

09-22-2024 Words of Worship

Welcome – So glad for everyone who is worshiping here together this morning! Whether you're a visitor, a regular attender, someone with family roots here or someone who's interested in the roots here, or most importantly – if you're here because you love God and you want to learn more about God's steadfast love and faithfulness – we're glad you're here.

Opportunities for Celebration and Service

- Next weekend we'll be out at Camp Mennoscah for our retreat and worship out there. Two weeks from today, on October 6, the Peace Committee invites you to bring food for the Tabor Food Pantry. Useful items are: cereal, canned fruit or canned meat, jars of peanut butter and jelly, pancake and other baking mixes and Hamburger Helper. The full list is available above the donation box at the bottom of the east stairs.

For the **Call to Worship** I invite you to turn to number 20 in the purple VT book, or read it from the screen. This is an adaptation of Psalm 100, bringing to mind God's steadfast faithfulness. I'll read the light print, you respond with the bold.

Leader: Make a joyful noise to the Lord, all you lands!

People: Serve the Lord with gladness; come into God's presence with a song.

Leader: Know that the Lord is God, our maker to whom we belong;

People: we are God's people and the sheep of God's pasture.

Leader: Enter the gates of the Lord with thanksgiving and the courts with praise;

People: give thanks and bless God's holy name.

Leader: Good indeed is the Lord, whose steadfast love is everlasting.

People: whose faithfulness endures from age to age.

Prayer –Speak to us, living God, as you have spoken to our ancestors:

through the voices of your prophets, the breath of your Spirit, and the life of your Son,
so that we may live according to your word, through Jesus Christ our Savior. Amen.

Morning Prayer –

Dear God we thank you for this time of worship when can gather to fellowship with one another, to sing your praises, read your word and hear, again, the message of your faithfulness. We're grateful for each person who is worshiping this morning – here and in every congregation and gathering of your people nearby and around the world. We thank you for the rhythms of life that you have established for us in your creation. Daytime and night, planting and harvest, work and play, rest and reflection, joy and grief, living, dying and the hope of new life in you. We thank you God, for the remarkable beauty of your creation – earth and the other planets, space and all that dwells there. We thank you for the beauty of what we see and understand and for all that remains mysterious to us. It's the mystery that helps us to remember that you are God and we are your people.

We thank you for the faith and the faithfulness of the saints who've gone before. We stand on their shoulders and we benefit from their experiences and wisdom. We pray for on-

going wisdom as we continue to learn how to follow Jesus and love him with all our heart, mind, soul and strength – and what it means to love our neighbor as we love ourselves. We pray for patience and understanding so that you can teach us how to love people the way you love them, to see them as you see them and to extend your grace as you've extended grace to us.

We want to be good stewards, God, of the gifts you've given us, and so we ask for your guidance and your joy as we live into your goodness.

We pray for the things that make for peace in your world, God. We pray for an end to fear and hate and violence. Give courage to those of us who claim and want to be followers of Jesus, that we would shine his light and be his love in this world. It's in his name that we pray. Amen.

Message: Faith, Community, Convictions

Kristine Schmucker

22 September 2024

Most of you know that this is way beyond my comfort zone, but as Pastor Lois noted, history is a passion and I think it is useful to look at the history of our church to see where we have been and what factors have shaped us today. Maybe the stories of the past can inspire us today. Not the nuts and bolts of names and dates, but of ideas and how the past influences the present and how the past can provide inspiration and understanding for our own time. I like to think of our church history as a great cloud of witnesses like we read about in Hebrews. Maybe we can learn or be inspired by our own great cloud of witnesses.

Most of us know the story. This year it has been pretty hard to miss as we have celebrated the 150 anniversary of the immigration of the Alexanderwohl village from Russia to Kansas. In 1820-21, this church had left Przechowko, West Prussia (today Poland) for Russia to escape the military draft. Participation in the military or any activity activity that would lead to the taking of humanlife went against the teachings of Jesus as they understood them. For some of us, this is part of our personal family history. For others your history has more recently joined the history of the church. For all of us, it is the history of our church.

Top put history in perspective and the role it plays in the present, Arlin Buller reminded me of something that David Weibe wrote in his book, "They Seek and Country," in 1974.

"The Past is to throw light on the Present and Future – to hold the key to unlock doors to new revelations, but the Past is not to exert a paralyzing influence."

