

Sermon – Anabaptism at 500: Renewal through Repentance

Preached by Zac Klassen on January 19th, 2025 @ Bloomingdale Mennonite Church

Good morning. Last Sunday, 6 churches in our MCEC perimeter cluster gathered for worship at Breslau Mennonite Church. It was a wonderful time of worship, fellowship, and thinking about our Anabaptist heritage as we approach the 500th anniversary of the faith movement. One of the hymns that we sang last week was “I Sing with Exultation,” the hymn we now just sang. It was written by early Anabaptist Felix Manz in 1526, somewhere around 1 year after he, George Blaurock, and Conrad Grebel met in Manz’ mother’s home and baptized each other. The last stanza of this hymn powerfully drives home Manz’s passion for “right faith” and a “penitential attitude” that is sealed in a “baptism true.” Singing it today, the power of the words, set to music, continues to reverberate. That said, despite the power of these words, I suspect we might struggle to capture a full sense of the depth of *passion* Manz and other early Anabaptists had, passion that drove their decision to preach against the currents of the day, advocating for adult baptism as the “true” baptism that followed upon repentance from sin and a desire to follow Jesus in daily life.

I think we also might struggle to get a sense of the implications their decision had. We probably find it hard to imagine how their actions were in direct violation not only with the church’s teaching but with the civic institutions of the day. The name “Anabaptism” after all, wasn’t even originally a name for those we see as forefathers and foremothers of our tradition but was rather a name for a crime in the Holy Roman Empire. Re-baptism was not simply a matter of going against a dominant church tradition and ritual, it was rather an abandonment of a civic duty, a rejection of a ritual that incorporated newborns into the larger political body of society within the empire. To be Christian, in that age, just *was* to be a citizen of the empire and

one's Christian duty was apiece with one's civic duty. Allegiance to one meant allegiance to the other.

So, when Blaurock and Manz and Grebel performed adult baptisms on that fateful day in 1525, they were rejecting their citizenship in the civic order of the day. That must have been no easy choice for them, but from what we know, it is a choice they felt compelled to take given the Spirit's call on their life. Renewal, for the early Anabaptists, meant turning away from a familiar path and walking in a new way. But these early Anabaptists were hardly the first to have to make hard choices for the renewal of their faith; they were not the only ones seeking to reform Christ's body. In fact, despite the importance of the Reformation in this history of Christianity, it is important to confess that the Holy wind of the Spirit's renewal has never left the church and that indeed, prior to the Anabaptist radical reformers, it had been moving powerfully through the church in Europe.

In his newly published *Survey of Global Anabaptist History*,¹ Troy Osborne (associate professor of history and theological studies at Conrad Grebel College) helpfully notes that it was a much broader context of renewal in the sixteenth century that first set the groundwork for Anabaptist faith. After all, there were many social, religious, and political changes that were afoot in Europe in the sixteenth century that preceded the first adult baptisms.² There was a weakening of civil and religious authority motivated by a deep skepticism about the unequal distributions of wealth and power at the top. There was a desire among many within the church for religious reform and renewal – a desire that would lead to new forms of faith expression that emphasized devotion and intimacy with God apart from religious institutions. There was also a

¹ Troy Osborne, *Radicals and Reformers: A Survey of Global Anabaptist History* (Herald Press, June 2024).

² What follows in my description below is a summary of Osborne's analysis on pp. 19-41 of *Radicals and Reformers*.

powerful educational movement that arose called “humanism” that encouraged teachers and students to return with vigor to original sources and texts, like the Bible, reading them in their original languages for insight into how to become renewed, virtuous people. There was the invention of the printing press and the dissemination of texts of the bible translated into the language of the common people. And with new translations came new interpretations of biblical texts, too.

Two notable examples that Osborne notes are those of a well-known humanist named Erasmus and then later the Reformer Martin Luther. Among the many challenges that they presented to church authorities at the time, one stood out to me as I prepared this sermon and reflected on John the Baptist’s and Jesus’ call to repentance. Erasmus and Luther both challenged the dominant Latin translation of John the Baptist’s words. While the Latin translation operative at the time read

“Do penance, for the kingdom of heaven is near,”

Erasmus and later Luther following him, argued for a different translation,

“Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near.”

