

### We Are the Church

According to my records, this is the 400<sup>th</sup> sermon I've preached at Salina Mennonite Church. That number may not be completely accurate – how many minutes does it need to last and what format does it need to be in to be called a sermon – but it's pretty close. I'm 100% sure that there is only person who has been present every time I've preached. I'll give you a moment to figure out who that might be.

It seems fitting that our topic today is what it means to a Christian community, a church. Sometimes I get tired of my own voice; sometimes I wonder if I have anything left to say; but then inspiration hits and I carry on. I trust this will be the case as long as I remain your pastor. I'll begin today with prayer, one that contains words other preachers and I have prayed many times.

**Prayer:** *Holy God, guide us as we read your word and consider what it means to be part of your church – a body of believers that transcends boundaries of time and place; a body of believers that is here and now, known as Salina Mennonite Church. Today and always, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.*

“Let's get back to the basics.” When things get too complicated and we seem to be losing our way, it's not unusual for someone to utter this sentence. “Let's get back to basics.” We hear it in education, in work settings, in our home life, and in our church. “Let's name our core values and focus on them. We need to let go of the extraneous activities, projects, and meetings.”

For a congregation, this often means looking back at the birth of Christianity. It means beginning with Jesus and the early church. The scriptures we've read this morning – from John 13 and Acts 2 – help us to do just that.<sup>1</sup>

There's a lot of action in John 13. Jesus washes his disciples' feet, gets into an argument with Peter, foretells his betrayal, talks about what is going to happen to him, issues a new commandment, and predicts Peter's denial. The new commandment is found in verses 34-35.

*Love each other deeply and fully. Remember the ways that I have loved you, and demonstrate your love for others in those same ways. Everyone will know you as My followers if you demonstrate your love to others.*<sup>2</sup>

Jesus' words to his disciples apply to us as well. He gave them, not as a suggestion, but as a command. Jesus was preparing to leave them. The church was to carry out the work he had begun. The Holy Spirit would enable them to do this.

Jesus asked those he was leaving behind to do what he had demonstrated while he was with them. He had shown them the kind of love that he asked of them. He had spent time with them. He had taught them. He had eaten with them. He had prayed with them. He had humbled himself with them. He would soon sacrifice his life for them.

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<sup>1</sup> This sermon draws from Joanna Harader, *Shine at Home: Spring 2021*, MennoMedia, [www.shinecurriculum.com](http://www.shinecurriculum.com), p. 38 and a sermon delivered by Richard Litwiller on February 8, 1998, at Berkey Avenue Mennonite Fellowship, Goshen, Indiana.

<sup>2</sup> John 13:34-35, *The Voice*.

Throughout his ministry, people were drawn to Jesus because of the love he showed. He told his disciples that this same kind of love would be evidence that they were his followers. Their witness would be natural, growing out of love and care for others. They would draw others into the Kingdom because the world is looking for this kind of love and caring and commitment.

Compare the actions of Jesus with those of his followers described in Acts 2. These verses come immediately after what we read last Sunday – after the coming of the Holy Spirit and Peter’s sermon.

*Whoever made a place for [Peter’s] message in their hearts received the baptism; in fact, that day alone, about 3,000 people joined the disciples.*

*The community continually committed themselves to learning what the apostles taught them, gathering for fellowship, breaking bread, and praying. Everyone felt a sense of awe because the apostles were doing many signs and wonders among them. There was an intense sense of togetherness among all who believed; they shared all their material possessions in trust. They sold any possessions and goods that did not benefit the community and used the money to help everyone in need. They were unified as they worshiped at the temple day after day. In homes, they broke bread and shared meals with glad and generous hearts. The new disciples praised God, and they enjoyed the goodwill of all the people of the city. Day after day the Lord added to their number everyone who was experiencing liberation.<sup>3</sup>*

Here we see that the early church was obedient to Jesus’ command to demonstrate his love and care. The people committed themselves to fellowship. They devoted themselves to teaching. They ate together. They prayed together. They humbled themselves with each other. They sacrificed for each other.

The people around them were surprised and curious. They saw miraculous signs and wonders. They saw worshippers who were continually praising God. They saw genuine love in daily practice. They saw what they wanted and needed. They saw the people of God, this new movement of Jesus Christ, as a loving, caring, healing family. Many wanted to become part of it.

As we try to replicate this in our setting, we may be frustrated by the details not included in this description. How was the community structured and funded? How did they run their congregational meetings? What particular church planting methods did they employ? What were the criteria for church membership?

The information given in Acts 2 might not be the information we most want. Still, it is the information the writer of Acts thought people most needed to know, listing teaching, fellowship, the breaking of bread, and prayer as four important features of their life together.

How do these elements play out in our faith community? How deeply do we participate in them? Let’s consider the ways in which our mission statement and membership covenant connect with these. Let’s also think about how we’re living – or not living – these out in our current practices.

