

Hyde Park Mennonite Fellowship 40th Anniversary 11/5/17

A pastor mused to his colleagues
that being a pastor is often like
“being married to someone
who isn’t married to you.”

I think of my years at Hyde Park Mennonite Fellowship
as offering another
startling family image,
one more like
“it is possible—and wonderful—
to fall in love with over 70 people
all at the same time.”

Occasionally when our two daughters were young
they would gang up on me to ask,
“Which one of us is your favorite child?”

Helplessly enamored with each of them
in all their uniqueness
and creativity
and innate loveliness,
looking from one intense set of brown eyes and then to the other,
I would finally say,
“I guess whichever one of you I’m currently looking at!”

It is this kind
of helplessly enamored
emotional charge
that I feel again
as I look back on my time with you all at Hyde Park,
and all the “meaningful moments”
that come flooding back.

I remember Worship Committee wrestling
with how to make our Easter service more meaningful
as most of us
were jumping from an upbeat Palm Sunday service
straight to Easter Sunday
without the darkness of Holy Week between
to contribute perspective and depth.

We decided to take a risk
and mess with tradition
and to try a Palm-Passion Sunday.

We began with the celebration of the palms
but then read through the whole Passion story as well,
darkening the church slowly
as the story spiraled into betrayal and mob rule,
drawing blinds,
turning out lights.

Worship Committee tasked Joy
with finding a big bouquet of flowers
and she chose
long-stemmed
huge dark purple irises,
a gorgeous bowl of them on the communion table.
They were instantly the focal point of the sanctuary.

As many different voices read through the texts,
the congregation sank into profound silence.

I saw people wiping tears away
and knew that our risk was paying off.

The great sorrow borne by God and humanity
in every innocent death,
by crucifixion,

by lynching,
by mob murder
 echoed palpably
down through the millennia
into our shared space.

At the moment of the crucifixion,
I snuffed out the Christ candle,
 took the biggest scissors I could find
 and in the near-dark
 snipped the flower heads off,
 one by one,
 each harsh scraping snip
 and soft thump of falling flower head
 echoing
in the total silence.

After the service,
 some of the kids gathered around the communion table
 as I was cleaning up.

One of our beautiful Hyde Park children
 looked at me with tears in his eyes
 as he carefully picked up
 a decapitated iris.

“If I put this in dirt, will it grow again?” he asked.

I looked at him,
seeing the compassionate face of God as clearly as I ever have.

“No, it won’t,” I said gently.

Another child, a little older,
 looked at the fallen flowers
 and at the one the 6-year-old was holding.

She reached out and touched his arm
with affection and compassion.
She said softly, sadly,
“I think that’s the point.”

(PAUSE)

As I reflect on my time with you at Hyde Park,
now, as another year spirals down
towards the darkness and waiting of Advent
I am so struck
with how durable these memories are....

Every one of you has reminded me
that we are
created in the image of God;
every one of you has shown me
some unique aspect of
the open-hearted,
compassionate,
loving,
forgiving,
shining face of God.

In hundreds of conversations and interactions
listening with the ear of my heart
and gazing from one beautiful pair of eyes to the next,
you all have taught me so much
about God’s justice
God’s mercy
God’s compassionate love.

Thank you.

(NOTE: I kept this short as I would really like to leave you time to sing
all four verses of ‘My soul cries out!’ It says so much of what I have
loved about the heart of HPMF.)