

# Conservative Mennonite Conference 2007

## Sweet, Sorrowful, Untidy Stories of God's Grace

by Mary Carol Miller

Women of the Conference wove together their personal stories, a dramatic interpretation of the "Sinful Woman," who annointed Jesus, and an original song to highlight the theme of "Amazing Grace – Our Stories," during the Women's Fellowship morning meeting.

Rose Yoder's original song led us to meditate on God's grace by describing the all-sufficiency of the blood of Christ which covered Jesus in death then and covers his people in life now.

In deft strokes and with small stories, author Martha Stoltzfus described the utter loneliness of widowhood that renders the grief stricken woman "without strength even to tie her shoes." Yet she declared that God's grace came to her in many forms. She recognized her heavenly father's touch in the loving hands and help of family and friends. She heard his comforting voice through small bits of comforting Scripture when she could not read the Bible, and in hymns, poetry, Appalachian songs and even an old lullaby when she could not sleep: "Sleep, my child, and peace attend thee, all through the night...."

For Martha, one small incident demonstrated God's grace to her in her trial of grieving. It was Halloween and only months after Wesley's death. Martha was completely unprepared with treats for the small astronaut and his Cinderella-like sister who stood hopefully on her doorstep with their candy bags opened for more treats. "I am so sorry," she apologized, "I don't have even a single piece of candy in the house."

"That's all right," said the forgiving, young trick-or-treater as he reached his grubby hand into his own bag of treats. "I'll give you some of mine."

"I deserved a trick," mused Martha. "But he gave me a treat."

Elnora Miller startled us by beginning her story of living through divorce with a bright, red letter "D" taped to her forehead. She said that wearing it demonstrated the stigma of perhaps all of the following: "divorce, dumped, duped and desperate."

Removing the red letter, Elnora shared her testimony of God's grace in providing for her and her two young sons. Throughout the years of separation and working for restoration of her marriage, Elnora believed that she received a strong gift of faith that God wanted to heal her marriage. Years passed and she realized that was a dream she needed

to give up, and yet the question remained, "Why did you give me this gift of faith?" She received a clear answer: the gift of faith was not simply "for God to care for me until my husband came home." Beyond that, it was for a deeper walk in which God wanted Elnora to trust Him forever.

Carol Graber's testimony of amazing grace started with an idyllic description of family life and continued through a breathtaking recount of losses and gains like a roller coaster of experiences. "And I never did like roly coasters," she confessed.

But even before the accident and death of her first husband, a particularly dry period in Carol's spiritual life and her ensuing prayer for a greater closeness to God had prepared her for God's assignments. She noted that Psalm 16 says that it is God "who assigns me my portion and my cup." And in the years of adjusting to family life without



the children's father, of remarriage into a very large blended family and then of losing her only birth daughter to a brain tumor, she grew to realize that the pathway through difficulties leads to higher ground. "Grieving with hope gives us a glimpse into the future and the good to come."

And then in a stark reminder that life's stories require God's amazing grace to take us through, Carol closed by asking the women of the conference to pray for her and her family in their most recent loss of a son who took his own life.

Perhaps the only way to comprehend God's grace in the mixture of these sweet, sorrowful and untidy stories is to return to the dramatic dance in which Jamie Yoder portrayed for us the loneliness and rejection of the "Sinful Woman" of Luke 7. From shackled shame to glorious joy, Jamie's sweeping movements gracefully showed that God's forgiveness breaks bondage and sets a woman free to love Him freely. That is amazing grace. **BB**