

JOSEPH'S COAT
1st Mennonite Church of Christian
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It has been reassuring to me this morning to look around and see the faces of many people I do not know; because that means the 1st Mennonite Church of Christian continues to be a living and growing institution. And of course it's also comforting to see familiar faces as well, because then I know I am among friends who have always been willing to suffer through whatever they had to on a Sunday morning on behalf of the congregation. Thank you all for being here.

For my part, I have been contemplating this morning's task by asking myself a series of questions. Simple questions, for the most part: questions like, how did I let myself get talked into this? What I am going to say, that hasn't already been said before or couldn't be said better by someone else? What am I doing here?

What am I doing here? That's a real question, not a rhetorical one. What am I doing here? Why is it me, and not someone else? Of all the potential answer that suggest themselves – such as, my mother is on the program committee, or they couldn't get anyone else – the one that seems the most promising to me is that I am the fifth generation of my family to be a part of this congregation. So it's my history we're observing today. Yet that, in turn, leads to another version of the same question. What, exactly, does it mean to think that this is my history?

To begin with, there's the obvious and conventional way to think about it, which for me involves thinking about all those generations of Goerings that have been a part of this congregation since its inception in 1878. The one I know the most about is my great-grandfather, Joseph C. Goering, who came to Kansas with the 1874 immigrants at the age of 14. He was the oldest of two sons and a daughter of a widowed mother, Marie Stucky Goering, who never remarried; so, in the words of his son Ed, he “worked like a slave” from the moment he hit dry land and didn't really stop until his death in 1934.

In adult life, Joe was 6' tall and well over 200 pounds, so in the Schweitzer way, to distinguish him from all the other Joe Goerings in the community he was given the nickname, “der Dicke Joe.”

Dicke Joe, in fact, was a bit larger-than-life in many ways beyond his waist-line. Coming to America with no money, no patrimony, no formal education, and no English, he steadily worked his way into positions of affluence and some influence in his new community. He started a dry-goods store in Moundridge, then a hardware store, and then an implement business. He served on the local school board and city council. He founded the Citizen's State Bank, according to family lore, because of his displeasure with the way the other bank in town was treating its newest employee, his son Chris.

Of course Joe was active in the 1st Mennonite Church, too, though not as prominent as his brother John, one of the congregation's first ministers and elders. Joe and his wife Anna Wedel had 14 children, 13 of whom grew to adulthood and were baptized in this church.

Thinking about all this, on Easter Sunday, it was not too great a stretch for me to think of another Joseph, who is the hero of the Bible's first great "resurrection" story, and that is of course Joseph, the son of Jacob and Rachel, and his famous coat. You all know this story, which occupies fully the last third of the book of Genesis. Joseph, the best-loved son of Jacob, we are told, is understandably resented by his 10 older brothers, who in a fit of jealous rage resolve to do away with him. First they want to kill him; then they decide there wouldn't be any profit in that; so instead they tie him up and sell him to a passing trader, who in turn sells him to the captain of Pharaoh's guard in Egypt.

So here's Joseph, age 17, literally a slave in a foreign land. He has no money, no patrimony, and at first, we assume, he doesn't speak the language. Yet Joseph quickly makes himself useful to the Egyptians, particularly in the matter of the interpretation of dreams. There follows an amazing rise to power, culminating in Joseph being named, in effect, the governor and chief executive officer of all the farms and communities of Egypt's great Nile valley.

You know the middle and the ending of the story as well. Driven by famine, Joseph's brothers are forced to journey to Egypt and solicit his aid; though of course they don't recognize him at first. Several chapters later, Joseph finally reveals himself to them and is even re-united with his father shortly before Jacob's death. Joseph's brothers move closer to him, to the land of Goshen near the present-day Suez canal, but Joseph himself remains in Egypt proper and is ultimately buried there.

So there you have two very abbreviated versions of the stories of Joe and Joseph. And without making too much of the parallel it seems to me they both raise a series of really interesting questions: about the nature of the immigrant experience, and about the relationship between faith and culture. Did the biblical Joseph think of himself as an Egyptian? He married an Egyptian; had an Egyptian family; he had a position of great power in Egyptian society. Ultimately he spoke their language so well that his brothers plotted right in front of him because they didn't imagine anyone like that could understand Hebrew. And Joseph chose to be buried in Egypt, unlike his father who was taken back to Canaan to lie with Abraham and Isaac.

A similar set of questions intrigues me about my great-grandfather, Dicke Joe. Did Joe Goering consider himself, an American? In October of 1917, when the United States was at war with Germany and the Bolsheviks were overrunning Russia, if you'd have asked him how he felt about his country being at war – which country would he have thought of?

