

On Being Mennonite



For an urban California Mennonite, it is not in the embarrassment of head coverings and plain dress, nor in harsh small-town community judgments of the wayward. But it is there in my trusted pastor's words to me one Sunday when I again hit the solid wall of men, suits lined shoulder to shoulder, hands folded over trousers, men standing guard over the communion plate. The pastor scoffs, "Women serving communion? Then why not anyone? Why not Jake Neufeld?" Ah, woman = man with Down's syndrome ... Or a relative's comment on allowing women in church leadership, "That is a slippery slope. Why, the gays will be next!" Ah, woman = gay and lesbian.

To be Mennonite — it is all those screws in the mouth. That is it, yet not it at all. It is a quilt, communally stitched with gossip and women's wisdom, warm (sometimes wrapped too close) around the shoulders, it is the zwiebach, doubled high, warm and doughy like my grandma's hands, piled on plates at weddings and funerals. (Mennonites never acknowledge gluttony as sin.) It is the day we pick up a hammer and nail together a new life, a new hope for the home-less (unless we are too busy climbing our own ladders). It is the day we gather to mourn a senseless war and advertise for peace in the community paper, in the banners outside our doors, in our hearts (though peace with our fellow Mennonite may be a different matter). It is this and not this — how can words or images say why we love, just as a lover when pressed cannot really say, but knows love is there. To be Mennonite: it is a cold metallic taste mixed with buttered zwiebach, oven-warm. There can be shunning, silencing, ankle-binding, yes, but there is also the comforter, the after-Sunday-dinner sigh, the barn-raising and a shared quiet faith in the Constructor of all.

—Fran Martens Friesen, 2007

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Fran Martens Friesen teaches literature and writing courses at Fresno Pacific University. She received a B.A. from Goshen College and an M.A. in English from Georgetown University. She has had several poems printed by Mennonite publishers. She is a member of Mennonite Community Church in Fresno.