SMCHA 150th Anniversary Celebration
Eden Mennonite Church, August 23, 2024

"The Use of Memory"

Good evening, everyone.

We are brought together this evening by the confluence of two anniversaries. There is of course the arrival of our ancestors in 1874; but of equal importance, for this observance, is the establishment of the Swiss Mennonite Cultural & Historical Association: founded to head up our Centennial celebration in 1974, and maintained since that time "to educate descendants of the Swiss Mennonites on the origin and culture of our group." So because we literally wouldn't be here without them, I want to ask all the members of the current SMCHA board or committees to please stand and be recognized.

In preparation for tonight's remarks, I have spent a lot of time browsing the website of the Association, which contains a truly impressive archive of documents, notes and materials from our 150 years in America. I've been drawn particularly, to its collections of the speeches and events of earlier anniversaries of our arrival in this country.

The first celebration documented on the website is the 75th, in 1949, at the Hopefield Mennonite Church. It consisted of a full day's worth of special music and speeches; and I have to say, with regard to the latter, that the tone of the event was decidedly admonitory. Speaker after speaker chided his fellow Schweitzers for their failure to live up to the godly precepts of their forbears. "Separation or Infiltration?" asked J. Winfield Fretz, lamenting our increasing conformity to the ways of our new world. P.P. Wedel, whom I always thought of as a kindly old man in my home congregation of First Mennonite in Moundridge, was anything but in his assessment of mid-century Mennonites. ""As we do not measure up to our pioneer fathers in honesty and in nonconformity," he began, "so also in other qualities or characteristics. We merely make mention of some of them, such as, diligence, industry, frugality, sociability, mutual helpfulness, fidelity in family relations, absence of divorce, and obedience to civil law."

And then there was R.C. Kauffman, a psychology professor at Bethel College, who took a more scholarly approach. In a speech titled "A Critical Evaluation of Ourselves," the social scientist argued that any kind of evaluation was meaningless in the absence of a comparison group; and that the obvious group, in this case, were the Low Germans who came to this country at the same time and settled on the other side of the Turkey Creek. Those Low Germans, Kauffman pointed out, were substantially more wealthy, cultured, and educated when they arrived, which helped to explain why, some 75 years later, we

Schweitzers [and I am quoting here] "are still . . . more loud, uncouth and unpolished." (Those of you who know my wife, Ardie Schroeder, can imagine that this sentiment is inspiring much merriment in our household.)

Well. Clearly none of these men were acquainted with the concept of "playing to your base." And so it was quite a change of pace 25 years later, when preparations got underway for the Centennial celebration under the Association leadership of Harley J. Stucky.

Now I have to be a little careful here, because I did not personally know Harley well, and many who did, including members of his family, are here tonight. But I think it is safe to say that Harley was not a hide-your-light-under-a-bushel kind of Mennonite. And we have the tangible illustration of that in the form of the Centennial Monument just west of the Hopefield Church, whose dedication was a central feature of that observance. Erland Waltner, president of the Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminaries, and Martin Schrag, a history professor at Messiah College who was at the time <u>the</u> historian of the Swiss Volhynian people, were the speakers.

Of course the creation of the monument provoked predictable grumbling about the "Golden Calf" and whether that was really appropriate for us humble folk. But if you have not been there recently, or ever, I suggest you include a visit in the next couple of days. To my way of thinking, the seven plaques that surround the sculpture do a nice job of balancing information about the past, with clearly articulated challenges for the future. This is no monument to a Lost Cause. This is a rare memorial that asks, "Will our simple life style be perpetuated, or will it disappear like a vapor trail . . . under the temptation of living in a changing world?"

Now to be sure, 1974 was a very different moment in the history of both the Schweitzers and their adopted country than 1949. Our friend Jim Juhnke had just run for Congress, as an anti-war Democrat; and shortly thereafter, in the summer of 1976, Bethel College would send a choir to perform at the Kennedy Center in Washington, D.C. as part of the nation's bicentennial celebration. Taken altogether, if the implicit theme of our 75th anniversary was, "Look How Far We've Fallen;" by 1974 it was something like, "Now We Have Arrived."

And that brings us to 1999 and the 125th Anniversary observance. I was a part of that, and I imagine many of you were as well. How many of you all were actually here, in this church, on that Saturday evening of August 14, 1999?

