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Salina Mennonite Church
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Texts: Acts 2:37-47; 1 Peter 2:4-10

Community Is the Center of Our Lives

Today's sermon is the second in a three-part series on Anabaptist beliefs. The series is based on a booklet by Palmer Becker titled *What Is an Anabaptist Christian?*¹ Becker lists three core values that Anabaptist Christians, which includes Mennonites, 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.

My hope is that this sermon series will help prepare us for our upcoming visioning retreat. On Saturday, October 26, we'll gather in this building from 9:00 to 3:00. (That's actually one hour less than we've been publicizing.) Two Mennonite pastors, Phil Schmidt and Clayton Gladish, will assist us as we 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 will do in the future.

Last week, we considered Core Value #1: Jesus is the center of our faith.² This value is applied in three ways. First, Jesus is to be followed in daily life. Quoting Hans Denck, an early Anabaptist, "No one can truly know Christ unless they follow after him in daily life." Christianity is about beliefs, spiritual experience, and salvation, however Christianity is primarily about discipleship.

Second, the Bible is interpreted from a Christ-centered point of view. All Scripture is inspired, but not equal in authority. Jesus, the living Word, is the fullest revelation of God we have. Jesus is our standard for both personal and social ethics. The teachings and spirit of Jesus guide the way we interpret the Bible

Third, Jesus is accepted as both Lord and Savior. God created governments to control evil and do good in a secular world. We obey the government, however, when there is a conflict between God's ways and rules of law, we choose God above human authority and are willing to take the punishment.

As we think about these and as I continue the series today, please remember the disclaimers I made last week. 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 know that not everyone in this congregation would agree totally with every statement made about what Anabaptist Christians believe.

Also, while comparing and contrasting beliefs of different groups of Christians, we should never forget that all followers of Christ hold many beliefs in common. What I'm highlighting in this series are the ways we hold these beliefs somewhat differently than other Christians do. This is meant to be a comparison, not a critique.

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?>

² Becker, 4-8.

The focus for this Sunday is Core Value #2: Community is the center of our lives. For Anabaptist Christians, being a follower of Jesus is believing in Jesus as Savior and Lord and belonging to a community.

We see this in Jesus' ministry and in the early church. Jesus taught large crowds and formed a smaller community with his disciples. Later on, the apostles preached to crowds in the marketplace and the Early church gathered in small groups in homes. It was both/and. Both larger gatherings and small in-home prayer groups. As we read in Acts 2, the first Christians listened to instruction from their leaders, fellowshiped together, ate together, prayed together, and shared their possessions.

The church's identity was as a counter-cultural community. They were representatives of Jesus to the world and were not "of" the world. Living that out took support from their brothers and sisters in Christ. Learning how to be Christ-like in the challenge of everyday life and in the presence of persecution required the support that comes from being in community. Small groups were central to that. Community was the center of their lives.

History began to change that. Instead of stressing the church as a family of brothers and sisters that met together for Bible study, sharing, prayer, and worship, the emperor Constantine emphasized the church as an organization that met in large, impersonal sanctuaries.³ The weekly, large gatherings became dominant. Cathedrals were built in the center of every city and town.

In a society where every citizen was considered to be a Christian, the theologian Augustine emphasized experiencing the presence of God through the sacraments rather than experiencing the presence of Christ in community.⁴ To be cleansed of original sin, Christians needed the sacrament of baptism. To be forgiven of ongoing sin, they needed the mass (Eucharist). To be released from purgatory, they needed to pray to the saints, give money to poor people, and buy grants from the pope. The idea of belonging to Christ and to one another in small group community was lost. Instead of being a counter-cultural community, the church became much like the world.

Martin Luther and other reformers originally intended to reform the church to its biblical basis. The Peasants' War at the same time as the Reformation resulted in the Reformers siding with the rulers and government in order to restore order. Luther and Zwingli weren't able to follow through with all of their intended reforms.

Anabaptists had a vision for an independent church composed of transformed followers of Jesus.⁵ They did not want the politics of Constantine or theology of Augustine. They wanted to restore the church back to the way it was in the New Testament. Due to persecution, they met in small groups, in caves, hiding places, and homes. They testified to a power to live differently. Faithful Christians are not merely free from guilt, they also live Spirit-filled ethical lives.

Of course, not everything was perfect in every Anabaptist community. Those who were deemed to not be following Jesus in daily life were excommunicated. Some groups were overly concerned about the end times. Others reverted to violence. A group in Münster, Germany, declared themselves to be the New Israel, introduced polygamy, and took up arms in self-defense.⁶

³ Becker, 9

⁴ Becker, 10.

