

**Following Jesus as Anabaptists:  
The Priesthood of All Believers  
May 7, 2023**

**Scripture Texts: 1 Cor. 12:12-14, 26; 1 Peter 2:4-5, 9**

“Called into service are women and men, so that this body might ever again, witness through worship, through deed, and through word, to Christ our Lord.” – From hymn “One is the Body” in *Voices Together* 386

I love the way that the hymns we sing together are mini sermons in themselves. One of the reasons I often start sermons with a line or two from our hymns is to point to the profound scriptural teaching that is present within them. Today’s hymn of preparation, “One is the Body,” is a wonderful example of this. If you look at the hymn in the hymn book, you will see at the bottom the scripture references that inspired this song by John Bell – and in this case the text listed is Ephesians 4, but I think the hymnal committee just as easily could have also listed 1 Corinthians 12 -- our text for today – for it is in Paul’s letter to the Corinthians that he powerfully describes the church as Christ’s body – one body that is made up of many parts, mutually empowering one another, suffering with one another in times of suffering, and taking time to honour each other. It is a fitting hymn and a fitting text to attend to in this series we continue today called “Following Jesus as Anabaptists,” and by the end of this sermon, I hope you will see why.

Last week Arnold Snyder helped us come to a greater understanding of the beginnings of the Anabaptist movement in Switzerland in the 16<sup>th</sup> century and began to get us thinking a bit about what it might mean to pursue peace and justice as Anabaptist Christians. I don’t know about you, but I found that one of the more interesting moments in Arnold’s sermon was when he asked us how we would locate our identity as a Mennonite Church in relation to other church

traditions. Would we conceive of ourselves as broadly “Protestant?” Would we conceive of ourselves as in any sense Catholic?” Arnold noted that for the 16<sup>th</sup> century Anabaptists, their identities were to some extent fluid and changing at that time. As they broke away from both Protestant and Catholic churches, Anabaptists took emphases from both. They were more Protestant when it came to their emphasis on scripture, believing *it* to be authoritative over what they saw to be human traditions, but Anabaptists were more Catholic when it came to their emphasis on the nature of salvation— “faith alone” as the means of salvation, a central theme of Protestantism, wasn’t really an Anabaptist slogan, rather the “new birth” and “discipleship” were the watchwords of the Anabaptist confession of salvation in Christ. Arnold noted that the Anabaptist emphasis on “new birth” at times created an assumption, however, that after the new birth in the life of believers, “sin should be rare.” We all chuckled when Arnold followed this statement by noting there was a great “optimism” about how “free from sin” those who were born again would be. I think our chuckling was indicative of a good development that has taken place in Anabaptist-Mennonite self-understanding and our theologies of salvation through time – by and large we have in the last number of years come to accept what our Protestant siblings know well: that we can never attain to such perfection as human beings, even as we continually strive to obey Jesus’ difficult call to “be perfect.” Our striving to follow Jesus will always involve a journey of living *into* God’s calling for us, sometimes succeeding and sometimes failing. In light of that, Mennonites have begun to learn better how to be communities of grace, even as we still emphasize the crucial importance of practical works.

And so, on the one hand, I think we can thank God that, broadly speaking, the Anabaptist-Mennonite tradition has become more realistic in its assumptions about how successfully we can “be without sin” as newly born people. In an era where we are becoming

increasingly attuned to the abuses of power within church and other environments, we have learned the hard way that over-emphasizing “purity,” “obedience,” and “perfection” is too often more about control and manipulation than about encouraging discipleship.<sup>1</sup> While still emphasizing the importance of new birth, we also recognize that new birth is not a one-time event but leads us on a life-long journey of transformation into Christ’s image. Perhaps we could map this onto our roots-and-wings exercise from a couple of Sundays ago and say that we’ve come to learn that our deep Anabaptist roots have nurtured us to be “obedient” to Jesus in ways that sometimes have put us in danger of missing the freedom (the wings) that animated Jesus’ ministry, the freedom that comes with being lifted up and embraced by God’s grace, love, and forgiveness. And, as a result, we have sometimes failed to offer the world that same grace and love. While we need the nurture of our Anabaptist roots that have kept us striving for a life of obedience, we also need a healthy dose of Protestant grace.

