

Reconciliation is the centre of our work

Various Verses before and after sermon

This sermon series of the fundamentals of what is an Anabaptist Christian, is not to put down other denominations. It is simply to remind ourselves of church history, and our Mennonite heritage. We know the Christian church has been faithful in many ways during the last 500 years, while it also can be severely criticized for some of its theology and behavior. So the basic question is – how can we do better and lay the ground work for the next 500 years?

This might seem too grandiose a vision, but we need to start somewhere. And what better place to start than at North Star? I know you can read what I'm preaching by getting the pamphlet, *What is an Anabaptist Christian*, by Palmer Becker, on line, but sharing what he writes with a few of my comments, puts us all on the same page. With so much technological, political, social, and economic, with ever more coming, it's important to reflect on who we are, why we are here, our tradition, and what does God want us to hear.

Here is a description of the first Christians. Are we being invited to live this report out in faithful ways today?

Aristides shares these words from 125 AD. "They walk in all humility and kindness, and falsehood is not found among them, and they love one another. They despise not the widow, and grieve not the orphan. He that has, distributes liberally to him that has not. If they see a stranger, they bring him under their roof, and rejoice over him as if he were their own brother: for they call themselves brethren, not after the flesh, but after the Spirit of God. When one of their own poor passes away from the world, and any of them see him, then he provides for his burial

according to his ability. And if they hear that any of their number is imprisoned or oppressed for the name of their Messiah, all of them provide for his needs, and if it is possible that he may be delivered, they deliver him. And if there is any among them, that is poor and needy, and they have not an abundance of necessaries, they fast two or three days that they may supply the needy with their necessary food." Quite a testimony isn't it?

God sent his Son, Jesus, as the solution to the problem of sin. Jesus came to reconcile all those who would respond to God and to each other. He addressed brokenness and injustice of all kinds, and trained a group of followers who became ambassadors of reconciliation.

Jesus outlined specific steps for reconciliation within the faith community as recorded in Matthew 18:15-20. Offended persons & groups are to go to each other one-to-one to seek a solution to the presenting problem. If the injustice or offense remains unresolved, further steps are to be taken enlisting more community members.

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus taught his disciples that peace and justice come through seeking first the kingdom, repenting of wrong, and treating people as they themselves would like to be treated. "Don't just love those who love you," Jesus said. "Even the pagans do that much! Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you" (Mt 5:43-48). Jesus meant what he said and he meant it for us! Following Jesus means *behaving* in a new way.

At the end of his ministry, Jesus said, "As the Father has sent me, so send I you" (John 20:21). "Go into all the world and make disciples of all peoples, baptizing them and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you" (Matthew 28:18-20). As a

result, the early disciples went throughout the known world preaching, teaching and practicing a new way of life so that people everywhere might be reconciled to God and to each other.

One of the greatest challenges facing early Christians was the racial, religious and cultural conflict between Jews and Gentiles. After seeing people from diverse backgrounds being filled with the Spirit and coming into the family of God, the Apostles agreed that it was through faith in Christ, not laws and rituals, that people from different backgrounds would become one body and develop a culture of peace.

For the first several hundred years, followers of Jesus refused to engage in military combat. They understood that they were under orders to love their enemies, not kill them. "All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation," said the Apostle Paul in 2 Corinthians 5:18. If you would have asked the first Christians, I believe they would have said, "*Reconciling people to God and to each other is the center of our work!*"

When **Constantine** began to merge church and state, major changes came to the church. Jesus had said, "My kingdom is not of this world," yet Constantine was a king. Over time, the difference between the voluntary kingdom ruled by Jesus and the kingdom ruled by the emperor became blurred. The clear convictions of the early Christians were compromised. Within the church some became rich and others became poor.

Christians became persecutors. The former peacemakers went to war. Instead of spending their energies on evangelism, peacemaking and ministry, enormous amounts of energy, money and time were given to constructing great cathedrals in

nearly every province of Europe. Constructing these buildings became the center of their work.

