

Randall D Koehler

Hutterthal Mennonite Church

James 3:1-12

5 September 2021

### Making Meaning

#### *Greeting and Prayer:*

Hutterthal Mennonite Church, good morning. And good morning to all of you who are joining us online. To all of our guests, we are glad that you are here with us this morning.

Let us pray: Awesome and magnificent God, you spoke our world into being, organizing the potential of chaos into beauty and life. Thank you for how you have worked in each of our lives, helping us make sense of what can be overwhelming and paralyzing. Your faithfulness carries us and sustains us even when our circumstances make us feel powerless. Fill us with your Holy Spirit that the words of our mouths and the meditations of our hearts would be pleasing in your sight, O God, our Rock and our Redeemer. In Jesus' name. Amen.

#### *Message:*

As you heard in the children's story, Jada Koerner and I participated both in the annual assembly with Central Plains Mennonite Conference and the biennial national convention for MCUSA. The annual assembly was June 18-19, while MennoCon21 was July 6-10. Both of us participated online with CPMC, while Jada went to Cincinnati, and I stuck around here in Freeman for national convention online. I cannot remember when this particular conversation had taken place, but I was speaking with Suzanne not too long after both events were over. I had asked her about how the trip to Cincinnati had gone for Jada, and she said that Jada probably needed to do a

report about it for church, and I thought to myself, “If Jada’s going to do a report, then I probably should too; thanks Suzanne for getting me thinking about it,” so here we are today, a couple of months after the fact but still with important things to share. We are sharing also the songs that were especially meaningful or integral to our time at either event.

Making meaning is the title of our message this morning. The task before us is to find ways of telling all of you about the things that we found important or meaningful from our time with CPMC and MCUSA. In James chapter 3, James warns his audience of the power of words and by extension, the power of the tongue. Like the rudder of a ship or the bit in a horses mouth, our ability to speak can sway not only we, the speakers, in the right or wrong direction but also an entire group, a church, a state, a nation. This morning, Jada and I offer you our reflections, making meaning out of experiences that we have had, describing how we have sensed the Holy Spirit working inside of us and around us. We lay these thoughts before you, giving you the chance also to glean encouragement and hope, resilience and strength, life and light.

From our Central Plains virtual gathering in June, two themes stuck out to me: unveiling and creating space. If you remember in that time for our church, we were just starting to sing again on Sunday mornings. In our first virtual worship service, Nathan Luitjens, our executive conference minister asked all of us to consider what had been revealed or unveiled in our time with COVID. Using the story of Saul on the road to Damascus, Nathan discussed how God opened Saul’s eyes by blinding him. We must remember that Saul was completely devoted to and convinced of his mission, yet still completely wrong and missing what had happened. It took God’s intervention on the road for him to reconsider. Interestingly, we had this same story in our VBS curriculum, except that we looked at it from Ananias’s point of view, the man who took blind Saul in and prayed over him that he would receive his sight. Both Ananias and Saul were

humbled by God's grace in this experience as Saul was suddenly helpless on his own, and Ananias was deeply suspicious and afraid of what Saul might do to him as a follower of Jesus. But through this story, God again unveiled for Saul and Ananias how God's grace and mercy were doing something new in the world. Saul found transformation and a new mission, to spread the news of Jesus, while Ananias's eyes were opened to how God could redeem anyone's life, even an enemy or persecutor of believers.

How did our time with COVID and even our moments today as cases are higher than they have been in a while, how do they reveal our blindness or blind us so that like Saul, we humbly have to ask others for help? Or maybe, like Ananias, our time with COVID has kept us uncertain and afraid of what God is doing in our midst, so we are paralyzed even when God calls us into something different like reaching out a hand to those whom God has led to us. What was revealed to or unveiled for you during that time and even today?

Our main speaker for the rest of the time was David Fitch, a seminary professor, author, and pastor in the Northwest Suburbs of Chicago. The theme that stuck with me even after our time online was that of creating space. His challenge to us was to create space for the Holy Spirit's work in the midst of all that was happening and continues to happen in this time. I have explored this since somewhat in some of my sermons when I have asked you all about who has a place at your table. Who have you extended an invitation to, who have you sought out to listen and understand, who has been allowed space in your life? I do not want to spend too much time on it, but I do want to offer the idea to you. Put another way, how have you created space for the Spirit of God to work in your heart and life, how have you offered your point of view, asking the Spirit to reveal the ways that you have become blind like Saul or Ananias?