He notes that "stripped of name, custom, & traditions is Faith. Faith in an eternal God, a Faith in the Redeemer, a Faith in the eternal word of God and a Faith that love not force is the answer to the ills of this world. Each generation makes its contribution – their Faith triumphed." I like this way of looking at

history, if we strip everything away from each generation, what is the common denominator? Faith and the history is the story of how they lived out their faith.

When you look at a church like Alexanderwohl with a long history, each generation has made a contribution to shape the church we are today, just as we are shaping it for the next generation. The questions to ask is how and who shaped Alexanderwohl in the past. How did the faith of the collective community play a role?

How have previous generations shaped the church into what it is today? With a history of about 400 years, there has been a lot of shaping. I'm going to focus on the time when Alexanderwohl was in Russia for a couple of reasons. During the roughly 54 years Alexanderwohl was in Russia a great deal of our identity as a church community was established. Our identity as "Alexanderwohl" really took shape in Russia. One of the people that had an important role in shaping that identity was Elder Peter Wedel. I will also touch briefly on how the decision to migrate in 1874 still forms part of our identity and imagination.

When Tzar Catherine invited the Mennonites and other German groups to Russia she granted them privileges. The Mennonites were granted freedom to govern their own villages, be in charge of their own schools and the very important promise of no military service. This allowed the Mennonites to become fairly isolated from the culture around them. An identity of being different "we are separate." There is of course a shadow side to the idea of keeping separate as it can lead to the idea that "we are better." Life revolved around the church, family and community. Hard work was valued as was maintaining Mennonite traditions.

Even in Prussia the Przechowko church seemed somewhat separate from the other Mennonite groups. They used an independent Confession of Faith translated from the Dutch by Elder Peter Jantz. In 1787 Elder Jacob Wedel a Confession of Faith for Przechowko that was still in use in Russia, and maybe Kansas. Several of the historians made note of this difference. Elder Jacob Wedel was also the first Elder to preach in German and the one that started the church records books.

This independent thinking is interesting to me and probably deserves more study.

Another influencing factor was leadership. In Russia, Alexanderwohl had one elder for 57 years, basically the entire time in Russia. Elder Peter Wedel served as Alexanderwohl's longest serving elder at 57 years. A record I doubt will be broken.

Fun Trivia. The first elder was Berend Ratzlaff – he "gathered our church together" on early historian wrote. The second elder was Benjamin Wedel. Every elder after him until 1910 was a descendant from

this Benjamin Wedel. In Przechowko the church was often called “Wedel’s Chuch.” This long line was broken in 1910 when Heinrich Banman was elected Elder.

Elder Peter Wedel was the 6th generation in the long line of Wedel descendants to serve as Elder. It is important to note before we begin, he was a man just like anyone, he had his faults and made mistakes. What I will be talking about highlights his successes, but should not be viewed that he was perfect. Wedel was born into a family with a tradition of serving as Elders in the Przechowko Church. Born in 1792, he became elder in 1815 at the age of 23. That he was a man of strong convictions was evidenced when he went to prison in 1815 rather than renounce a criticism he had made of the government regarding military service and the Kaiser. Someone had reported him. The story continues when a young couple wanted to get married and needed the Elder. One of the ministers, Heinrich Buller, agreed to trade places with Elder Wedel in jail so that Wedel could get out and marry the couple. After the wedding ceremony Wedel returned to the jail to switch back. The jailor was so surprised that he worked to officially free Elder Wedel. Not only was Elder Wedel a man of conviction, he surrounded himself with other leaders of conviction.

In 1820, he led the Przechowko village to settle in the Molotschna Colony, S Russia or today, Ukraine. Elder Peter Wedel served the Alexanderwohl congregation until his death in the summer of 1871. A leader of strong convictions for that length of time had a lot of influence in shaping Alexanderwohl’s identity and convictions. He baptized the large majority of members who would have taken catechism with him. He trained the next Elders – Jacob Buller, Peter Balzer, Heinrich Banman. What were his interests? His theology? And how did that shape Alexanderwohl?

D.C. Wedel in “The Story of Alexanderwohl” noted that Elder Wedel had an interest in Pietism, made trips to Poland to minister to people there and he had contact with the Moravians where he became interested in missions. Wedel describes Alexanderwohl under Elder Wedel’s leadership as “moderately progressive.” What influenced this moderate progressivism?