The program chair for the 125th celebration was Arnold M. Wedel, long-time mathematics professor at Bethel. I did know Arnold well, and one thing I can testify to was his encyclopedic knowledge of all Schweitzers of accomplishment, the world over. Thus, the program for that evening featured a commissioned musical work by the composer-in-residence of the Los Angeles Philharmonic, Steven Stucky – who subsequently went on to win a Pulitzer prize. I understand our piece, "A Hymn of Heritage," is going to be performed publicly for a second time at Sunday morning's worship service; and speaking for myself and my late mother, Gladys Goering, who wrote the lyrics for it, I think that will be a wonderful and fitting thing.

And then there was the keynote address, provided by the internationally renowned theologian and Edward Mallinckrodt, Jr. Professor of Divinity at the Harvard Divinity School, Gordon Kaufman. So quite apart from the actual content of the evening, the theme of that anniversary celebration couldn't be more clear: "Look How Far We've Come."

Kaufman took as his text, biblical passages from the prophets Isaiah and Amos, the gospel of Matthew, and the book of Hebrews; and his talk is reprinted on the Swiss Mennonite Cultural & Historical Association website. Reading through it, I had a fleeting thought that maybe with a little cutting and pasting, and updating a reference here and there, I could just give the same speech here this evening! Because, after all - he was THE Gordon Kaufman, while I – you know – am not.

But that would be futile. Because of course you all can go to the web and read his remarks yourselves; and in fact, with the aid of a technology that wasn't even invented yet in 1999, you can click on a YouTube link and watch him deliver that very speech, in this very church, in that familiar, growly Kaufman baritone. I would commend that to everyone here this evening, because even 25 years later, it holds up well.

And yet, as impressive as Gordon Kaufman was, he wasn't speaking to us. He was speaking to the people we were, twenty-five years ago. In 1999 we were people who still knew actual Schweitzer immigrants. Kaufman began his remarks that night with a joke, a well-worn one even then, about his grandfather believing that God spoke German because the Bible says so, in his first words to Adam: "Adam, wo bist du?" That grandfather, John P. Kaufman, was born in Volhynia, and turned nine years old the day the City of Richmond sailed into New York on August 31, 1874.

And thus we begin to see this evolution of our relationship to those who first came to America. In 1949, at the 75th anniversary, there is no doubt that there were actual immigrants in attendance: people old enough to remember Volhynia, and the journey, and

the first years in Kansas and South Dakota. By the time of the Centennial, in 1974, people with those memories were a thing of the past. By 1999, Schweitzer memories had become recollections not of the journey itself, but of the people who made the journey: fond memories, full of nostalgia and gentle affection for their old-fashioned ways.

So here we are again, in 2024. And we have to ask, I think, what is it – apart from our European fascination with multiples of 25, of which Arnold Wedel would have thoroughly approved – what is it that that brings us together now, 150 years removed from the event? We don't remember the journey, and we don't remember those who made it. So what is it, exactly, that we have gathered here to collectively recall?

Well I am not a theologian, renowned or otherwise; and I'm pretty sure there are at least 100 people here this evening who know more about Schweitzer history than I. I am more of what the English poet T.S. Eliot described as, "not Prince Hamlet," but "an attendant lord, one that will do / To swell a progress, start a scene or two." And so I'm going to start our gathering together by taking as my text, another poem by Eliot entitled, *Little Gidding.*

Little Gidding was written in 1941, at the height of the German bombing of London known as "the Blitz." Watching the fires spring up in his adopted city, Eliot was struck by contrasts: of the terrible beauty of descending bombs – a "dark dove with flickering tongue," he called them – and the destruction they left; and of the fact that Love – love of country – motivated both those who were being bombed and those doing the bombing.

And so in his mind, he saw a place he had visited years before: the graveyard behind a county church in the tiny hamlet of Little Gidding, near Cambridge, England, where lay the remains of people who fought on both sides of England's long civil strife in the 17th and 18th centuries. The resulting poem is a kind of cemetery tour, not unlike the ones many of us will take in the next couple of days. Eliot felt that somewhere in this image were the seeds of understanding the drama he was witnessing, but that it would not be found in the simple names and dates on the tombstones. Thus he begins his tour with a stark warning: "You are not here to verify / Instruct yourself, or inform curiosity." Indeed? If not that, what are the reasons for our gathering?

One important reason, it seems to me, is the act of animation. At a time when we no longer remember the journey of 1874 or the people who made it, we come together to bring to life, much of that which has been central to our experiences this past century and a half. I'm thinking of the farm demonstrations with centuries-old equipment, of the food, of the present-day incarnations of art forms like quilting and woodworking, and of the many stories we will share. (Speaking of quilting and woodworking, I remember one

about our brother Dale Stucky fuming about the lack of legal protections for the commercial use of the word "Mennonite," as in the way any yahoo could arbitrarily label something a "Mennonite Quilt" or "Mennonite Furniture" as a way of increasing its market value.)