Well, Joe died 20 years before I was born. And even if he hadn't, very likely the generation and culture gaps between us would have prevented my asking those questions. My dad wrote that he never really had anything you could call a personal conversation with his grandfather Goering, even though he was the only one of dad's grandparents he could literally converse with, being the only one who spoke English.

So the question lingers – did Joe C. Goering, think of himself as an American? And, more to today's occasion, did he think of America's history as his history? I know I do. I know without a shred of hesitation that at this moment my government is making war in the Middle East for a

whole host of reasons, some of which go all the way back in the history of my country to the idea of Manifest Destiny in the 1840s.

In fact, I know that same Manifest Destiny played a critical role as well in the history of my state – New Mexico. In the year 1846, acting on the idea that God had ordained the United States to be the world’s greatest country, President James K. Polk’s government made war on Mexico, including its northern territories. General Stephen Kearny and his army rode into Santa Fe, and proclaimed to the people there they were now part of the United States, which would, nevertheless, respect their language, their customs, their religion, and all of their property. Now for anyone who has been watching CNN these past few weeks, this rhetoric should have a familiar ring; and I can tell you that you don’t have to live long in New Mexico today to realize the degree to which that rhetoric and that history are still very much a part of the fabric of life there.

So all that is now my history, even though my biological ancestors were then living in Russia and speaking German, never having heard of Manifest Destiny, the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo or even of “Kansas,” a state which did not then exist.

In this time of war I have also been re-reading one of my favorite poets, T. S. Eliot. T. S. Eliot, like me, was a midwesterner; he grew up in St. Louis, the son of a brick manufacturer. But after moving to London, as a young man in 1914, he eventually became Great Britain’s greatest 20th century poet; making England his country, and the Anglican Church, his church.

Eliot served England as a fire-watcher during WWII. Fire-watchers were assigned look-out positions in London during the nightly German bombing raids. When the incendiary bombs would set off fires across the city, the watchers would relay their position to emergency personnel. I imagine the experience was not unlike what it must have been to live in central Baghdad earlier this month.

During his anxious nights of watching, Eliot wrote poetry. He traveled, in his mind, to a church cemetery near Cambridge, called “Little Gidding,” where the dead of earlier English wars and conflicts were buried; many who fought and opposed each other in life, now “folded in a single party,” as he phrased it. “We cannot revive old factions,” he wrote. “We cannot restore old policies.” So he asked himself, what is it about us that reveres their history? “Why should we celebrate / These dead men?”

This afternoon some of us will go out to the First Mennonite Church cemetery, and walk among the graves and hear the stories of some of the families who founded this congregation: Stuckys, Kaufmans, Krehbiels, Wedels, and yes, Goerings. And we will hear there, stories of people who in life were also parts of different factions and differing policies.

For example – many of you know the outlines of the story of how our church got its unique name. The original townsite in this area, near the Memorial Home, was founded on land donated by Christian Hirschler, Christian Voran, and Christian and Dan Krehbiel, and so was appropriately named, Christian. Therefore, its first church was the First Mennonite Church of Christian, until the Missouri Pacific Railroad came through a mile north of the town and named

its depot Moundridge. Being practical men and women, the citizens of Christian picked up their buildings and churches and moved them over here, but the church retained its charter name and so became the First Mennonite Church of Christian in Moundridge.

Well I've know that story for quite a while, but just recently I ran across a couple of additional elements that put the whole thing in a little different light. One was a quote from Christian Krehbiel about that move to Moundridge. Krehbiel wrote, "when the MPRR built its line from Newton to McPherson and in spite of all our efforts placed its station a mile north at Moundridge, we dissolved the town [of] Christian."

For some reason that phrase caught my eye. "In spite of all our efforts," the train station went a mile north. It got me to thinking that if the railroad missed the town of Christian in spite of all their efforts, maybe somebody else's efforts prevailed to bring the tracks up this way. So I went to my centennial history of Moundridge to see who owned the land where the tracks did end up, and found four names there as well, one of whom was my great-great grandfather, Dicke Joe's father-in-law, John P. Wedel, also a member of the First Mennonite Church of Christian.

I imagine the dynamics in church were quite interesting for a while after that.

And as to old policies, the history of the 1st Mennonite Church is replete with policy debates, usually having something to do with the question of membership. Early on, there were arguments about whether members of other Mennonite congregations should be allowed to join or even participate in communion without being rebaptized in this church. Later those arguments took the form of the participation of members of other denominations. Then it was whether military veterans could retain their membership, and then it was whether divorcees could be members in good standing.

