

Remembering our Anabaptist story
July 21, 2013
Philippians 3:7-21

Goal: To remind the congregation of how our Anabaptist history and story inform our understanding and practice of two-kingdom theology and therefore our assertion that our citizenship is in heaven.

Last week Conrad Showalter shared the significance of remembering our stories and where we have come from as people of God. Using texts from Deuteronomy, Conrad showed how time and time again God's people were instructed to "remember that you were once slaves." This reminder of where they have come from was not just something they were to remember in and of itself. But instead this was a formational remembering. Remembering where they came from as slaves in Egypt was to inform how they lived day to day as ones who could embrace lives of freedom. As outlined in Deuteronomy and as shared by Conrad, this remembering was to inform how God's people treated the alien, the orphan, and the widowed in their midst. It was to also inform how God's people worshiped and treated their possessions. This formational remembering was to keep them grounded in a perspective of who they are and who God is and has been in their lives.

This morning we want to shift and look at the formational remembering of how we are a part of the larger Anabaptist story and therefore how that formational remembering speaks to how we proclaim with the Apostle Paul and live into our belief that our citizenship is in heaven. So allow us to remember once again this formational story together.

Following the early church, as portrayed in the book of Acts, followers of Jesus mainly met in homes during the next 300 years, as they continued to grow in numbers. During these centuries the church experienced significant persecution as they declared that Jesus was their Lord and not Caesar, and therefore that their citizenship was in heaven and not on earth. Hesston College Professor Michelle Hershberger has written a book called *God's Story, Our Story*, which is designed to be used by individuals or groups considering baptism. Within this book Michelle says, "By the end of the second century, the church often required new believers to take long periods of pre-baptism instruction (often three years) in order to make sure they were ready for possible suffering. Despite great opposition, the church grew in number."¹

Things changed around 313 with the Emperor Constantine. Constantine had a dream the night before a battle, where he heard a voice say, "Conquer in the symbol of the cross." So Constantine told God that if he won the battle he would become a Christian. Constantine won the battle, which led to the creation of the Edict of Milan, which declared a toleration of all religions. Within this edict was a call to end oppression for those professing Christianity. Suddenly the persecution of Christians lessened. It was only then a short while before Emperor Theodosius declared in 380 that Christianity, as expressed through the Catholic church, was the only religion permitted to be observed within the kingdom.

¹ Hershberger, p. 139.

Now, at first glance we might say that what Constantine and Theodosius did were good things for the early Christians, with lasting positive things for us today in 2013. However, before these mandates from the emperors, it was clear that followers of Jesus were set apart from the world around them. Before the mandates, people experienced years of preparation to make the decision to align themselves with followers of Jesus Christ. Followers of Jesus were forced to make choices that placed themselves in difficult and potentially life-threatening situations. Therefore, before the mandates, choosing to follow Christ and be a part of the body of faith was a choice that one had to make carefully. It was not a decision made on a whim, because it could very well cost your life when it became public that you were now professing the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. Foundational to grasp, though, is that, before these mandates, individuals had to choose to be followers of Jesus to be members of the church, to seek to be faithful in following and living like Jesus, to state that their citizenship was in heaven.

After the mandates from Constantine and Theodosius, all this changed. Suddenly, when babies were born, they were baptized, and their baptisms were directly connected with their citizenship in the nation. This process was done to keep track of census for taxation purposes and as a way for everyone to be initiated into the state church. “Now, people were forced into being Christians, or they were considered Christians because of their nationality. As the church became ‘official,’ many Christians didn’t even know that being a Christian meant living a transformed life, free from sin.”² Now the nation was filled with people walking around saying, “I am a Christian,” and yet not having any idea what that statement really meant or even a familiarity with the person of Jesus Christ.

Now fast forward to the 1500s. The time in-between, the Middle Ages, was a period when the church continued to experience great power. In 1054 the one church split into two, creating the Roman Catholic Church and the Eastern Orthodox Church, with both churches claiming to be the real church.³ The Pope, the head of the Catholic Church, had great power and authority, even to the point at times of possessing more than the emperor. Then, during the 1500s, we read of the Reformation of leaders like John Hus, John Wycliff, and Martin Luther and his “95 Theses.”

The video we watched earlier depicted the start of the Radical Reformation <www.mennoniteusa.org/about/who-are-the-mennonites/>, which took things a step further than did the reformers of the Reformation. The Anabaptists leaders fought hard to separate church and state, declaring that one must choose to be a follower of Jesus and that, furthermore, that choice is displayed through the waters of believers baptism. They declared and lived out the essence of a free church. “The governments of Europe, both Catholic and Protestant, outlawed the movement, forcing Anabaptists to meet secretly in homes and in forests.”⁴ As Aaron mentioned during the children’s time, during this time there were many Anabaptists who were killed because of their faith as recorded in the *Martyrs Mirror*.

