

Bloomington Sermon, April 30, 2023

## **Pursuing Peace and Justice as Disciples**

John 15: 1-5; Matthew 5:38-39; 43-45; Romans 12:20-21

It is a pleasure being with you today. I think what you are doing in this series is a wonderful thing: reflecting on the past as a way of reflecting on the present and future. I am an historian, so reflecting on the past is what I do. This morning I will be talking about Anabaptist beginnings. I have to talk fast. I'm going to try to pack ten pounds of potatoes into a five pound bag. As I describe some of our 16<sup>th</sup> century beginnings I would like you to note where it does, and does not coincide with what you know of the Mennonite church of today. We can perhaps talk about these similarities and differences in the next hour.

A little more than a year and a half from now, in January 2025, we will mark exactly 500 years since the first adult baptisms took place in Zurich, in Felix Mantz's mother's house, just a few blocks from the cathedral in downtown Zurich. We know that Conrad Grebel, Felix Mantz and George Blaurock were present, along with a few unnamed others. Scripture study had convinced them that infant baptism was not biblical, and that baptism should be reserved for those who had first heard and understood the gospel, and believed it, repented of their sins, and requested water baptism as a sign of their faith and a mark that they were setting out to live new lives in Christ. Infants could do none of this.

Three things here:

First, the adult baptizers in Zurich originally were followers of Ulrich Zwingli who was a Protestant leader, setting out to reform the Catholic church on the basis of Scripture alone. Our tradition is "Protestant" in the broad sense that it originated in this movement to reform the church according to Scripture. But when

the Anabaptists read Scripture, they came to some unique conclusions. For one, they concluded that adult baptism was what Jesus had taught and the apostles practiced. Here the words of the Great Commission, Matthew 28:19-20, were central.<sup>1</sup> This close link to Scripture would remain a feature of our tradition as decades and centuries passed, not just in defining baptism, but also in clarifying what a “life in Christ” would look like. So our tradition is “Protestant” in emphasizing the centrality of Scripture.

Second, by limiting baptism to adults who chose to be baptized, our parents in the faith defined the church in a new way. The church of Zurich included all the citizens of the territory, baptized as infants. Baptizing only adults would break apart the church/state unity that prevailed everywhere. Today “believers’ churches” are common. In 1525 such a church was unheard-of, considered to be a radical and dangerous dis-ordering of society.

Third, when they baptized with water, the first adult baptizers weren’t just following literal Scripture by pouring water on adults. More fundamentally, they believed baptism was a significant step in the spiritual process of salvation. Here they weren’t very Protestant. It was only after an inward, spiritual process, which was sometimes called “coming to faith,” that baptism in water happened. The water was a visible sign that pointed back to an underlying spiritual process and pointed forward to a new life in Christ. It is this spiritual process I want to speak about in more detail. It explains more about the discipleship that came to define our tradition.

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<sup>1</sup> Matthew 28:19-20: “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you.”

## The New Birth

A Confession of faith from 1617 said the following about spiritual and water baptism: “Without this inward baptism, with the Holy Spirit and fire (Matt. 3:11), the visible baptism of the water is vain and useless (like the seal of an empty letter) (Rom. 2:8).” [Koop, “Thirty-Three Articles” (1617), *Confessions*, 228.] This puts the inner/outer reality in pretty stark terms.<sup>2</sup> To become a child of God one must be born again through the Holy Spirit and not just baptized in water.

A “Short Confession” from 1610 spoke about this rebirth as “an act of God carried out in the soul of the truly penitent, a restoring of the image of God in us, a renewing of mind and heart...”

The new birth restores God’s image within and renews hearts and minds. It re-makes people. This is a big deal! The confession continues:

“This new birth brings with it ... a sincere putting to death of all evil within... At the same time the new birth brings with it an awakening of new life in God, in true goodness, righteousness and holiness...”

The new birth has concrete results, inwardly and outwardly. Some Anabaptist language here seemed to suggest that after rebirth, any further sinning would be rare. There was a high degree of optimism. The confession continues:

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<sup>2</sup> An earlier confession said the same thing differently: “... children of God [are created] by renewal and the new birth through the Holy Spirit.” [“Confession,” 347.]

“The means by which this [new birth] is worked in us is the Holy Spirit with his fire and power, not by any creaturely means. ... Hereby we become children of God, heavenly, spiritual-minded, righteous and holy.”<sup>3</sup>

So the new birth is the work of the Holy Spirit, and can't be attained any other way. One must be “born from above” to see the kingdom of God. Furthermore, it is this inward spiritual work that truly matters, and not any outward ceremonies. To say this another way, getting baptized in water without the corresponding spiritual rebirth just gets you wet. Nothing more.

### Discipleship

In the Protestant tradition, one is saved by believing the Good News of Jesus' atoning sacrifice for human sin. In contrast to the “good works of penance” of Roman Catholicism, Martin Luther famously said that we are “Saved by faith through grace.” And end of story. Good works played no role in the Protestant understanding of salvation.

By contrast with the Protestant tradition, the Anabaptists insisted that not only faith, but also the new birth is central to salvation, and also the life of discipleship that follows baptism. The Short, Simple Confession of 1590 says this: “...through the new birth which comes down from heaven a person is grafted into the vine, planted and given grace.” (Short, Simple Confession, 208).