I'm thinking especially, at this 150th anniversary observation, of Jenny Schrag's drama, "A Goodly Heritage." History, said T.S. Eliot, is a pattern of timeless moments; and I believe Jenny did a masterful job of bringing to life the timeless moments of, let us call it, our mythic past – everything from the baptism of George Blaurock, to the invention of bohne beroggi – along with our contemporary efforts to claim that heritage.

Near the end of the play, a group of figures are discussing the shortcomings, as they see them, of our ancestors' actions: in particular, the way in which the immigrants' culture and farming practices constituted a "disregard for the land and its inhabitants." This, they conclude," is something we must confess and actively address." Thus do we come, not full circle, but more like 180 degrees in our Schweitzer sensibilities. In 1949 we were castigating ourselves for not living up to the virtues of our forebears. Now, it seems, it is they who failed to live up to ours.

Atonement for those sins of our ancestors is indeed a second reason implicit in our gathering at the 150 year mark. And to be sure, this has been a notable blind spot in the immigration narrative we've been repeating for well over a century. None of the seven plaques on the Centennial Monument mention the tribes who occupied the land before our arrival (though the railroad gets a shout out in plaques 1 and 2.) And some of the words prevalent in contemporary discourse, like "stolen land," convey moral imprecations every bit as harsh as those P.P. Wedel levied against us 75 years ago.

T.S. Eliot would have questioned this recurrent streak of Mennonite self-criticism. He thought it simply the inevitable consequence of living a long life: "the awareness / Of things ill done and done to others' harm / Which once you took for exercise of virtue." And it is a tricky thing, this business of rendering the judgment of history. Because history is not static. History is not the decisions and actions of 73 Swiss Volhynian families, but the story they set in motion. Their part has long been over; while ours changes moment to moment. History, as Eliot put it, is now.

To use a very secular illustration: it is like the exchange of dialogue in the movie, "Men in Black," starring Tommy Lee Jones and Will Smith as two government agents who know the secret that refugees from other planets are living on earth. At the beginning of the film, Smith is a New York city cop who is shaken by his first encounter with one of

these aliens; and Jones, the veteran agent, is trying to help him come to terms with the moment.

"1500 years ago," Tommy Lee Jones says, "everybody knew the earth was the center of the universe. 500 years ago, everybody knew the world was flat. 15 minutes ago you knew we humans were alone on this planet. Imagine what you'll know, tomorrow."

In my head, there's a Schweitzer version of this exchange that goes like this: 500 years ago, everybody knew that the Pope was the head of Christendom on earth and that all infants needed to be baptized. 150 years ago, everybody knew that there was uninhabited land available at a fair price in the central plains of the United States. Today we all know that terrible things were done to the peoples living on that land prior to our arrival, and that in some way our ancestors were complicit. Imagine what we'll know, tomorrow.

The life-span statistics maintained by the CDC tell me that there's a 1 in 10 chance that I will still be around in 2049 for the 175th anniversary of the Schweitzers coming to America. For a variety of reasons, I hope I beat the odds and am here to see what that generation will make of all this. One thing I can predict with confidence, is that because they'll be Schweitzers, they will have opinions! And because I also believe in the old hymn that says time is like an ever rolling stream, I can also predict that those opinions will be different than the ones that predominate now. "History may be servitude," said T.S. Eliot, "History may be freedom. See, now they vanish, / The faces and places . . . To become renewed, transfigured, in another pattern."

For now, though, we cannot un-see what we have seen. Unlike the Men in Black, we have no gadget that can selectively erase our memories of things we'd rather not know. So our future, whatever it holds, has to reckon with this knowledge and what it means for what we will become. Perhaps our most recent monument, Ann Zerger's sculpture, "Fields of Hope," has taken us on the first steps of this journey.

But meanwhile, we seem to be at a bit of a standstill. If we no longer can remember the journey of 1874 or those who took it; and we cannot forget the parts of it that now seem ill considered, what else is it we might hope to accomplish on this August weekend in the year of our Lord 2024?

Well – to the categories of animation and atonement, I would add a third and most important observance, and that is appreciation. Appreciation is akin to gratitude, but more comprehensive. To appreciate, is to understand something. If I listen to a piece of music once, I may like it; but it takes many listenings before I begin to truly appreciate it.