*Message Pt. 2*

From my virtual participation in national convention, also called MennoCon21, I wanted to highlight a few pieces that were especially encouraging to me. Like Jada but not in person, I appreciated the live music and the diversity of music offered throughout the 5 days. Sometimes, a simple tune sticks with us, reshapes us, encourages us, or draws us into where God is leading and what God is doing in our midst.

Each morning of convention, one of my seminary professors, Safwat Marzouk, led morning bible study. His exploration of the story of the birth of Moses in Exodus and the story of Joseph in Genesis continues to stick with me today. He was my Old Testament professor, but he was not one to let us get by without thinking deeply about all of the pieces of the Old Testament, even the difficult ones. He required us to engage, to hold the words of scripture with the Holy Spirit's help. And he did this same thing with morning bible study as he offered his own reflections on the intercultural and subversive themes within these two stories. This teaching event was the last of Professor Marzouk's tenure with AMBS. He is now a professor at Union Presbyterian Seminary in Richmond, VA. He is also an ordained pastor with the Presbyterian church, and I will never forget his greatest piece of advice to me as a seminary student. I was stressed about how to reach out to those who saw the Bible and the rest of the Christian life very differently than I did, so I asked him about it in the middle of one of our Old Testament class sessions. Without even taking long to think about it, he told me to read the bible with whoever it might be. Encounter the scriptures together, and I have never forgotten.

A particular online seminar that I attended during MennoCon21 was called "The Kingdom is like a Child with a Bucket, Dipper, and Lid." This seminar was also offered by one of the professors at AMBS, Malinda Berry, and I have mentioned it in church before. If you

remember a children's story about a month ago, Kylea Waltner offered a story to the kids about how we can fill other's social-emotional buckets out of our own or we can hold all of our water to ourselves. You can take this metaphor even further when you add a lid and a dipper to the idea that each of us has our own social-emotional bucket. With our dipper, we can take water from our neighbors' buckets when ours are running low by sapping their energy or excitement with our own negativity or shame. Or maybe we need to put the lid on our bucket because our water level is low and we need to protect what little we have available. Or maybe we notice that our neighbor's water level is low, so we pour from our abundance into our neighbor's bucket with acts of kindness or encouragement. I wonder if we could say too that we can trust God's way and work in us that God can and will fill our buckets when we ask kind of like James has already reminded us about wisdom and God's grace and generosity. I have probably mentioned this before, but I have been amazed how this metaphor has revealed unhealthy habits that I need to change, ways of relating to people that have led to me not having enough water in my bucket. Maybe you have felt the same way before too.

Finally, on the final day of MCUSA convention, Glen Guyton the executive minister for the denomination revealed the theme for the next two years within MCUSA: Be Transformed. Coming into this event in July, the theme had been Bring the Peace, which was an insightful piece of advice, especially since 9 months later, the whole world would be turned upside down because of COVID. How have you brought or not brought the peace over the last year in your relationships, in your work, in your family, in everything. Remember that Jesus does not ask us for only pieces of ourselves as we found out last week in James. Jesus asks us for the entirety of who we are, our whole selves, and Jesus offers us complete transformation through the power of the Holy Spirit. In light of our denominational minister's theme to be transformed, how is God

leading you in this time? Where are you noticing the Spirit's conviction or how have you changed in the last 6 months, year, or several years? Sometimes, it is not until we sit long enough to think about it that we realize how God has transformed us and continues to do so even today. I encourage you to tell others of how God has been working in you, what you're noticing, and how you are sensing God's leading in this time. Be Transformed.

Let us pray: God of hope and life, we look to you as we make meaning of the words spoken this morning by Jada and by me. Help us make meaning of our life experiences. Give us eyes to see and ears to hear your leading. Thank you for our conference and our denomination and the services that they offer. Give our leaders and fellow pastors strength and hope for our present time. We ask for your wisdom and insight as we continue to figure out how to be church here and now. We long for transformation, knowing that you can bring the best out in us, who we are meant to be through the power of your Spirit. In Jesus name. Amen.