We can get a glimpse of Elder Peter Wedel’s personality and theology in the discussion he took part in surrounding the Mennonite Brethren/Krimmer Mennonite Brethren split from the larger Mennonite church in Russia in the late 1850s-60. This split was over issues of remaining separate from the society around them, a return to a “simplistic” lifestyle (not so worldly and a reaction to Pietism which was sweeping across Russia).

Pietism was encouraged by the Russian government and those that were influenced by it had an interest in end times theology, establishing Bible Societies and missions.

I have always had a hard time getting a grasp on what Alexanderwohl's role was in Mennonite Brethren split from the larger Mennonite Church in Russia. In the late 1850-early 1860s it would seem like Alexanderwohl would be impacted. With a leader like Elder Wedel with such strong convictions it seemed like he would have been involved. But our histories are silent on the issue of Alexanderwohl and the Mennonite Brethren split.

To learn more, I found help from several MB and KMB historians. They actually had more to say about Elder Wedel and Alexanderwohl than any other place I found. Delbert Plett has a series of four books on the MB history which were very helpful and P.M. Friesen, *The Mennonite Brotherhood in Russia* was also a source for much of this information.

The church in Russia was at a crossroads of sorts in the 1850-60s. Some were agitating for the Mennonite church to hold fast and remain separate from the culture around them. The majority of Mennonite churches seemed fine with the status quo. However, there were many strong personalities in leadership positions with points of view that did not allow for compromise.

Klaas Reimer was one of leaders was pushing for reform of the Mennonite church which led to the Mennonite Brethren and Krimmer Mennonite Brethren split from the larger church. Reimer felt the Mennonites should remain separate from the society around them. He had noted how some were interacting more with their Russian neighbors and as a result the Mennonite Church had become too worldly and in their faith they were only going through the motions. He was strict on church discipline, plain living and Bible Study. Reimer was also suspicious of the Pietist movement with its outward focused. Among other things, Pietism promoted Bible Societies, missions and it involved working with Christians that were not Mennonite. This was a major sticking point for Reimer.

When Elder Peter Wedel and the Alexanderwohl congregation settled in S.Russia, Wedel became interested in these Bible Societies. He even set up a branch and was president of one in Alexanderwohl. Having a government-like structure (president, vice-president) was also seen as worldly by many more conservative Mennonites.

In a meeting with Reimer regarding Bible Societies, Wedel and another leader, Goerz asked Reimer if he condemned other confessions. Reimer replied, "All those that believe in child baptism, the swearing of oaths and war were not right thinking Christians, even if they were pious in other respects.

This filled Goerz and Wedel with abhorrence. Wedel jumped up and exclaimed, "You have made a terrible statement that cannot stand!"

From that statement it seems that Wedel was willing to work with people of other baptisms and acknowledge them as Christian. Quite a difference from the separate inward focus that Reimer was promoting. According to Friesen many of the more conservative Mennonites accused Alexanderwohl of “preaching boldly of the Universal Church.” This too flew right in the face of Reimers’s separatism.

There were churches that were carefully looking outward while holding on to their conservative Mennonite values. Alexanderwohl, under the leadership of Elder Peter Wedel was willing to engage in the world in small ways through Bible Societies while holding firm to Anabaptist essentials. Even MB historian, Delbert Plett had to admit that Alexanderwhol remained solid in conservative Mennonite values. He describes Alexanderwohl as progressively conservative.

Did Elder Wedel’s progressive conservatism which included an interest in missions and a willingness to work with other denominations help shape Alexanderwohl? Did it lead us to be a more outward looking church. Did it plant the seeds of service and missions that we value so much today? In Russia the Mennonites did not have a concept of serving outside of their communities or sharing the Gospel with others. They had not been allowed to reach out to non-Mennonites for over 250 years. The ideas of sharing the good news of Jesus with non-Mennonites was new to them.

The migration of 1874, shows that the church remained committed to the core values of following Christ, living in community and nonresistance. All values that Elder Wedel likely stressed. Another strength was strong leaderships. Jacob Buller served as co-Elder with Elder Wedel for several years. The ministers, Balzer and Banman to name a few, were able to carry on a strong leadership even without Elder Wedel’s presence. This continuous leadership from Russia to Kansas helped with the migration and settlement. It enabled them to be open to projects to help others once they were settled.