Our mission statement should be familiar to each of us. It’s printed in the bulletin every Sunday. This is who we say we are. ***Salina Mennonite Church is a Christian community seeking to share God’s love through celebration, nurture, service, and peacemaking.***

We expand on this mission statement in our membership covenant. This may not be familiar to you. We don’t often look at it together. The covenant consists of an opening statement, eight commitments, and a concluding sentence. As we read through the commitments

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<sup>3</sup> Acts 2:41-47, *The Voice*.

together, I encourage you to consider two questions. How well are we putting this into practice? How could we strengthen or improve what we are doing?

***Giving thanks to God the source of our life, our faith, and every good gift, we of the Salina Mennonite Church make this covenant with God and with each other.***

- ***We commit ourselves to Jesus Christ as Lord of all of life.***
- ***We commit ourselves to follow His will for our lives-as revealed in the Scriptures, as understood through the Anabaptist tradition, and as confirmed by the continuing presence of His Spirit among us.***
- ***We commit ourselves to seek and live by the way of love and good, supremely demonstrated by Jesus, thereby rejecting violence; and we commit ourselves to seek justice and peace for all peoples.***

As Anabaptist Christians, we say that Jesus is the center of our faith.<sup>4</sup> We seek to follow him in our daily lives. Christianity is about beliefs, spiritual experiences, and salvation; however, Christianity is primarily about discipleship – putting faith into practice.

We interpret the Bible from a Christ-centered point of view. Jesus is our standard for both personal and social ethics. The teachings and spirit of Jesus guide the way we interpret the Bible. The example of Jesus shows us how to respond when there is a conflict between God's ways and rules of law, choosing God above human authority and accepting the consequences without resorting to violence.

I'd say that we live out these commitments fairly well in our teaching and study. How have we lived them out in our actions beyond this small community of faith? What could we be doing?

- ***We commit ourselves to join regularly for worship, study, and fellowship.***
- ***We commit ourselves to one another through prayer, exchanging counsel and admonition, sharing our faith and love, and growing together as brothers and sisters in God's family.***

As Anabaptist Christians, we say that community is the center of our life. We read the Bible both individually and together in Spirit-guided community. We value meeting in face-to-face groups. We see the church as a body in which different parts have different roles at different times and still function through connected, intimate mutuality. We realize that our relationships with God and with each other are vital to our spiritual health. Confession and forgiveness remove barriers that prevent fellowship with God and with each other.

Choices we've made during this past year demonstrate our commitment to community. During this time of keeping our distance, we've met every Sunday for worship – virtually or in person. We've connected at other times for study, prayer, and fellowship. Our priority for worship has been to find a way to see and hear each other whether in the church building or at home. The system we cobbled together through trial and error seems to be working at the moment.

We've needed to sacrifice some of our personal preferences to accommodate our priority of face-to-face interaction. We've been hampered by the limitations of our technical skill and availability of people willing to run the technology. As we transition to a more "normal" form of worship with the majority of us in the sanctuary and live music, those joining by Zoom likely

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<sup>4</sup> Palmer Becker, *What Is an Anabaptist Christian?*, Mennonite Mission Network, 2015, accessed at <https://www.mennonitemission.net/resources/publications/Missio%20Dei/1/What%20is%20an%20Anabaptist%20Christian?>

will sacrifice some quality of sound. All of us will continue to benefit from the ability of worshippers and guest speakers to join us from a distance.

- *We commit ourselves to build trust and openness with one another, sharing differences and seeking unity within diversity.*
- *We commit ourselves to stewardship of our time, material goods, and abilities, finding ways to use all these gifts for the building of God's Kingdom.*
- *We commit ourselves to reach out to others in our community, sharing our faith and love, and to invite others to join us in our commitment to follow Christ.*

As Anabaptist Christians, we believe that reconciliation is the center of our work. We are to help reconcile people to God and to each other. We are to be ambassadors of reconciliation in the world. We are to be a blessing to people of all backgrounds, genders, and convictions. We say yes to forgiveness. We reject injustice and violence. We encourage peaceful alternatives to war and other conflicts. We work for justice.

It's easy to see huge problems around us. It's difficult to discern which harmful situations should be a priority for us to address. It's difficult to envision what difference our small efforts can make. And yet, we must try.

Events of this past year have exposed some disagreements among us – ones we knew existed, but perhaps have become more visible. Our commitments to trust, openness, and unity within diversity have aided our ability to worship and seek God together as a community of faith. We've needed to forgive each other. My hope is that we can share our concerns about issues and events without resorting to name-calling, without attacking individuals, groups, or parties. This is vital to our health and our witness.

The conclusion of our membership covenant is similar to our mission statement.

***Together we will seek to worship God and to serve with our love, our resources, and our example.***

Learning about Jesus, learning about each other, sharing in daily life, and praying—these are the foundations of church life—in the first century and today. The Bible doesn't tell us which curriculum to use or how often to have potlucks, but it assures us that learning and sharing and living and praying together is what it means to be the church.

Which of elements of being church – worship, teaching, fellowship, prayer, forgiveness, sacrifice, witness – is most important in your life right now? What is most important in our congregation? What is one thing you can do this week to strengthen at least one of these elements in your life? In the life of your church?

**Prayer:** *God, we thank you for your church. We thank you for our church. Draw us into deeper connections with other people in our community so that together we may live with glad and generous hearts as we worship you and love your people. Amen.*