And at every step along the way – not always in a straight line, but always tending in the same direction – the 1st Mennonite Church of Christian decided that we were not going to be a congregation that kept people out. We were not only going to allow, but to invite others to be a part of our fellowship and our ministry; and we, in turn, would a part of theirs.

That is the story to be read in those church minutes, and in the congregation's participation in wider church bodies like the Kansas Conference and Western District, and now even Mennonite Church USA. That is the story to be read in the involvement of our congregational leaders in the founding of Bethel College, whose charter members included Mennonites of many different ethnic origins as well as other members of the Newton community. We even see this story in the margins, at least, of the tale of Christian and Moundridge. Regardless of whose interests prevailed in the laying of the tracks, everyone involved seems to have wanted that physical connection with the commerce and society of the new world they were settling.

That is our history, and we are all products of it, in some way or other. You know, as Anabaptists our theology is founded on the principle of choice – of adult baptism and discipleship – and I sometimes think that because of that, we may fall into the mistaken notion that we are entirely the product of our choices. Well that's a misleading notion, at best; and a dangerous heresy, at worst. As members of this or any church, we are inevitably the product not

only of our choices but of the many, many choices made by the men and women who went before us.

Take a simple thing like Joseph's coat, for instance. How many of you here this morning, would say that Joseph's problems started when his father gave him a coat with long sleeves? That's how the Revised Standard Version of the Bible describes it. Now how many think it was a coat of many colors? So how many of you regularly read the King James Bible at home? How many routinely use some other edition?

So – despite the fact that most modern editions of the Bible do not translate the garment in Genesis 37 as a “coat of many colors,” most of us think of it that way. And we think of it that way not because of the choices we've made, but because of choices made by our parents and grandparents and maybe even great-great-grandparents, since the Luther Bible also has it as “einen bunten Rock” – a colorful coat.

So what do we do with this reality? Do we throw up our hands and say, well, sure we speak English or German or go to this church or that because of where we were born and is that supposed to mean that all of our beliefs and actions are predetermined?? To which the answer is, of course not. That really would be heresy. But I do believe that when each of us here in the 1st Mennonite Church of Christian, chooses this church, we also choose to become, part of its history – a history, or maybe even histories, that go back thousands of years and continue right up through this very congregation.

It is important for us to be aware of, and own those histories, because they are a part not only of who we are, but how others see us as well. Joseph and his coat, whatever it looked like, furnish us with a kind of lesson about what happens when we don't pay attention to our own histories. After all, while it wasn't Joseph's fault that his father loved him best, by age 17 you'd think he might have figured out that as the son of Rachel, his father's favorite wife, he would have been well-advised to keep a lower profile around his step-brothers. A more self-aware young man might have said, gee, dad, that's really a nice coat, but maybe it would be better if you'd spring for new clothes for Reuben and Levi and Naphtali and the rest of the guys, too.

As it actually happened, Joseph was thrown into a situation where he would spend the rest of his life making choices about what traditions he would acknowledge and own as his traditions; and what histories would ultimately make up, his history. And in that regard, Joseph's condition is ours. It is the modern condition, if you will.

I remember Martin Marty telling us in graduate school, that the only true traditionalists in the world are those people who don't know there is more than one tradition. None of us here this morning, fit in that category. We are all, in that sense, neo-traditionalists – people who choose their faith expressions and the histories that go with them. And the beauty of that is two-fold. It means we don't have the burden of creating our entire theology and its resulting church community from scratch – we inherit that community ready-made – and yet at the same time, it also means that in making the choice, we become ourselves, participants and builders of that tradition and its history.

So if this congregation is fortunate enough to observe a 150th or even a 200th birthday some Sunday morning in 2078, that day's cemetery tour will celebrate the Stuckys and the Goerings and a whole additional host of people and families whose names aren't there yet. We don't know who they'll be. I don't suppose Joe Goering and the others present at the 50th anniversary of this church would have imagined a future celebration paying homage to the leadership of a Gingrich from New York or an Allaby from Ohio; but Dicke Joe and others like him, made this a church and a community that valued those connections; that welcomed that leadership and made it its own.

That's how it works. That's how history makes the future possible. At least that's what T.S. Eliot thought. "This is the use of memory," he wrote in Little Gidding, "For liberation – not less of love but expanding / Of love beyond desire, and so liberation / From the future as well as the past." It is only when we know and remember where we came from that we are truly free to become the people and the church God wants us to be.

So at this moment of memory, as we pause to look back on 125 years in the life the 1st Mennonite Church, let us give thanks for all the histories that have brought us together on this journey of faith. Let us look forward to all the Josephs from all the lands who will some day join us on the journey and become a part of that history as well. And on this Easter Sunday, let us celebrate the age-old story of Jesus' resurrection and its promise of God's future. Amen.