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October 13, 2019

Texts: Matthew 5:38-48; 2 Corinthians 5:16-21

### **Reconciliation Is the Center of Our Work**

What is an Anabaptist Christian? If you've listened to or read my sermons during the past month, I hope that question rings a bell with you. Perhaps it brings to mind a booklet by Palmer Becker. Perhaps you're able to repeat Becker's list of three core values that Anabaptist Christians, which includes Mennonites, share. Can you answer these questions? Who do Anabaptists believe is the center of our faith? (Jesus) What is the center of our lives? (Community) What is the center of our work? (Reconciliation) These core values overlap and correlate with each other.

Today's sermon is the last in a three-part series on Anabaptist beliefs. This sermon series is in preparation for our upcoming visioning retreat. Two people will introduce us to ideas from the Kansas Leadership Center as they help us 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.

We've taken time during the past month or so to talk about the core values that made the Anabaptists distinct from other groups of Christians back in the 1500's and also to consider how Christians with an Anabaptist perspective apply those values today. As we continue the series this morning, keep in mind that 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. And, while comparing and contrasting beliefs of Anabaptist and other Christians, we should never forget that all followers of Christ hold many beliefs in common. A person can disagree with some of the statements and still identify as an Anabaptist Christian. We also can share inspiring worship, joyful fellowship and meaningful work with Christians who do not call themselves Anabaptists.

On September 22, we looked at core value #1: Jesus is the center of our faith. This value is applied in three ways: (1) Jesus is to be followed in daily life; (2) The Bible is interpreted from a Christ-centered point of view; (3) Jesus is accepted as both Savior and Lord.

Two weeks ago, we considered core value #2: Community is the center of our lives. In today's world, Christians with an Anabaptist perspective understand and practice Christ-centered community in three ways: (1) Forgiveness is essential for community. Forgiveness is both vertical and horizontal. We need forgiveness from God. We need forgiveness from each other. (2) The Scriptures are interpreted in community. The Bible needs to be studied both individually and together in Spirit-guided community. (3) Community is experienced in face-to-face groups. The church is the Body of Christ that functions through connected, intimate mutuality. Church is a place where everyone is known and prayed for by name.

Today, we come to Core Value #3: Reconciliation is the center of our work.<sup>1</sup> This value is applied in three ways: (1) We are to help reconcile people to God; (2) We are to help reconcile people to each other; (3) We are to be ambassadors of reconciliation in the world.

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<sup>1</sup> What follows comes largely from Palmer Becker, *What Is an Anabaptist Christian?*, Mennonite Mission Network, 2015, pp. 13-18, 23. This can be accessed at <https://www.mennonitemission.net/resources/publications/Missio%20Dei/1/What%20is%20an%20Anabaptist%20Christian?>

God sent his Son, Jesus, as the solution to the problem of sin – those actions and inactions, thoughts and attitudes that break our relationships with God and with each other. 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.” For early followers of Christ, being a Christian was a blend of *believing* in Jesus, *belonging* to the church, and *behaving* in a new way.

Jesus anticipated conflicts. He provided steps for reconciliation in Matthew 18:15-20. Offended persons and 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 gave guidelines for behavior in God’s family. True peace is from knowing truth, repenting of wrong, and treating people in a new way. “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.”

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. In 2 Corinthians 5:18, the Apostle Paul states that all this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation.

When Constantine began to merge church and state, major changes came to the church. Time, money, and energy were spent on constructing great cathedrals rather than on peacemaking and ministry. By the mid 400’s, only Christians were permitted in the Roman Army. Evangelism primarily meant extending the boundaries of the “Christian” empire.

Early Anabaptists sought to reclaim the early church view of peace with God, peace with each other, and peace with enemies. They wanted the Scriptures to be their only weapon. The Anabaptist movement of the 16<sup>th</sup> century was the charismatic, evangelistic and social justice movement of that day. They believed that the Holy Spirit empowered them for discipleship, evangelism, peacemaking, and living the simple life. 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? The core value of reconciliation is to be applied in three ways. First, we are to help reconcile people to God. Many Christians emphasize justification by faith. Many Christians primarily emphasize the holiness of God and the need to be justified through faith in the sacrificial work of Christ. For some, this includes dwelling on the wrath of God. Conversion means being forgiven for sin, saved from hell, and destined for heaven.

Anabaptist Christians emphasize transformation of life. Being reconciled to God leads to transformed living. Jesus changes the thinking, the friendships and the behaviors of those who accept him as Lord and Savior. They become transformed mentally, emotionally, physically, socially and politically. This places them in stark contrast to the world.”

Anabaptist Christians tend to emphasize the loving/nurturing nature of God. They desire to be transformed by the Spirit to become Christ-like in attitude and action. Conversion means being reconciled to God and empowered to live like Jesus in daily life.

Of course, both natures of God, the holiness and the love, are important. Neither one can be overlooked. It's a matter of emphasis.

