

Jesus Is the Center of Our Faith

It's human nature to compare. Consciously or subconsciously, we're constantly comparing attributes such as physical appearance, abilities, and possessions.

We look for similarities such as "we both have brown eyes" and "you like Ethiopian food too." And we look for differences. "You're a morning person; I'm a night owl. I like dogs; you prefer cats."

Discovering how we're alike and different can be helpful. The process helps us to form an identity. It shows us ways we can complement each other; how we can be stronger together than apart.

Comparisons can also be harmful. They can damage self-esteem: "Since I'm not as successful at something as the next person, I must be worthless as a person." They can also give someone an unhealthy picture of themselves: "Thank goodness I'm not like that loser over there." Differences can create divisions and build walls between individuals and groups. They can lead to discrimination, oppression and violence. We see this even, and maybe especially, when it comes to matters of faith.

Two weeks ago I talked about two ancient statements of core beliefs, Psalm 146 and the Jesus Prayer. Last week our speaker listed two core statements she uses as she makes choices, both big and small. Statements of faith – lists of core convictions – provide a foundation to stand on in good times and in bad. They keep people centered, letting us know who God is and who we are in relation to God. They provide guidance in decision making.

On October 26, we'll gather in this building to talk about our vision for Salina Mennonite Church. We'll discuss who God wants us to be and what God wants us to do. Perhaps we'll write a list of core convictions we can use as we make decisions about who we are and what we do in the future.

To help us in this endeavor, today I'm beginning a three part series on Anabaptist beliefs. The series is based on a booklet by Palmer Becker, *What Is an Anabaptist Christian?*¹ Anabaptist is an invented name meaning "re-baptizers." It was given to 16th –century Christians who saw little value in infant baptism and baptized each other as adults upon confession of faith. As Mennonites, these Anabaptist Christians are our forerunners.

Palmer lists three core values that Anabaptist Christians share. Anabaptists believe that Jesus is the center of our faith, community is the center of our lives, and reconciliation is the center of our work. As you can tell from the title of the sermon and the scriptures chosen, our focus this morning is core value #1: Jesus is the center of our faith.

As I mentioned at the beginning, it's human nature to compare. At best, these comparisons form identity and provide a basis for working together. At worst, they cause division and provide a basis for discrimination. In this series, I'll be making statements about what many Christians believe and what Anabaptist Christians believe. In order to make comparisons, these statements will be simplified and generalized. Many Christians – whether they call themselves Anabaptist or not – will find themselves somewhere between the positions described.

While comparing and contrasting beliefs of Anabaptist and other Christians, we should never forget that all followers of Christ hold many beliefs in common. Belief in a personal three-in-one God who is both holy and gracious. Belief in salvation by grace through repentance and faith. Belief in the

¹ 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?>

humanity and divinity of Jesus, in the inspiration and authority of Scripture, in the power of the Spirit, and in the church as the body of Christ. But Anabaptist Christians often hold these convictions somewhat differently than others.²

Let's review a bit of church history – more than 1500 years covered in a few minutes. The story, of course, begins with creation, but we'll begin right after Jesus' ascension to heaven. We heard his parting words as recorded in Matthew 28. For the first 300 years, Christians met in each other's home, shared their possessions, and welcomed everyone into their fellowship. Church membership came after a long period of instruction. They were nonviolent. They refused to fight in the Roman army. They faced great opposition from the larger society and experienced waves of persecution.³

All this changed with Emperor Constantine in the year 313. As a result of having a spiritual experience in which he saw a vision of the cross, he stopped persecuting Christians and allowed Christianity to become a recognized religion of the Roman Empire.⁴ Soon, people were forced into being Christians, or they were considered to be Christians simply because of their nationality.⁵ The focus of the church shifted from following Jesus to learning correct doctrine, following elaborate ritual, and defending themselves against enemies. By the mid 400's, only Christians were permitted in the Roman Army. Evangelism primarily meant extending the boundaries of the "Christian" empire through force.