This may seem a minor matter of translation, but in the system operative at the time, doing penance meant very particular things: going to confession at set times to confess sin and then willingly receive a form of penance from the parish priest – a task to do to show that one was sorry. While much good could be said about such acts and while later Reformers and Anabaptists would have a very positive view of having a penitential attitude in life, what really irked the Reformers at the time was the way that doing penance had become too much an outer act for show and not enough of a genuine attitude of remorse. Furthermore, penitential actions sometimes took the form of paying indulgences, where it was believed that one could purchase

“the forgiveness of sins”³ for themselves or others and so shorten the length of purgatory that one would have to serve after death.⁴

Erasmus’ and Luther’s choice to translate John the Baptist’s call as “repent” rather than “do penance,” then gave the passage a very different sense and was leveraged to argue for a more authentic, embodied repentance and faith. Arguments like Luther’s and Erasmus’, and many other different movements of reform would go on to impact and shape the thinking of Anabaptists like Felix Manz, Conrad Grebel, and later Menno Simons. While many Anabaptists would think these earlier reformers did not going far enough in their reforms, they certainly followed them in passionately preaching for an understanding of repentance that produced a real sense of remorse and that then resulted in a change in one’s outer life. Baptism, for the early Anabaptists, was closely connected to repentance because, among other things, it was a public testimony to one’s repentance and intention to live life in Christ.⁵ And of course, for the Anabaptists, an infant could not give such a testimony or make such a commitment.

Having thought about the context of renewal that fed the passions of the early Anabaptists and led them to a passionate insistence on repentance as a crucial to the life of faith, we are faced with a question: what does responding to Jesus’ call to repentance look like for us today? To put this a bit differently, if we were to look for a *new translation* or a renewed *sense* of what “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near” means for us, what would that renewed sense be and how would that impact our practices of penitence in daily living? Some of the materials distributed for the 500th commemoration of Anabaptism includes focus statements for worship

³ *Radicals and Reformers*, 37.

⁴ *Radicals and Reformers*, 37. Osborne notes that a catchy tune was even invented at the time to encourage, like a modern day commercial, people to buy into this system. One such tune included the lyrics: “As soon as the coin in the coffer rings/the soul from purgatory springs!” (*Radicals and Reformers*, 37)

⁵ A great summary of the Anabaptist understand of baptism is found in C. Arnold Snyder’s analysis in *Following in the Footsteps of Christ: The Anabaptist Tradition* (Orbis Books, 2004), 69.

services of renewal like the ones we are having. The focus statement for today's service reads as follows (and I'll read it through slowly so we can digest it):

Anabaptist communities...have fallen short of who we're called to be as followers of Jesus. Penitence, a primary theme in early Anabaptist spirituality, can correct our tendency as modern Anabaptists to practice discipleship as a form of spiritual and practical mastery rather than as *a habit of repentance*. A phrase repeated often in early Anabaptist spiritual writings is "Bend the knees of my heart." Being sorry for our sins, witting or unwitting, should motivate *a persistent curiosity* about our failures to live what we profess, along with *creative new ways* to amend our lives in solidarity with the body of Christ.⁶

There are many parts to this focus statement that I want to highlight as we consider here at Bloomingdale what a renewed sense of Christ's call to us to repent might look like and how it would impact our practices of penitence in daily living.

First, I think it worthwhile to highlight the emphasis on discipleship as a "habit of repentance" rather than a form of "spiritual and practical mastery." If we look at the Gospels, we don't see Jesus' disciples joining him and having it all figured out or never failing. This is so important to name given that, ironically, one of the negative tendencies that has crept into our Anabaptist-Mennonite heritage has been to demand perfection. Where this demand has been unrealistically placed on believers, the tendency has been either to cover up sin when it happens or divert attention away from the sins of some by magnifying the sinfulness of others. Rather than being a form of spiritual mastery, discipleship should be a habit of repentance for *all of us*.