Augustine was very concerned about personal moral issues such as drunkenness, gambling, covetousness, and adultery, but his teaching and practice related to peace and justice were severely restricted in a church closely linked to the empire. Instead of seeking reconciliation with enemies, Augustine came to believe that the Christian faith needed to be defended against them. A "just war" theory developed, which permitted Christians, in certain situations, to participate in violence and war. This approach to war has remained the position of many Christian traditions today.

Luther, Zwingli and Calvin did much that was good. Luther developed the idea of the "community chest," and Calvin sought to influence society to live by Christian principles. However, they, like Augustine, emphasized personal forgiveness and obedience to the Ten Commandments, but provided less specific teaching and practice related to transforming grace, evangelism and peacemaking.

Early Anabaptist Christians under the leadership of **Menno Simons** and others struggled to find common understandings on how to live as the body of Christ in the world. They came to believe that due to the work of the Holy Spirit and their commitment to each other, followers of Jesus could become Christ-like and *behave* in a Christ-like way.

Early Anabaptists often assembled in homes and small group settings where they sensed the Spirit's presence and studied the Bible as a basis for giving each other counsel on how to live. Anabaptists wanted the Scriptures to be their only "weapon." In their studies they emphasized economic sharing, peace with

God, peace with each other, and peace with their enemies.

The Anabaptist movement was in some ways the charismatic or Holy Spirit movement of the Reformation era. Anabaptist leaders spoke more about the transforming power of the Holy Spirit than did the other reformers. They believed that the Holy Spirit empowered them for discipleship, evangelism, peace making, and living the simple life.

The Anabaptist movement was also the evangelistic movement of the 16th century. With persistence and passion, key leaders – at the cost of their lives – went throughout Europe seeking to reconcile people to God and to each other. By the thousands, people came to a personal relationship with Jesus, and joined the Anabaptist fellowships that were springing up throughout much of Europe.

In addition, Anabaptists also played key roles in promoting the cause of social justice in their day. Many local groups within the movement were known for their economic sharing and their emphasis on treating people justly. Their leaders and followers addressed many of the economic and social concerns being raised by peasants who were revolting against the dictatorial nature of the feudal system. Small fellowships functioned as alternative societies to both the Empire and the feudal system. It was inconceivable that genuine followers of Jesus, who had been transformed by the Spirit of God and baptized into the one body of Christ, would cling to surplus goods or wealth when they saw fellow members in need.

Through the study of Scripture and an unwavering commitment to following Jesus in everyday life, Anabaptist Christians came to believe that it was wrong to participate in war. Like the early disciples, they refused to

join the military even though Muslim Turks were attempting to invade Europe. Rather than fighting back against their enemies, Anabaptists chose to follow the example of Jesus, who “did not retaliate when people hurled their insults at him and made no threats when he suffered” (1 Peter 2:23).

If you would have asked them, I believe that Menno Simons and most early Anabaptist Christians would have joined the first disciples in saying, “*Reconciling people to God and to each other is the center of our work!*”

What does this mean for us today? Christians from an Anabaptist perspective believe that: **1. We are to help reconcile people to God.** Just as God took the initiative in Jesus Christ to reconcile us to himself and to each other, so God is asking us to take the initiative to do our part in reconciling others to him in our Judeas, Jerusalems, Samarias, and broader worlds. God has given us the ministry of reconciliation!

Present-day Christians from an Anabaptist perspective are commissioned to make disciples, to baptize them, and to instruct them in all that Jesus lived and taught. They want their acquaintances to *believe* in Jesus, to *belong* to a Christ-centered community, and to *behave* in a transformed way.

When seekers “surrender as much of themselves as they can to as much of Christ as they can understand,” they are born again. They are given a new start in life. They have new values and Holy Spirit empowerment to live those values.