On the other hand, however, I think we would be remiss if we failed to recognize some of the significant strengths and even *untapped potential* of the optimism the early Anabaptists had as they sought radically to live into the new birth that they had experienced through Christ. One of the powerful aspects of early Anabaptist communities was their openness to the work of the Spirit, affecting significant change in their personal lives, in the church, and in the world. You might say they were radically open to growing and stretching their “wings” in relation to their own Catholic and Protestant church roots. Being a community of the *newly born* had the benefit, for the early Anabaptists, of putting new possibilities for faith expression on the table as old

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<sup>1</sup> Ironically, it is an overemphasis on “purity” that often leads churches to avoid confronting sin through covering it up or through using a congregational scapegoat as a means of avoiding the hard work of holding offending members to account. This has especially been the case in situations of abuse or infidelity in the church.

ways were questioned and critiqued.<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, for some of these early Anabaptists, these new possibilities had social, political, and economic implications. The Anabaptist movement sprung up, after all, during the Peasant's War, "a social upheaval [and movement] early in 1525 in wide areas of southern and central Germany and Austria" during which lower classes sought to protest and rebel against the harsh taxes and inequalities imposed on them by the Princes, clergy and other upper-class rulers.<sup>3</sup> As historian James Stayer notes, many of those who would later become Anabaptist leaders participated in that protest movement and recruited some of the rebels from the Peasant's War to be their first "Anabaptist converts."<sup>4</sup> This moment in early Anabaptist history is often less emphasized in the history due to the ways some Anabaptists went, shall we say, "off the deep end," embracing violence<sup>5</sup> and other questionable ethics.

That said, I think we do well not to forget that the new birth talked about in the early moments of the Anabaptist movement was understood to affect the social and political realms.<sup>6</sup> As Arnold noted last week, the "inner" transformation of the new birth was to have concrete, "outer" results in the church's engagement with the world, results like caring for justice, mercy, and love. It is no surprise, therefore, that years later Menno Simons would have to answer to those who scorned Anabaptists as calling for a total "community of goods," which in that time was seen as a scheme to basically take advantage of people and steal their property. Menno Simons answered back that a total community of goods was not what the church was after, but

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<sup>2</sup> Granted, many Anabaptists might have seen these ways not so much as "new" as "original" to the New Testament church.

<sup>3</sup> Bender, Harold S. and James M. Stayer. "Peasants' War, 1524-1525." *Global Anabaptist Mennonite Encyclopedia Online*. 1987. Web. 5 May 2023. [https://gameo.org/index.php?title=Peasants%27\\_War,\\_1524-1525&oldid=144557](https://gameo.org/index.php?title=Peasants%27_War,_1524-1525&oldid=144557).

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> The example of Munster, where violence and unethical behaviour took root, was often appealed to by Anabaptist critics as the quintessential example of what Anabaptist belief would lead to.

<sup>6</sup> As Arnold Snyder puts it elsewhere, "...the early Swiss baptizing movement was not all Bible, repentance, and Spirit; from the start it also had been intertwined with the social, political, and economic grievances of the peasants in Switzerland, Swabia, and the Black Forest." (*Profiles of Anabaptist Women*, 19)

rather, appealing to 1 Corinthians 12 among other texts, he said the unity of the church as Christ's "one body" calls them to a greater sense of love, mercy, and care for every single member, such that no one, especially the poor, would be left without.<sup>7</sup> All this to say that while we do well today to be more realistic than our Anabaptist parents about the human capacity for "purity" and "perfection," an appeal to "new birth" and an optimistic view of how God can transform communities is not in itself a bad thing, indeed, perhaps it is crucial now more than ever with the social, political, and economic inequalities and crises we face today.