Here this Confession referred to a passage often cited by Anabaptists, which we heard read this morning: John 15: 1-5. “I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinegrower. ... <sup>4</sup> Abide in me as I abide in you. Just as the branch cannot bear fruit

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<sup>3</sup> “We believe and teach that this new birth is necessary for salvation according to the words of Christ: ‘Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born from above, he cannot see the kingdom of God’...” [Koop, “Short Confession” (Waterlander, 1610), *Confessions*. 148-9.]

by itself unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in me. <sup>5</sup> I am the vine; you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing.”

The new birth in the Spirit, said the Anabaptists, ingrafts us into the vine who is Christ. In order to bear heavenly fruit, believers must first be spiritually ingrafted, and also must continue to abide spiritually in Christ the living vine.<sup>4</sup> Discipleship has deep spiritual roots.

The Anabaptists believed that since Christ ascended into heaven, the bearing of fruit in this world had now been passed from Christ the vine, to the branches—that is to say, to the church. It is the church of ingrafted believers that makes Christ visible in the world in the present time. This is a very high view of the church, don't you agree?

The 1590 confession goes on to describe the life of believers as Christ's life made visible:

“... all Christ's teaching is the Christian's teaching; his love our love; his mercy our mercy; his patience our patience; his peace our peace; his suffering our suffering; his death our death; his resurrection our resurrection; his ascension our ascension.” [“Confession, 208]

And the Confession clarifies further, in case we have missed it: “Therefore, whoever has become a participant in the divine nature ... such a one truly has the son of God in him, and also life in him, and brings forth good fruit, as noted above.” [Confession, 211].

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<sup>4</sup> The Short Simple Confession goes on to say: “Everyone ought to know, that the vine no longer produces grapes, except through the branches and not on the vine itself; so also Christ, through his disciples and followers: “If you abide in me,” he says, “you will bring forth much fruit.” [John 15:5]

This is how the Anabaptists understood the Christian life: because Christ lives in the hearts of believers, their life looks like Jesus. They are living disciples of Christ. It is the living Christ who acts **through them** to bring forth good fruit in the world. This is a profound spiritual discipleship.<sup>5</sup>

### Christocentrism

The Protestant tradition is sometimes called “Christocentric” because it placed faith in the saving work of Christ at the centre of its understanding of salvation. But our Anabaptist tradition was even more radically Christocentric because faith in Christ was just the beginning. As the early Anabaptist teacher Hans Denck said, Christ “...has fulfilled the Law, not to place us above it, but to give us an example to follow Him.” [Hans Denck, "The Law of God (1526)," in Edward J. Furcha, ed. and trans., Selected Writings of Hans Denck (Pittsburgh: Pickwick Press, 1975), 49.] In contrast to the Protestant view, we are not saved by “faith alone” in Christ’s sacrifice, but rather by faith **and** a new life that follows after Christ and even looks like Jesus.

Because of this, the Anabaptists paid special attention to the words and actions of Jesus. In 1585 a group of Anabaptists wrote to the government of Bern, explaining why they could not obey the requirements to swear oaths, go to war, and other things. Their argument was Christocentric:

“We ... desire ... to live according to ... all institutions, commandments, and example of Christ and his Apostles...”<sup>6</sup> “For what Christ taught us, he lived

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<sup>5</sup> “...his love [is] our love; his mercy our mercy; his patience our patience; his peace our peace; his suffering our suffering; his death our death; his resurrection our resurrection; his ascension our ascension.”

<sup>6</sup> “Anabaptist Letter Sent to the Magistrates in Bern, December 18, 1585,” *Later Writings*, 144.

out for us in his own life, and asked us to follow him. This we earnestly wish to do.”<sup>7</sup> Spiritually reborn believers will look like Jesus in the New Testament.<sup>8</sup>

So we come to Peace and Justice.

What did Jesus teach about peace and justice? As Mennonites we know the answer to this one! In Matthew 5:38-39 Jesus says: <sup>38</sup>“You have heard that it was said, ‘An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.’ <sup>39</sup>But I say to you: Do not resist an evildoer. But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also...”

And in the same chapter, verses 43-44 he makes an even stronger point, saying <sup>43</sup>“You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ <sup>44</sup>But I say to you: Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you...” And the apostle Paul reinforced all this when he wrote in Romans 12 <sup>20</sup> ... “if your enemies are hungry, feed them; if they are thirsty, give them something to drink... <sup>21</sup>Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.”

Looking to the New Testament, it is undeniable that disciples who bear the true fruit of the vine Christ, will be peaceful and devoted to overcoming evil with good, just as he instructed and also lived out in his own life. This is the ideal of Christian life and church life that we inherited from our faith parents in the sixteenth century. It is an ideal we have tried to live up to ever since.

And here I must stop, having taken more time than I should have for one morning’s sermon. In what ways have you been reminded of our church today, and in what ways not? I understand we will have some time following to continue the conversation.

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 146.

<sup>8</sup> The Schleithem Articles of 1527 say this: “...as Christ our Head is minded, so also must be minded the members of the body of Christ through Him... Since then Christ is as is written of Him, so must His members also be the same...” Schleithem, art. 6.