And everything I learn about that music will help me appreciate it more: something we're all going to be experiencing in just a few moments.

Appreciation also means, literally, to increase in value over time – and this is particularly important to us, as we get farther and farther away from the event we are now marking. That is why, in part, we have a whole series of seminars on Saturday: to learn more about what this business of being "Schweitzer," really is. Kudos to the planning committee and especially the chair, my cousin Danielle Goering, for making this possible. (And yes I know, she's really only my "cousin-in-law"; and so kudos to my cousin Wayne, for having the excellent sense to marry her all those years ago.)

For my part, I offer up one personal example of appreciation, for which I am indebted to Wayne for providing additional information. Our great-great grandmother Maria Stucky Goering was one of the 1874 immigrants, and I suspect her circumstances were not unique. Fate had already widowed Maria twice: the first time, when she was barely 20 years old, shortly after the death of one child, and six months before the death of another. She married again, this time to Christian Goering, only to lose him 10 years later after the birth of 3 more children, including our great-grandfather, Dicke Joe Goering. When we read in the annals of the Schweitzers coming to America, that the entire Kotosufka congregation decided to emigrate, one thing I know for certain is that neither Maria nor her children got a vote in that decision. That was not the way it was done, in 1874. She was simply told that she would be leaving everything she'd ever known, including the graves of her two husbands and two children, never to see them again.

One cannot help but be filled with awe and appreciation for the fortitude Maria and others like her, displayed at that moment. It was surely an illustration of what the Emperor Napoleon liked to call "2 o'clock in the morning courage": the ability to get unwelcome news when you are alone in the dark, and still be able to function. We Mennonites are fond of stories of being "Banished for Faith;" in part because they showcase our heritage in a heroic light. But faith is more than fidelity to lofty principles. It requires 2 o'clock in the morning courage, without which none of the other stories we like to repeat, would be possible.

Now I emphasize this example of courage in the face of circumstance, precisely because it is not a uniquely Mennonite virtue. To the contrary, it is a quality equally prized by Napoleon the Emperor of France and Napoleon the Elder of Hoffnungsfeld: that would be Napoleon R. Kaufman, another of my great-grandfathers, who led the Hopefield congregation after the passing of Elder Jacob Stucky. Courage, and fortitude, and discipline, and plain old stick-to-it-iveness; love and care for the land we settled: these are an equal part of our Mennonite immigrant story that we need to appreciate now, more

than ever. Because 150 years into our American journey, Schweitzers can no longer claim to be seriously worrying about separation vs. infiltration, or whether we'll succumb to the temptations of living in a changing world. That ship, if you'll pardon the metaphor, has surely sailed.

So maybe it's time we stopped being a people trying hard to hold on to our distinctiveness, and instead become a people that is seeking a full appreciation of all the ways we have been shaped by our goodly heritage and our shared humanity Because it seems to me – and admittedly, this is a subjective judgment – that our world in 2024 is less in need of another prophetic voice, than it is in need of people who can see in their own stories, the seeds of empathy for the stories of others.

In the fullness of our history, we ought to be people who can say to all who feel their faith is being threatened by a misguided government, that we get it. We ought to be people who can say, we understand, to any group, anywhere, whose lives have been shaped by centuries of persecution and dislocation. We ought to be people who can move beyond our historic focus on the first lines of Roman 12:2 – "Be ye not conformed to this world" – to the entirety of the sentence: "Be ye not conformed to this world, but be ye transformed by the renewing of your minds."

To be sure, such a transformation would not come easily. It would require that we give up at least some of what has brought us safe thus far: namely, the conviction that we are almost always, uniquely, in the right. Yet Gordon Kaufman thought we could do it, when he reminded us that "however deep may be our own convictions about right and wrong, good and evil, our special mission in the world, we must never forget that [God] is at work with and in and through all peoples everywhere." It's what T.S. Eliot thought, as he looked out over the graves of an old English cemetery. "This is use of memory," he said, "For liberation – not less of love but expanding / Of love beyond desire, and so liberation / From the future as well as the past."

Fellow Schweitzers and Friends, I know from your presence here this evening that you, too, are interested not only in the journey taken by our forebears, but in where that journey will take us next. So let me leave you with this benediction from the end of Eliot's poem:

"With the drawing of this Love and the voice of this Calling / We shall not cease from exploration / And the end of all our exploring / Will be to arrive where we started / And know the place for the first time."

Wynn Goering