Let's skip ahead more than 1000 years to the 1500's. The discovery of ancient writings made people question traditional religious ideas. Christian reformers like John Hus and John Wycliffe called for common people to study the Bible for themselves.⁶ Gutenberg's invention of the printing press made it possible for people to have their own copy of the Bible. Martin Luther, a German monk, was one of many people who were disturbed by the condition of the church. Ulrich Zwingli and John Calvin were others who saw a need for significant changes.

Luther was especially bothered by the way spiritual favors were sold by an ever-richer Roman church. In 1517, he wrote a stinging criticism of the state church and nailed it on the door of the church in Wittenberg. Luther preached that people are made right with God through faith, not by their efforts to please God or by the rituals of the church. Because of such protest, the movement Luther began was called the Protestant Reformation.⁷

Ulrich Zwingli went farther than some of the other reformers. He dared to think of a church that could be somewhat free from the state. He even questioned the traditional practice of baptizing babies.⁸ However, because of government pressure, Zwingli gave in and preserved the strong link between church and state.

Several of Zwingli's followers – Conrad Grebel, Felix Manz, and Georg Blaurock – refused to compromise. They were convinced that the only way to experience the true church was to join God's people because you wanted to, not because you were born into it.⁹ They argued about this with the government officials and refused to have their own babies baptized.

At a meeting in January 1525, Grebel baptized Blaurock, and Blaurock in turn baptized Grebel and several others present with them. In that act, they defied their government and the state church, returning to the free churches of the time before Constantine. People made fun of them by calling them Anabaptists, ("re-baptizers" or "again-baptizers," since the first members had already been

² Becker, 1.

³ Michele Hershberger, *God's Story, Our Story*, Faith & Life Resources, 2003, 138-139.

⁴ Becker, 4.

⁵ Hershberger, 139.

⁶ Hershberger, 141.

⁷ Hershberger, 141.

⁸ Hershberger, 142.

⁹ Hershberger, 142.

baptized as babies.”¹⁰ Other early Anabaptists included Hans Hut, Hans Denck, Pilgram Marpeck, Jakob Hutter, and, somewhat later, Menno Simons, a former Catholic priest, who taught and coordinated groups that were emerging in the Netherlands.¹¹

What we’re talking about today and several Sundays in the future are the core values that made these Anabaptists distinct from other groups of Christians. This brings us again to Core Value #1: Jesus is the center of our faith.¹²

Of course, all Christians seek to follow Christ. How that happens shifted over time; different groups have different emphases in how this happens. Early believers referred to Jesus as Teacher, Savior and Lord. With the shift during the time of Constantine, church and government became entwined. Government, not God, became the highest authority.

The Anabaptists wanted to go back to the way things worked in the earliest church. They talked about “being born again” rather than about being “justified by faith.” They saw salvation as the grace of God that called for living in obedience to God’s ways and Jesus’ teachings. Salvation should make a difference in a person’s moral, social and economic life.

Current Anabaptists seek to apply these 16th century understandings of Jesus in 3 ways. First, Jesus is to be followed in daily life. Many Christians emphasize Christ’s death. Anabaptist Christians emphasize Christ’s life. Many Christians focus primarily on the holiness of God and the need for personal salvation. They emphasize “Christ came to die” and focus less on the life, teachings and empowering Spirit of Jesus. Christianity is primarily about forgiveness.¹³

Anabaptist Christians affirm the holiness and forgiving grace of God, but emphasize that “Jesus came to live.” His death resulted in part from the way he lived. Jesus as Risen Lord empowers us to follow him in life. Christianity is primarily about discipleship.¹⁴

Second, the Bible is interpreted from a Christ-centered point of view. Many Christians emphasize a “flat” Bible. Anabaptist Christians emphasize a “Christ centered” Bible.