⁵ Becker, 11.

⁶ Becker, 11.

However, for most early Anabaptists, their strong sense of belonging to Jesus and their loyal support of each other helped them to live devoted ethical lives in the midst of a hostile world. Christ-centered community was the center of their lives.

Current Anabaptists understand and practice Christ-centered community in 3 ways. First, forgiveness is essential for community. Many Christians focus more on vertical forgiveness from God than on horizontal forgiveness from each other. Forgiveness is seen as a means for receiving individual salvation and eternal life.⁷ It comes through sacrifice and sacrament.

Of course, vertical forgiveness is necessary. It is God's way of helping us overcome the alienation, guilt, fear, and shame caused by sin. It restores our relationship with God. However, Christians need both vertical forgiveness from God and horizontal forgiveness from each other. The transformation that comes through faith, confession, repentance, obedience, and forgiveness removes barriers that prevent fellowship with God and with each other. Forgiveness builds community. It is a means to peaceful relationships with each other.⁸

Faith communities are not immune to the broken relationships that result from offending God and each other through attitudes and actions. Careful listening, honest confession, and forgiveness are means to resolving differences. Over the years in this congregation, I've seen relationship broken and restored. Forgiveness is essential for creating the nurturing community.

A second understanding is that Scriptures are interpreted in community. Unpacking and following the scripture isn't just for trained clergy or instructors. Everyone should take time for personal study and application. It also isn't just for us to do all on our own. When we limit ourselves to private interpretation, we may arrive at false understandings. The Bible needs to be studied both individually and together in Spirit-guided community. This provides all of us with some checks and balances.

Many Christians seek to interpret the Scriptures out of their own understanding and experience. On the other hand, some rely almost totally on trained teachers or pastors to interpret the Scripture for them. Anabaptist Christians believe that individual study of Scripture must be combined with group study. Group members commit themselves to giving and receiving counsel from others in the Spirit of Jesus.⁹

In this congregation, we don't create as many opportunities for group study as you might find in another congregation. Currently we have two adult Sunday school classes but no midweek study as we have sometimes in the past. Everyone does have the opportunity each Sunday to respond to the sermon and raise questions during the sharing time.

I appreciate the fact that you honor my training and position as your pastor while not expecting me to have the answer to every theological and ethical question. We can wrestle with the difficult questions together.

Scriptures are to be interpreted in community. Of course, it would be difficult for several different groups of Christians to interpret the Bible together if they have completely different approaches to the Bible. As I noted last week, interpreting the Bible from a Jesus-centered point of view generates different applications than using a flat Bible or dispensational point of view.

Third, community is experienced in face-to-face groups. Many Christians meet primarily in sanctuaries. Anabaptist Christians emphasize meeting in small groups. The church has sometimes been described as a two-winged bird. One wing represents the larger worshiping community where vertical relationships with our transcendent, holy God are emphasized. The

⁷ Becker, 22.

⁸ Becker, 22.

⁹ Becker, 22.

other wing represents small face-to-face groups where close horizontal relationships are emphasized. Both wings are needed.¹⁰

During the last few decades or so, we Mennonites have increased our appreciation of the value of the visual and the transcendent in worship. At Salina Mennonite Church, we have made some changes over the last decade to make our building a more welcoming place. Perhaps in the next year we could work on making our sanctuary a bit more welcoming as well as a bit more transcendent. Perhaps we need to place more emphasis on the vertical aspect of our worship. At the same time it's important to realize that some aspects of Christian living happen best in small, relational groups.

Many Christians tend to think of the worshiping congregation as the basic unit of the church. Often, the church is seen as a structure, an organization, or as a Sunday morning performance. Anabaptist Christians tend to see the church as a family. Healthy churches are often organized as networks of small groups in which members fellowship, study, share and pray together.¹¹ The metaphor of a body in which different parts have different roles at different times and still function through connected, intimate mutuality is an accurate depiction of the way Anabaptist Christians view the church. Healthy congregations are structured for community.

As a small congregation, Salina Mennonite Church is able to function as a small group on Sunday mornings. We notice if someone is missing or is not feeling well or is frustrated with someone else. But even in a group our size it's possible not to know each other's names. It's possible for someone to go a long stretch of time with only superficial contact with the other members of the group. What could we do to strengthen the relationships in our community?

What does it mean for us as a congregation to state that community is the center of our lives? Are communication, confession, and forgiveness important aspects of this community? Do we spend enough time reading and interpreting Scripture in our community? How could enhance the face-to-face contact that is essential to the health of this church?

May God guide us as we answer these questions personally and as a congregation.

¹⁰ Becker, 13.

¹¹ Becker, 22.