McPherson and east to Ottawa, including all the small towns in between. “Half my families are in the Emporia region,” he said. He often puts in 11 and 12-hour days but there are compensations: he’s enjoying seeing parts of Kansas he’d never seen before, and watching the seasons change. “I love getting to know new people. I love people. And that’s what it is really all

about: loving the people that God places in my  
path.” *Pat Bartel*

All submissions of interest to the FMC family are welcome  
and will be included, depending on timeliness and space

availability. (Anonymous submissions are accepted but not  
preferred.) *First Threshings* is distributed the first Sunday of  
each month so materials should be submitted at least one week  
previously. Comments pro/con regarding any aspect of the  
newsletter are also welcome. Please address these to Pat Bartel,  
compiler/editor: mailslot 107 or meadowlark.  
bartel@gmail.com.