

Mennonite World Conference – World Fellowship Sunday

Lev. 19:33-34; Luke 4:18-21; I Peter 2:11-12

Tomorrow, January 21, 494 years ago, in 1525, the first baptism of those who became Anabaptists, took place in Switzerland. Sometimes, a single act can have enormous consequences. In the religious ferment of 16th-century Europe, a small group of Christians in the Swiss canton of Zurich gathered in a home on a wintry January day in 1525.

One of them, George Blaurock, asked another, Conrad Grebel, to baptize him. Around the circle they went, baptizing each other in what they understood to be their first true baptism. It was a baptism performed upon their confession of faith in Jesus as Lord, as adults. It was a radical act that earned many of them a martyr's death. This act, along with some of their ideas, was considered a religious & a political crime.

The first Anabaptists of the early 16th century played a distinctive role. They were neither Catholic nor Protestant but a separate third religious force. They became a reform movement that threatened the ideas of both the main emerging protestant denominations as well as the Catholics. They wanted to go farther in religious reforms than the other protestant reformers were willing to do. This had both religious and political implications.

The 16th century was a time of great change in the religious life, culture and practices of many in Western Europe. The printing press had been invented so many copies of articles and books, like the Bible became more easily available. This changed lives as people had reason to learn to read and communication became faster, easier, widespread, cheaper, and allowed more people to express their ideas and opinions. Sounds a little like today with our computer, phone and online technology.

Many people at the time were unhappy with various practices of the church and society. A variety of voices from within the church were

advocating for change. They were frequently critical of practices and theology that had developed over many centuries of church life.

Change often brings harsh reactions, especially when the status quo is threatened. Protestants under Zwingli in Switzerland were the first to persecute the Anabaptists. Felix Manz became the first Anabaptist or Radical Reformation martyr on January 5, 1527. He was drowned by Zwingli in what was called "...his third baptism" since he had been baptized as a child, rebaptized as an adult, and was drowned in what Zwingli called a baptism of death.

Later that year, on May 20 or 21, 1527, Roman Catholic authorities executed Michael Sattler. King Ferdinand, the Holy Roman Emperor, declared the drowning, "the third baptism. He called it "the best antidote to Anabaptism." But the Radical Reformers, the Anabaptist ideas, their theology, and their stances did not die.

The historian Roland H. Bainton writes: "The Anabaptists anticipated all other religious bodies in the proclamation and exemplification of three principles which are on the North American continent among those truths which we hold to be self-evident:

One - the voluntary church;

Two - the separation of church & state;

Three - religious liberty."

I would add a fourth principle, which is that of pacifism – the obedience to Jesus' command to love the enemy; the refusal to respond to violence with violence; and the rejection to join with the government in going to war.

Today, we have the opportunity to remind ourselves that we are part of a global body made up of many tribes, languages and nations, who generally and in many places specifically adhere to these principles just mentioned.

Today is an invitation to visibly proclaim that there is no discrimination among us on the basis of race, social status, economic power, nation or gender. And it's a good day to lift up the principles of the first Anabaptists.

It is a special day where we show we are living a new life in a new society where we mutually support one another, carry those who suffer, serve the world and interdependently learn from one another, what it means to follow Jesus. Today the principles of the early Anabaptists are alive and well in a variety of denominations around the world. The map at the back of the sanctuary shows us where these old radical ideas about how to follow Jesus have spread. And today, we celebrate that, in Christ, and by the power of the Holy Spirit, the cultural, language and national boundaries, that separate us are overcome by the cross.

The Anabaptist story is frequently one of migration and mission, experiencing the grace of God in leaving one place for another, which is why we are so sensitive, open, and willing to welcome the foreigner, the stranger, the alien. Many of our own family histories have stories of migration and fleeing violence, political upheaval, financial loss, and persecution.