Being reconciled to God leads to transformed living. Jesus changes the thinking, the friendships and the behaviors of those who accept him. They become transformed mentally, emotionally, physically, socially &

politically. This places them in stark contrast to the world.

2. We are to help reconcile people to each other. Reconciling people not only to God but also to each other is at the center of our work. This may mean exploring the cause of a conflict and helping the parties to reconcile that conflict through careful listening, honest confession, unselfish forgiving, and appropriate restitution.

Forgiveness removes the walls of offense that exist not only between us and God, but also between us and others in the church. Eating the Lord's Supper together becomes a fellowship experience made possible by the forgiveness that we have received from God and each other.

Christians are to be a blessing to people of all backgrounds, genders and convictions. When we encounter individuals or groups in conflict with one another, we are to "think reconcilia-tion" rather than judgment. But we cannot help others to go farther than we ourselves have gone. Even as we seek to help others to be reconciled, we must keep growing in our own understanding of how we need to be changed.

3. We are to be ambassadors of reconciliation in the world. Evangelism and peace making are brought together in the concept of reconciliation. While some Christians say that evangelism is at the center of our work and others place peacemaking there, it might be best to say that "*reconciliation is the center of our work!*" The purposes of God are "to reconcile to himself all things through Christ" (Colossians 1:19).

It is due to their view of salvation as transformation that today's Anabaptist Christians refuse to be involved in war. Modern warfare

trains soldiers to lie, to hate and to destroy. Transformed people do not do such things.

Peacemaking is not the same as appeasement. As transformed followers of Jesus, we are to "fight" evil and injustice as vigorously or more than anyone else, but we need to "fight" differently. We are challenged to say with the Apostle Paul, "... though we live in the world, we do not wage war as the world does. The weapons we fight with are not the weapons of the world" (2 Cor. 10:3-4).

History and experience indicate that violence generally leads to more violence. Violence can only be reduced by nonviolence and by correcting the injustices that motivate it. At all times and in all situations, we are called to imitate the example and spirit of Jesus. Jesus used words, caregiving & nonviolent action, not guns and bombs, to reconcile conflict and to draw people into God's family. Our attitude "should be the same as that of Christ Jesus" (Philippians 2:5).

Reconciliation is hard work. It calls us to be willing to give our lives so that people in our world can be reconciled to God, to each other, and even to their enemies. But there is no greater joy than to live a reconciled life and to bring others into a reconciled relationship with God and each other.

In summary, Christians from an Anabaptist perspective believe they are called to:

1. Help reconcile people to God.
2. Help reconcile people to each other.
3. Serve as God's ambassadors of reconciliation in the world.

Reconciliation is at the center of their work.
Are you an Anabaptist Christian?

Taken from: What is an Anabaptist Christian, by Palmer Becker. Missio Dei Number 18 <https://www.mennonitemission.net/Downloads/DL.MissioDei18.E.pdf>

Scriptures - read before sermon

Colossians 1:19-22 “For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross. And you, who once were alienated and hostile in mind, doing evil deeds, he has now reconciled in his body of flesh by his death, in order to present you holy and blameless and above reproach before him.”

Ephesians 4:32 Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you.

Hebrews 12:14 Strive for peace with everyone, and for the holiness without which no one will see the Lord.

Matthew 5:23-26 So if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go. First be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift. Come to terms quickly with your accuser while you are going with him to court, lest your accuser hand you over to the judge, and the judge to the guard, and you be put in prison. Truly, I say to you, you will never get out until you have paid the last penny.

Read immediately after sermon

Luke 4:18-19

“The Spirit of the Lord is on us,
because he has anointed us
to proclaim good news to the poor.
He has sent us to proclaim freedom for the
prisoners
and recovery of sight for the blind,
to set the oppressed free,
to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.”

II Corinthians 5:18-21

“All this is from God, who through Christ reconciled us to himself and gave us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation. Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through us. We implore you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.”