

Joseph Stuckey

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Guten morgen. Good morning. I'm (Ch)Joseph Stuckey. I've heard that some of you remember me—or at least some stories about me. I've even heard that your conference today still bears the touch of my convictions. Ach, my Barbara would be surprised!

Vell, let me tell you! I have lived a full and exciting life. I have seen many things in my life-time. I find it amazing that I have spent most of my life in Illinois. Did you know that my grandparents lived in Bern, Switzerland, along with many other Amish and Mennonite families that later moved to America? But then my parents fled to the Alsace-Lorraine area of France because of persecution, so I grew up speaking French.

I was born in 1826 and when I was five years old my parents decided to come to America. When we got on the ship to cross the Atlantic Ocean there were lots of Amish boys and girls on the ship. So I learned German from them as we played together. Ach, what a long boat ride! We got to a place called New Orleans and then sailed up the Mississippi River and the Ohio River to Butler County near Dayton, Ohio.

I never had the chance to go to school, but my mother and father taught me to read German. I was baptized and joined the church when I was 17, and then I got married the next year to Barbara Roth. In 1850, I got what you call "itchy feet." I wanted to move out west. So Barbara and I and our two children got on a boat and traveled down the Ohio River to the Mississippi and then the Illinois River and came to Peoria, where I worked in a meat packing plant to make us some money.

Then in March of 1851 we made the big move to Danvers Township where I started farming. I loved the earth, the good soil. I enjoyed farming. I was a good farmer and did well. People often came to me for advice about money.

I really enjoyed reading and studying my Bible. The ministers in the congregation were getting older, and so they voted me in as a minister in 1860. Being ordained really made me want to dig into the scriptures. I always carried a Bible with me. Barbara used to get so upset with me because I was always losing my Bible when I was plowing! I wonder if any of you Illinois farmers ever found my New Testament in the ground?
(Pause)

The world was changing fast. I knew that I needed to learn to read English. I could speak English, but not read it. I remember one day in 1856 I went to Bloomington and bought an English newspaper. I decided that I was going to learn to read English. And I did! My wife Barbara thought I was "verecht" ---excuse me, she thought I was crazy.

(Pause)

A few years after I became a minister the Civil War came along. That was not a good time. Some of our young men served in the war. Such pain the war caused. I must say, though, it was good for us farmers. We got some very high prices for our corn and wheat. The prices were so high it made it possible for me to retire from farming when I was only 42. Oh, I helped my son-in-law when he needed help on the farm, but God had other plans for me. The church took a lot of my time--preaching, marrying and ordaining. Would you believe I married 256 couples and baptized 1,328 persons?

I didn't have many books. I just read the scriptures. When I would preach I didn't have many notes, I just trusted God to give me what I needed to say. Sometimes the congregation wished God wouldn't give me so much. 'Ach, der lieber,' sometimes I preached for almost two hours." In my preaching I preached about discipleship, you know, that we need to follow Jesus Christ in our everyday life, but I also thought it was very important that we have a *new birth* experience. (Pause)

My wife Barbara was so patient with me. I was always going to a meeting someplace. I traveled to other counties in Illinois: Tazewell, Woodford, Bureau and Livingston. And I went to Iowa and Indiana a lot. I even traveled way out east to Ohio and Pennsylvania and west to Missouri to meet with other ministers. Lots of travel, lots of miles, lots of time—but we knew we needed to get together lest we forget who we are and what we believe.

Some of the other ministers just wanted to talk about rules and more rules, but that's only part of it. I got into trouble sometimes. Did you know that I could be stubborn sometimes? At least that's what Barbara said. And she was usually right. I didn't like all the rules that some of the bishops said were so important. I remember in about 1865 some of the men in the Rock Creek congregation began to wear buttons, and the younger men began to wear neckties. That raised a ruckus! We had a lot of meetings about rules.

Ministers meetings and more ministers meetings. We would get together and try to decide which was the proper method of baptism, the responsibility of the deacon's office, the extent to which the ban should be observed, especially in such cases as between husband and wife. We talked about the use of such worldly innovations as insurance, photographs, lotteries, meetinghouses, lightning rods, and musical instruments. And then came 1872.

In 1872 my congregation built a meetinghouse at North Danvers. Did you know that it is the oldest church building in McLean County that still has the same congregation worshipping in it?

But those were not good years for me. I had a lot of trouble with some of the rules that

we Amish bishops had, like excommunicating someone from church. That's telling someone they can't worship with you anymore. The straw that broke the camel's back came when my friend, (Ch)Joseph Yoder, wrote a poem that I didn't like and other bishops didn't like either. His poem talked about how God would let all people go to heaven because God wouldn't send anyone to hell. Even though I didn't agree with Joseph, I didn't think he should be excommunicated. How are you ever going to get someone to change their mind if you don't talk to them anymore?! What really didn't settle with me was having people who didn't know him decide he should be excommunicated. They didn't understand him; they didn't know what motivated him; they didn't know what the rest of his life was like. How could others decide to excommunicate him?! So I told the other ministers, 'He is still my brother.' That did not please the bishops.

It was a sad time. Many of the bishops said that I had failed the church, and so they disfellowshipped me. They refused to speak to me anymore. But the other ministers at North Danvers stood beside me. And soon other ministers and bishops let me know that they agreed with me. That helped me get through that sad time. Pretty soon we became known as the "Stuckey" Amish.

Another thing that really helped me during those hard years were the many good *Mennonite* friends that I had in the area. We often talked about the church and God's word. There were a lot of like-minded congregations that asked me to be their bishop—some in Indiana, Illinois, Iowa and other places. People said we had a "Stuckey Way" of Christianity. We agreed that some things were more important than other things. We were more concerned for what people have in their **heads and hearts** - rather than for what they have **on their heads**. We wanted the emphasis on **heart attitudes** rather than on outward forms. We felt called to be ambassadors of Christ through the will of God. And we wanted abundant opportunity for young people to accept responsibility in the church.

As an old man, I saw the Central Conference formed. Creating the conference was a practical way to help churches solve problems, find preachers, and start new Sunday Schools in our area. I didn't do much to design the conference. I let that to younger ministers. But we organized the conference to help our churches be strong, not to decide on rules. And we always stayed in fellowship with the ministers of the Middle District and were encouraged by their efforts to be faithful as well.

Vell, it wasn't easy! I know there were others besides Barbara who thought I was stubborn. I did have strong convictions, but I always tried to be very considerate of the views of others. Some said I was unorthodox because I was sympathetic with those who thought different. But perhaps that weakness was also a strength. God will be my judge.

Ach, there are many more things that I could tell you, but I'd better stop in case this sermon is two hours long!

(Information was gathered from *Central Conference of Mennonites*, by William B Weaver, 1927 and from *A Goodly Heritage: A History of the North Danvers Mennonite Church*, by Steve Estes, 1982, and *Faith in Ferment*, by Samuel Floyd Pannabecker, 1968.)