Second, we are to help reconcile people to each other. Many Christians emphasize personal salvation. They tend to think of reconciliation in personal terms. Peacemaking and social action are add-ons rather than essential to the gospel.

Anabaptist Christians emphasize reconciled living. They tend to think of reconciliation in both personal and social terms. Evangelism and peacemaking come together in the term reconciliation. 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.

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 reconciliation' 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.

Third, we are to be ambassadors of reconciliation in the world. Many Christians obey authority even if it requires actions contrary to the teachings of Jesus and conscience. Some believe in 'redemptive violence' and the just war theory. When the government asks them to perform military service, they accept.

Anabaptist Christians obey authority insofar as obedience to Christ will allow. They refuse orders to participate in violence. Correcting injustices and being reconciled to enemies are important. Alternatives to military service that seek to resolve conflict are strongly encouraged.

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. History and experience indicate that violence generally leads to more violence. Violence can only be reduced by nonviolence and by correcting 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 and nonviolent action to reconcile conflict and to draw people into God's family. 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.

It's hard to talk about reconciliation when I can think of areas in my own life that need reconciliation; when I can name Mennonite congregations that have split into two groups; when I can list congregations and conferences who have left our denomination during the past five years over differences in theology; when I think about the divides that continue to exist within Mennonite Church USA over human sexuality and immigration. We need to name the ways we have fallen short even as we seek to follow Jesus' example of reconciliation.

When you think of reconciliation, a story from Texas may come to mind. Last week Amber Guyger, a former Dallas police officer, was convicted of murder in the shooting death of her unarmed neighbor Botham Jean in his own apartment. When Botham Jean's family was given the opportunity to make a victim impact statement, Brandt Jean used his time to address his brother's killer. He said, "If you truly are sorry, I know I can speak for myself, I forgive you." Brandt told Guyger that Botham would have wanted her to give her life to Christ. He asked to give her a hug, and after receiving permission, Brandt offered a long embrace.

When commenting on this event, one writer asked white Christians not to cheapen the hug message of forgiveness from this encounter.<sup>2</sup> He asked the readers to listen to the statements from the rest of the family, including these words from Botham's mother, Allison Jean. "Forgiveness for us as Christians is a healing for us, but as my husband said, there are consequences. It does not mean that everything else we have suffered has to go unnoticed," Mother Allison told the court.

What went unnoticed? According to Botham Jean's mother, the crime scene was contaminated by Dallas police. High-ranking officials deleted evidence. Police officers turned off body cameras and vehicle cameras. "You saw investigations that were marred with corruption," Mother Allison said. "While we walk as Christians, we still have a responsibility to ensure that our city does what is right."

Listening to the entire Jean family offers us a fuller picture of Christianity. In their words and posture towards Guyger and the criminal justice system, we hear calls for both forgiveness and justice. But if we elevate the words of one family member at the expense of another, we run the risk of distorting the gospel.

We heard similar messages after a white supremacist gunned down nine people during a Bible study at a church in Charleston, SC, in 2015.<sup>3</sup> "Mother Emmanuel," as the church is known, is the oldest African Methodist Episcopal church in the South. Its congregations have endured laws forbidding black worship, a white mob burning down their building, and an earthquake. After every tragedy, they came together to rebuild, sometimes literally and always emotionally.

As Reverend Joseph Darby, the presiding elder for a neighboring district, said, "Their extension of grace is rooted in a long-standing coping mechanism passed down from people who had no option in many cases but to forgive and move on while still leaving the door open for justice to be done. It takes you past raw vengeance. Forgiveness clears your head to pursue justice."

On the Sunday after the shooting, church bells around the city tolled at ten a.m. for nine minutes – one minute for each victim. "What unites us is stronger than what divides us," pronounced Jermain Watkins, a pastor from a local church. "To hatred, we say no way, not today. To racism, we say no way, not today. To division, we say no way, not today. To reconciliation, we say yes. To loss of hope, we say no way, not today. To racial war, we say no way, not today."

How do we say yes to reconciliation and no way to hatred, division, and loss of hope? What does it mean for us as a congregation to state that reconciliation is the center of our work? How do we help reconcile people to God? How do we help reconcile people to each other? How are we ambassadors of reconciliation in the world? How do we say yes to forgiveness? How do we reject injustice and violence? How do we encourage peaceful alternatives to war and other conflicts? How do we work for justice? May God guide us as we answer these questions personally and as a congregation.

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<sup>2</sup> Account taken from Jemar Tisby, "White Christians, do not cheapen the hug and message of forgiveness from Botham Jean's brother" accessed at <https://www.washingtonpost.com/religion/2019/10/03/white-christians-do-not-cheapen-hug-message-forgiveness-botham-jeans-brother/>

<sup>3</sup> What follows is as recounted in Sheryl Sandberg and Adam Grant, *Option B: Facing Adversity, Building Resilience, and Finding Joy*, Alfred A Knopf, 2017, pp. 136-138.