

## Following Jesus as Anabaptists: Examining our Roots, Imagining our Future

Faith of the martyrs, living still  
in spite of dungeon, fire, and sword;  
oh, how our hearts beat high with joy  
whene'er we hear that glorious word!

The word “martyr” likely evokes for many of us images of someone who endures intense persecution and suffering for their faith, and indeed this is its primary meaning. Interestingly, however, the word “martyr” comes from the Latin word for “witness” – so we might also call this song “Faith of the Witnesses.” It struck me, as I thought about the opening stanza to this hymn, just how appropriate an Easter hymn it is! In this season of Easter, after all, we celebrate that faith that faces the trial of persecution and death and comes out alive – “living still,” a witness that cannot be defeated and kept down. Jesus is for us Christians our supreme witness – God with us to witness to Godself in flesh. Every martyr, every witness to God since Jesus, has been a martyr whose living and dying seeks to be a participation in the living and dying and so also the rising that comes in Christ Jesus. Singing of the “faith of the martyrs,” then, is singing of a resurrection faith – a faith that lives still. There is another line in this hymn that stood out to me – a line that did not so much sound a note of joyous triumph but rather a note of challenge:

“Faith of the martyrs, holy faith, we will be true to thee till death.”

This refrain is quite a strong promise of our corporate commitment to upholding the heritage of faith passed down to us from those witnesses to Jesus who come before us. For years, Mennonites have been inspired by this heritage through the mid-seventeenth century compendium called “The Martyrs Mirror,” a book put together by the Flemish Mennonite Tielman van Braght. In this book were many accounts of the “faith of the martyrs” from the early church all the way up until the time of the Anabaptists and Mennonites. The accounts within this book testify to the bold, strong faith of disciples through the ages that stood firm while in prison cells, and before fire and sword, boldly proclaiming Jesus as Lord. Today the use of this text is likely not nearly so popular as it once was. I suspect we might lose something important by not paying attention to it anymore, comfortable and at home as we are in our

world. And, yet, perhaps it is ok that this text does not occupy us too much. After all, if used wrongly by modern privileged folks like ourselves, a text like the *Martyrs Mirror* could encourage a kind of false martyr complex, rather than help us see just how privileged we are and help us see the responsibility that that privilege lays on us. In contrast with the Early Anabaptist martyrs who had sought separation from the world and from the corruption they encountered in it, most of us today live integrated with the dominant culture and have considerable social and economic power. The history of Anabaptism and the development of the Mennonite tradition is a history, then, not only of martyrdom and suffering, but also success and development, and of involvement in the world. Which then raises the question, what does it mean to be “true,” as we sang, to the faith of Anabaptist and Mennonite martyrs today? In what sense, if at all, can we say that today we want to follow Jesus “as Anabaptists.”

Over the next six weeks at Bloomingdale, we will be pursuing something of an answer to these questions by way of looking back – looking back at and examining *the roots* [slides] of Anabaptist and Mennonite faith that have, in one way or another, shaped the congregation that has gathered in the Bloomingdale area for the past 200 or so years. And so, we will look at important strands of the Anabaptist-Mennonite root systems, strands like: Believers Baptism, the life of peace, the priesthood of all believers, the regular reading of scripture, and approaches to mutual accountability and conflict resolution. At the same time as we look back at these strands of the Anabaptist-Mennonite root system, however, we will also be looking forward – looking forward in order to imagine the future that God has in store for us as we move into the next stages of our congregational life together. How can we be “true” to the faith of those Anabaptist and Mennonite witnesses that have come before us—how can we stay *rooted* in that faith tradition—while also remaining open to the Spirit of life that gives us *wings* and sets us free for new forms of faithful discipleship in our time? I hope that by the end of our series, we will have learned the importance of both: of both nurturing a connection to our roots as well as encouraging the freedom to innovate, to grow wings and move into new ventures of faith as a church.

To get us thinking about the challenges of finding this balance between “roots” and “wings” when thinking about how we might stay “true” to the faith of our forebearers, I want to lead us in a

congregational exercise that I first encountered through SJMC pastor Kevin Derksen at a Silver Lake Winter retreat. The exercise starts with having us first take time to think about the “strengths” and the “dangers” that are inherent in “roots” (or tradition) and the strengths and dangers that are inherent in “wings” (or innovation). So, let’s do that now:

*Roots (Tradition) and Wings (Innovation) Exercise*

See next Page for picture of this exercise:

# ROOTS

- Stability
- Identity
- Nurture
- Common Understanding / Connectedness
- Security
- Anchoring → Reach out
- Faith
- Sucks up water
- Gives a starting point
- Allows to pass forward

- Choke out growth
- Rigid conformity
- Fear to change
- Stuck in one place
- Entanglement
- Environment that roots are in
- Closed-mindedness

# WINGS

- Fly
- Freedom
- See a broader pic
- New exp.
- New growth
- New places / Adventures
- Competing
- Exercise - Stretching

- Tiredness
- Falling
- Vulnerability
- Lose your way
- Too far away  
↳ from roots
- No home
- Fickle
- Dangerous environ.
- wings break easier
- Too much freedom
- Flighty

## *Conclusion*

In his presentation, Kevin shared how he learned from Betty Pries, who many of you know is a conflict, change, and leadership specialist, that what we are dealing with when we talk about “roots” and “wings” is a polarity, or, two opposite and sometimes contradictory tendencies. Now, when those two tendencies meet, they can draw us into conflict. When we find our “rooted” or “traditional” selves in conflict with those who want to sprout “wings” or “innovate,” we will tend to argue against the one by highlighting the strengths of our position while focusing directly on the dangers of the other. [Explain with examples] Conflict begins to be managed when we start to find ways of keeping these two in healthy tension – nurturing our roots while encouraging imagination that helps us grow wings.

Drawing this all back to our worship series, I hope that as we begin to examine the root system of our Anabaptist-Mennonite tradition, that we will be able to identify, the gifts and dangers there, while also discerning the gifts and dangers involved in innovating within our tradition as we find new ways to follow Jesus as Anabaptists today. May it be so. Amen.