Second, I think it worthwhile to highlight the emphasis on having a persistent curiosity about our failures to live what we profess. I really like this phrase "persistent curiosity" because it takes the element of harmful shame out of repentance. Repentance is not meant to beat us down or make us feel inadequate. "Persistent curiosity" about our failures empowers us to bring

⁶ This summary is found on p. 27 of the Anabaptism at 500 toolkit found here: https://anabaptismat500.com/wp-content/uploads/2024/08/Toolkit_txt_web.pdf

ourselves before the God of grace with an openness about the possibility of renewal. When we are persistently curious about our failures, we can ask about the factors that lead to our failure to live out our calling and we can begin, with God's help and the help of the community, to address those factors.

Third, when we persevere in that curiosity, we can begin with the Spirit's help to find creative new ways to amend our lives. A habit of repentance need not keep us stuck in the past or in cycles of failure but can open up new ways of thinking and being – new modes of living that break us out of old habits or tendencies. After all, the Greek word we translate “repent” (*metanoiete*) is made up of two words: *meta* (beyond) and *nous* (mind or spirit) – repenting, then, involves going beyond or moving past ones or turning from or breaking out of a present mindset or spiritual attitude to a new way of thinking and being. And this makes sense given John the Baptist's and Jesus' summons to turn away from the old order of things in order to embrace the newness of the kingdom drawing near – a kingdom that brought new creative new possibilities for living out Good News for all. As people were baptized in the Jordan River back then, were baptized throughout the centuries in the churches of Christendom, were later baptized in the home of Felix Manz' mother, and are today baptized here in the Waterloo Region and across the world in Asia or Africa, the summons of Jesus was and is the same even as the message must be taken up in every new age: Change your mind, turn around and follow me. Thank God that we have a global witness of Anabaptist and other siblings in Christ to witness with us to the many creative ways to live out that new kingdom life!

Living habits of repentance is what we want to do as followers of Jesus – and even this morning, today, we want to find a way to embody repentance together. In just a moment, Dorothy will play once through VT #678 Kyrie eleison – a phrase that means “Lord, have

mercy” and expresses our desire to sincerely repent from corporate and individual failures to live out our calling to follow Jesus in daily life. As the music indicates (with the two dots at the end of the bars), the phrase is sung through twice. After we sing it, I will lead us in a time of confession with brief pauses throughout for moments of silent prayer. After those moments of silence, I will use that early Anabaptist phrase: “Bend the knees of our hearts, O God” to prompt us to sing again “Kyrie eleison.” When our time of confession ends, I will then prompt us to sing through “Kyrie eleison” two times to close. Throughout this time of prayer, I invite you to assume whatever posture you are comfortable with: hands open, eyes closed, head bowed, kneeling; whatever helps you to enter this time meaningfully and authentically.

Kyrie eleison

Lord Jesus, we gather this morning as a congregation of your disciples in a spirit of repentance and sorrow, for we know that as your people we have personally and corporately done wrong and failed to live as Jesus calls us to live. As we bring to mind that which we are sorry for today, assure us of your grace and love.

For those times that we have harmed others, either by our words, our actions, or our inactions, we are sorry. Forgive us.

Silence

“Bend the knees of our hearts, O God”

Kyrie eleison

For those times we have overlooked the least of these: the poor, the outcast, and the stranger living among us, forgive us.

Silence

“Bend the knees of our hearts, O God”

Kyrie eleison

For our insatiable desire to consume, and for the ways we have become addicted to storing up treasures on earth. For failing to take care for the garden that you have asked us to tend, forgive us.

Silence

“Bend the knees of our hearts, O God”

Kyrie eleison

For our tendency to relate to others in the church and outside the church with prejudice, with stereotypes, and with an attitude of superiority, forgive us, we pray.

Silence

“Bend the knees of our hearts, O God”

Kyrie eleison

O God, where we have become stubbornly set in our ways, change our minds, reveal to us a new direction for life, give us the creativity and resolve to live differently. Having taken time today to confess our sins to you, we now draw this time to a close with a resolve to be disciples that make repentance a habit of our faith. Turn us around toward Jesus, to walk in his light.

“Bend the knees of our hearts, O God”

Kyrie eleison