Once they got to Kansas, after homes and farms were established, Alexanderwohl started to look around at needs. There was a need for higher education. Alexanderwohl provided leadership and finances for Bethel College.

To me even more telling is the establishment of the Bethesda Hospital & Home Society in 1899. Bethesda was the first Mennonite owned-run hospital in North America. Service was a new idea, not like today when we regularly have opportunities to help others. Then, looking outside the community was foreign. The hospital wasn’t just for Mennonites either although that was the primary audience. It was a community supported, church run institution with a mission to help people. It was also an example of how three groups of Mennonites from Russia continued to at least be in conversation with each other in Kansas. Both the Goessel M.B. and the KMB Churches Alexanderwohl to create Bethesda with elders

from all three churches being involved from the beginning. Maybe Elder Wedel was able to at least keep a door open that allowed cooperation at a later date.

There are other examples over time of Alexanderwohl as a church supporting people in need without regard to which church they go to or if they go to one. Even today we have examples almost every Sunday for opportunities to serve. Was that willingness to serve a seed planted in Russia by not just Elder Peter Wedel, but the whole congregation? Did it begin a culture of serving community that even is present today?

Alexanderwohl has also stood by their convictions as a group throughout history. We are celebrating 150 years of one of those decisions. Yes, there were some economic factors. However in every diary I have read the reasons, the only reasons mentioned for leaving Russia was military conscription and the requirement to become more like the society around them. H.B. Freisen wrote about the loss of the military exemption,, “that was contrary to our conscience for we confess according to God’s Word, “that all that take the sword shall perish by the sword.”

Most lost money selling their farms and equipment. They had to say goodbye to a 15 year old church building. No doubt they felt much the same as we do about our building and it was hard to leave a place where they had worshiped as a community. They had just built a new school. They were relatively comfortable – reaping the rewards of those horrible first pioneer years. Many from neighboring villages thought they were crazy, after all the Russian government had offered forestry service instead of military. Why did they have to be so stubborn? Families from other villages were not coming. Some would come later, others never. The goodbyes were for forever.

Plett notes that many Elders in the larger Mennonite Churches did not share the same concerns as the Mennonite Brethren, KMB and Alexanderwohl. He noted that the more assimilated Mennonites were mainly concerned that there would be some sort of substitute for military service. He also makes this statement concerning the religious climate in Russia in the 1870s, those that “continued the conservative faith tradition such as Alexanderwohl obviously had a much more realistic comprehension of social and political realities and were led more directly by the Holy Spirit.” The evidence was that they migrated rather than compromise.

They took a stand and saying we will not compromise on our convictions to follow Christ. They stood together. They migrated together in 1820 and 1874 at personal cost.

Not many churches have that kind of history. Individual and groups within a church might, but as a whole church. A big part of their strength was in standing together. This story of migration rather than adjusting

to the culture around us has shaped us even today. It remains in our imaginations, sometimes it is even voiced. The ideas of following Jesus, not just as individuals, but as a community still influences us. It is an important and precious legacy, but it is a fragile legacy. Each generation has to make tough decisions about what is important and how we will react to the pressure from the outside world.

In 1974, Ron Krehbiel asked some very important questions that are still valid today. At that time, he noted strong commitment to the church and to the community that he had not experienced elsewhere. He gave an example of how he had seen this in action and said, “some of our people are not allowing themselves to simply be blown along the winds of materialism . . .they have decided to buck that kind of trend . . . and live a different life style.”

Alexanderwohl has never been immune from change, so he challenged them to think about how and who is doing the changing, is the change because everyone else is changing? Are we blindly believing in things that everyone else is believing?

We can allow ourselves to be inspired by the faith of Elder Peter Wedel, and the Alexanderwohl congregation and know that we stand in a long line of people that said ‘no, this we cannot do.’ We can allow the same wind, the wind of the Holy Spirit, guide us. The same Holy Spirit of Acts “and suddenly sound came from heaven like the rush of a mighty wind.” The same Holy Spirit that has been with this church since the beginning in the 1700s to now.

Today, we have to ask the same questions the church asked in 1820, 1874 and 1974. Whose wind are we going to allow to move and direct us? What direction should our church face in the next 50 years? We have learned a bit about our great cloud of witnesses, perhaps we can draw courage and inspiration from them and with the help of the Holy Spirit move forward together boldly.