Now fast forward another 488 years to 2013, and we continue to remember our Anabaptist story and strive to live into it as faithful followers of Jesus. This past week I took a while and went back and reread syntheses of the Anabaptists, beginning with the 1527 Schleithem Brotherly

² Hershberger, 139-140.

³ Hershberger, 140.

⁴ Hershberger, 143.

Union. I looked at confessions of faith: the 1632 Dordrecht Confession, Harold S. Bender's *The Anabaptist Vision* from 1943, the 1963 *Mennonite Confession of Faith*, the 1995 *Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective*, and the most recent synthesis of Anabaptist theology found in the Stuart Murray's 2010 publication, *The Naked Anabaptist*. I found several points very interesting. First, throughout the past 488 years we Anabaptists have returned time and again to articulate who we are, what we believe, where we have come from, and our relationship to the world around us. In each confession there is a statement of the choice one makes to follow Jesus, and by that choice setting ourselves apart from the world as we seek to emulate the life and teaching of Jesus Christ. In each synthesis of theology, there is a statement that we are to be people of shalom, of peace, of extending love. Within each confession I can read into a proclamation that our citizenship is in heaven.

Some might wonder, "If the confessions state similar thoughts, why could we not just keep the first confession from 1527?" However, one must note that the people in every generation in every culture need to articulate for themselves and the coming generations, "This we believe as Anabaptists because of where we have come from, because of the journey we have been on with God, which began with the Radical Reformation in 1525." Writing these confessions is part of retelling the story; it does not necessarily mean that the message changes. This is one reason our Worship Ministry Team came up with the idea of inviting the congregation to write down your own reflections to the statement, "but our citizenship is in heaven," for it is one way to rearticulate, recapture, retell, the story of our own lives and faith as well as how our lives fit into the bigger picture.

One of the key components of both the Reformation and the Radical Reformation was the call from the reformers for the laity to have access to the Bible in their own languages. Before the Reformation, the laity did not have access to the Bible in a language that they understood. Therefore, only the priests had access to God's word, and, therefore, they alone could provide an interpretation or teaching from it. However, with the Radical Reformation, our Anabaptist ancestors said not only that all should have a Bible, but also they went a step further than the leaders of the Reformation to declare that the body of faith, the community, should gather and discern together the word of God. I have to wonder if one of the early texts they studied together was the Apostle Paul's words to the church in Philippi as recorded in Philippians, chapter 3. If you have your Bibles I invite you to turn there with me.

Paul is in prison because of his beliefs, and while incarcerated he writes a letter to the church in Philippi. As I sat with this text this week, I felt as though Paul's words written for us today in 2013 to remind us of our Anabaptist story and our biblical calling to seek after Christ second to no one or nothing. Are we able to join this morning with Paul and proclaim, "I consider everything a loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus our Lord"? Paul eloquently reminds us to set our eyes on the goal, to keep our eyes on Christ, to be rooted in knowing who we are and who we are called to be as ones who seek to know Christ.

I think of the early Anabaptists and wonder how they would have encountered this biblical text, particularly verses 10-11. Here we read these words, "I want to know Christ—yes, to know the power of his resurrection and participation in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, and so, somehow attaining to the resurrection from the dead." Today we sit in a nice air conditioned

sanctuary with comfortable seating. We very openly drove our nice cars to church and are not forced to worship God in secret, hiding in the wetlands so as to not be found by the local police. I think that if we were honest, we do not think too much about possible suffering for our faith, or ways we are set apart from the world around us. As we dwell with this theme this month I do believe that we are being invited to look once again at how we as Anabaptists understand our relationship with the world around us.

We are part of a long story of a segment of God's people who are striving to live out their calling, to proclaim with their very lives that their citizenship is in heaven. Some of us were born into this faith, and some like me have chosen this faith as their own. In fact, within my own journey what was pivotal for me was taking a course at Bluffton University with Gerald Mast. What was the course? "Anabaptist History and Thought: Advanced Studies in Rhetoric." One of the textbooks for this class was the *Martyrs Mirror*. It was through reading the history of this faith movement that I was able to recognize how my own theology aligned with this movement and furthermore able to acknowledge the value of seeing the big picture of this free church.

For each of us, whether born Mennonite or have chosen Mennonite, there is still a choice to make to daily declare that Jesus is Lord of our lives and to embrace the ways of Jesus that lead to a lives committed to loving others, serving instead of being served, and striving daily to become more and more like Jesus. It is my prayer that, through the power of the Holy Spirit, we can join the Apostle Paul in proclaiming, "But whatever were gains to us, we now consider loss for the sake of Christ. What is more, we consider everything a loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus our Lord, for whose sake we have lost all things. We consider them garbage, that we may gain Christ and be found in him We want to know Christ—yes, to know the power of his resurrection and participation in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, and so somehow, attaining to the resurrection of the death." Our citizenship is in heaven, and we eagerly await a Savior from there, the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

—Cindy Voth