This year, Mennonite World Conference's, World Fellowship Sunday, has the theme, "Justice on the Journey: Migration and the Anabaptist Story." It's prepared out of the experience of our Latin American churches. I think we can safely assume that some of the people flowing out of Central America, are fellow Christians and some are Anabaptist Mennonites. We know that some Canadian Mennonites have fled and are fleeing from South Sudan, Somalia, West Africa, Vietnam, Laos, and Spanish speaking countries.

So we Anabaptists and many others, Christians and those of other faiths or no faiths, are still a migrant people. Fleeing violence, political corruption and lack of economic opportunities. Another common theme we hear is grand parents and parents are making great sacrifices so their children can have a better future than where they live now.

Pastor Elias was a nurse in El Salvador. He enjoyed his job and status of being the go to person, with the best most modern medical

skills in his village. But he became caught between the government forces who didn't want him to nurse the rebels, and the rebels who didn't want him to nurse the government soldiers, and the village people who needed and wanted his medical skills. All he wanted to do was be a nurse in a place that had few modern medical resources. But the day came when he had to flee for his life. He made his way to Mexico City and then Canada.

Pastor Elias has been in Canada for over 35 years. His last paying job was in a factory that makes doors. But then his nerve and muscle damage in his neck & shoulders, caused him to go on disability. He still lives with considerable pain at times. His testimony of becoming a follower of Jesus and pastor is fascinating.

Back in El Salvador – he deliberately was mean to pastors, especially when he drank too much. But he has pastored a Spanish speaking congregation in Calgary, for I believe 20 years or so. He's seldom received a salary of over \$500 a month, but his faithfulness and his testimony are remarkable. He is just one example of a person who had to flee for his life, caught between warring factions. He's been a model Canadian citizen, paying taxes, working hard, and along his journey, became a follower of Jesus, as well as an Anabaptist Mennonite. Plus his adult children and spouses and his wife have jobs & have not had trouble with the law.

With background about Anabaptism, World Fellowship Sunday, Mennonites and others, often being a migrant people, the overwhelming number of refugees today, & one immigrant story, let's look at a repeated instruction in the Bible. Lev. 19:33-34 says to us: "When a foreigner resides among you in your land, do not mistreat them. The foreigner residing among you must be treated as your native-born. Love them as yourself, for you were foreigners in Egypt. I am the LORD your God."

So immigration is a Biblical issue. And God is unavoidably, plainly, directly on the side of immigrants. Any theme that is repeated time

after time in the Bible – we need to give great importance to. The whole Old Testament is the story of the people of Israel – migrating. And trying to form a people. Jesus follows by telling us: welcome strangers. Love everyone, even enemies. Jesus reached out to Gentiles. And our study of I John told us, “Love is the mark of followers of Jesus – no exceptions.” The Bible is unequivocal. “Love everyone as yourselves.” Especially since we too have immigrant histories.

I like how Tony Campolo puts it. He says God is like a grandparent who carries your picture around with them, has it up on the refrigerator door and their phones are full of pictures of you. They are not afraid to ask, “Can I show you some pictures?” And eagerly does so.

God is the same way. God loves you and me, and because of God’s love we love others - and that includes loving immigrants - not just a little bit, not just now and then, not just when we’re up to it, but with the same love we have for our families and friends.

Jesus really made the point, in his first sermon his first declaration from Luke 4:18-21. “The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me 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.”

Then he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant & sat down. The eyes of everyone in the synagogue, a Jewish church, were fastened on him. He began by saying to them, “Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing.”

That’s quite a claim. Most people don’t leave their country because it’s easy. They leave because they see no hope, no way forward. The countries they live in are full of corruption, no way to have a livable income, violence, war, lack of food, none or bad medical care, political shenanigans, drugs, and the consequences of multinational corporation’s greediness, power

and selfishness. So it should not surprise us, that when we look at poverty around the world, it’s bad. No wonder people are on the move. Some of them are Mennonite

The book of Luke is viewed as the Gospel that spells out the “preferential option for the poor.” The message is directed towards vulnerable groups, establishing their dignity, freeing them, including them in God’s ministry to the world. We need to take note that Luke highlights the shepherds – often viewed as at the bottom of social standing, Joseph – a man whose fiancé got pregnant – but not by him; Mary as a pregnant unmarried woman, and two elderly people in the temple – Simeon and Anna. All of them represent some form of disadvantage in society. Then Luke begins the ministry of Jesus with him announcing that the kingdom of God will put an end to diabolical oppression.