Now, what might this optimism have to do with the "Priesthood of All Believers?" Already we've had some hints, but I will briefly try now to make it clear what this teaching is and how I think it relates to the optimistic Anabaptist view of new birth in Christ. A key dimension of the Reformation era was a strong emphasis on anti-clericalism. In other words, the authority of church leaders and specifically the clerical *monopoly* over the task of witness and ministry was radically called into question in the Reformation. Luther critiqued the Priests of the Catholic church for monopolizing ministry, often pointing to 1 Peter's description of the whole church as being a "kingdom of Priests." Anabaptists and later Mennonites followed Luther in this general anticlericalism. The clergy cannot monopolize ministry because ministry is for *all* baptized Christians. That said, Luther and later Anabaptists would still uphold understandings of special callings within the church, including the role of the Pastor or Shepherd. And, let's be honest here, for Luther and for the Anabaptists and later Mennonites, as they began to formalize their confessions, this role, and the authority that went with it, was seen as limited to men only. In other words, the general acceptance of Patriarchy within 16<sup>th</sup> century Christianity *did not*

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<sup>7</sup> "Reply to False Accusations," in *Complete Writings*, 558.

change with the Reformation idea of the Priesthood of All Believers, even as anticlericalism did begin to unravel some of the hierarchies at play.

But what interests me from some of the earliest Anabaptists accounts, before the broader formalization of confessions and during the more fluid and changing moments of the Anabaptist movement, is that it seems that Anabaptism was spiritually open to an even broader, more expansive understanding of the “Priesthood of All Believers” than would eventually take root, an understanding that saw all believing Christians, regardless of gender or estate, as truly “indispensable” to the Church’s witness to Christ. After all, if the Spirit was coming with power and resting upon both men and women, even among the lowly peasantry, to spread the Gospel, who was to prevent this from happening? In a co-edited volume, *Profiles of Anabaptist Women: Sixteenth-Century Reforming Pioneers*, Arnold Snyder notes that in the early Anabaptist movement,

“...there was a consistent appeal to the power of the Holy Spirit... [and]... In some specific cases this spiritualism freed Anabaptist women for missionizing, prophetic, and leadership roles: their authority came directly from God, and not from men.” (p.20).

If the early moments of Anabaptism held open an awareness of the Spirit’s power at work in the lives of those previously seen as “unqualified” for ministry, I can’t help but think that we too could do with a healthy dose of Spiritualism in our own churches today too. I wonder, how might a consideration of the spiritual fervor that animated our forebearers open us up to an ever-more expansive understanding of Christian vocation and witness to Christ as diffused throughout our community? How can we continue to honour each other, ensuring that all in our community are empowered for witness to Christ? This is perhaps the question we must reflect on today as we consider the heritage of our Anabaptist parents who, in their desire to live into new birth in Christ, listened to and make space for the freedom of the Spirit in the church, calling all to witness to Christ according to the gifts given to them. May we be a community that makes space

for such freedom, a community that regularly prays: “Come, Holy Spirit, come giver of gifts.”<sup>8</sup>

For if we pray this, we will be letting ourselves be built into a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ. May it be so. As a way of living into this prayer for the Spirit to come and bring gifts for all, let us sing together *Voices Together 58*: “Holy Spirit, Come to Us.” It is a Taizé song, which you can learn as you sing it. We’ll sing it through 4 times and Melodie and Jaren will help us catch and keep the tune.

**Text of Hymn:** “Holy Spirit, Come to Us. Kindle in Us the Fire of Your Love. Holy Spirit Come to Us. *Veni Sancte Spiritus* (Holy Spirit Come to Us).”

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<sup>8</sup> This is just one small portion of the much longer medieval prayer called *Veni Sancte Spiritus* (Come Holy Spirit). It is an appropriate song to sing as we approach Pentecost three weeks from now.