It’s possible to approach the Bible in a “flat” way. That means all the verses have the same importance. The words of God by Moses are of the same value as words of God by Jesus. When political or social issues such as war, capital punishment, or treatment of deviant people are encountered, those with a “flat” Bible often claim Old Testament texts as the basis for their belief and action, even when these texts differ from the teachings of Jesus.¹⁵

It’s also possible to approach the Bible from a “dispensational” point of view. There are different periods of time for history – dispensations. In this view, different biblical passages are authoritative for different periods of time. For example, in this approach The Sermon on the Mount is for “the future” – when the new heaven and the new earth appear. The thinking is that those ethics aren’t possible to live out now. They are for the time of perfection. For the present time, this viewpoint tends to give Jesus worship, but not radical daily obedience.¹⁶

What Anabaptists teach is that Bible should be read and interpreted from a Christ-centered point of view. They read back into the Old Testament through the lens of Jesus. They read ahead in the New Testament through the lens of Jesus. All scripture is read with the lens of the spirit of Jesus. That means that sometimes the teachings of Jesus transcend previous teachings. Jesus did that in the Sermon on the Mount by saying, “You have heard it said....but I tell you....”

¹⁰ Hershberger, 142-143.

¹¹ Becker, 5-6.

¹² Becker, 4-8.

¹³ Becker, 21.

¹⁴ Becker, 21.

¹⁵ Becker, 7.

¹⁶ Becker, 7.

Many Christians tend to see the Bible, rather than Jesus, as their final authority. Guidance for daily living comes from various Scriptures that seem to fit the situation. Not all decisions need to coincide with the teachings and Spirit of Jesus.¹⁷

Anabaptist-minded Christians are not strict literalists. The written word and the spirit of Jesus are held in “creative tension.” This isn’t always neat and tidy, or exact. Anabaptists affirm that while all Scripture is inspired, Jesus is the fullest revelation of God and the final authority for decision-making.¹⁸ When Anabaptist-minded Christians face an ethical question, they go first to Jesus for their primary guidance and then to other scriptures for further background and understanding. If two passages of Scripture seem to disagree, they let Jesus be the referee.¹⁹

Third application, Jesus is accepted as both Lord and Savior, with the priority on Jesus as Lord. Many Christians emphasize government as the final authority. Anabaptist Christians emphasize Jesus as the final authority.

It’s possible for some Christians to affirm Jesus as eternal Savior but place less emphasis on following him daily as Lord. There are other “lords” in their lives: employer, civic leader, military general, religious leader, president. Some Christians may tend to see government as the ultimate authority for daily life. They may be more obedient to the commands of earthly leaders than to those given by Jesus.

Christians from an Anabaptist perspective believe that government needs to be obeyed to the extent that following Jesus allows. Governments exist to preserve life, create order, control evil, and do good in a secular world. But when there is a conflict between God and government, we choose God above human authority and are willing to take the resulting punishment, if necessary.

Many Christians believe that since government leaders are ordained of God, they must be obeyed even if their demands are contrary to the teachings of Jesus or the dictates of conscience.²⁰ Anabaptist Christians recognize that government is ordained of God to preserve life and maintain order in a secular world. However, the demands of government shall not overrule the Lordship of Jesus.²¹

As I end this morning please remember the disclaimers I made at the beginning. Namely, in order to make comparisons, the statements of belief are generalized. Many Christians – whether they call themselves Anabaptist or not – will find themselves somewhere between the positions described. In fact, I’m sure that if we discussed each of the Anabaptist Christian beliefs listed in this sermon, we’d find differences among the members of this Mennonite congregation. Also, while comparing and contrasting beliefs of Anabaptist and other Christians, we should never forget that all followers of Christ hold many beliefs in common.

Keeping those things in mind: What does it mean for us as a congregation to state that Jesus is the center of our faith? How do we follow Jesus in our life as Salina Mennonite Church? What difference do we make in this community because we interpret the Bible from a Christ-centered point of view? How do we demonstrate that we acknowledge Jesus as Lord as well as Savior?

How does saying the Jesus is the center of our faith affect our understanding of who God wants us to be and what God wants us to do? How does this affect how we relate to and how we work with other faithful congregations in Salina? Even closer to home, how does this affect how we relate to the two other congregations who use our building and have some beliefs that different from ours?

May God guide us as we answer these questions.

¹⁷ Becker, 21.

¹⁸ Becker, 21.

¹⁹ Becker, 8.

²⁰ Becker, 21.

²¹ Becker, 21.