In the context of this book and the whole New Testament, this is very concrete and at the same time spiritual, as well as economic, emotional, social, cultural, and physical. The year of the Lord’s favour, or grace, refers to Jubilee: the year of justice, when even slaves and strangers are put on an equal footing in the people of God. The year of Jubilee is to be both liberating and missional (See Leviticus 25).

The ministry of the Messiah is holistic, concerned not only with individual salvation but also salvation for interpersonal and social relationships that is made manifest through justice for all. It is God’s shalom. God’s version of peace. It is utopia made real. It is in this sense that Jesus says: “Today the scripture has been fulfilled” (Lu 4:21), because this Jubilee is only possible under the Lordship of Jesus Christ.

These marvelous verses from I Peter 2:9-12 reflect the jubilee theme. “But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s special possession, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light. Once you were not a people, but now you are the people

of God; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.”

And Peter goes on to say: “Dear friends, I urge you, as foreigners and exiles, to abstain from sinful desires, which wage war against your soul. Live such good lives among the pagans that, though they accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day he visits us.”

Peter’s two letters were written while always keeping displaced people in mind: the brothers and sisters of the diaspora of the early church, those who have lost their homeland, the poor, those who have no one to count on other than a community of faith. They were on the run because of persecution.

In this sense, in 1 Peter, the condition of rootlessness is dignified through loving titles such as: a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s own people. These phrases proclaim the mighty acts of him who called people out of darkness into his marvelous light.

On the one hand, this is a text about the unique family of God, living under the lordship of one King, regardless of condition or nationality or geography. At the same time, this is a text that honors the status of being displaced, persecuted and humiliated. These people are the children of God, his priests, people who belong to another nation, another kingdom, a state that trumps any geo-political, social or cultural or wealth status. Yet in spite of this honoring, they should not forget that they are foreigners, pilgrims “passing through this world.”

In other words, they are defenseless and abandon themselves to the Lord for the great work of reconciliation. They have broken with idolatry to the empire and to evil. And they wait upon the Lord who is full of good works.

The primary idea that runs through the Bible is that God’s people are to remember that God cares for them and saves them when they were helpless. As a result God’s people should care

for the helpless people around them, since God’s people know well what it is like to be oppressed and mistreated. Followers of Jesus are foreigners and strangers in the world, and for that exact reason God’s people are called to open themselves up, become friends, and to be hospitable to foreigners, strangers, immigrants.

As God’s people we are to live as pilgrims, foreigners and sojourners in the land, temporary residents here, because our primary citizenship is that of belonging to the kingdom of God and not to any nation-state. This is key to remember in a world focused on nationalism and racism and anti-immigrant sentiment.

Because we know what it is like to be foreigners and sojourners and to be cared for by God, we are called upon to care for those who live as foreigners and sojourners among us, and to treat them not just well but very well.

Many Latin American Anabaptist churches, like ourselves, were begun by sojourners and migrants 25 or 50 or 75 years ago. And many who initially became a part of Anabaptist congregations broke with the prevailing religious culture, believing in Anabaptist distinctives. This in some ways caused them to experience being foreign in their own lands. All of them knew the challenges of being foreigners in the land, and also the blessing of God’s faithfulness. Now they are being called on to welcome other migrants, from troubled countries.

I hope our reflection of the beginning of the Anabaptist movement and God’s attitude toward people on the move, inspires you. The Anabaptist people around the world offer many examples of active love, sharing the good news of the Gospel, bringing education, health care, trauma healing, development, working for peace, practicing nonviolence and hospitality, development and emergency relief. These acts of love are offered to the strangers and marginalized in our midst and to people in other lands. We can give thanks for these manifestations of the Spirit of the Lord upon us and affirm our calling to witness God’s Spirit at work.