

Kate Heinzl, pastor

Matthew 7:1-12

“Don’t judge, so that you won’t be judged. You’ll receive the same judgment you give. Whatever you deal out will be dealt out to you. Why do you see the splinter that’s in your brother’s or sister’s eye, but don’t notice the log in your own eye? How can you say to your brother or sister, ‘Let me take the splinter out of your eye,’ when there’s a log in your eye? You deceive yourself! First take the log out of your eye, and then you’ll see clearly to take the splinter out of your brother’s or sister’s eye. Don’t give holy things to dogs, and don’t throw your pearls in front of pigs. They will stomp on the pearls, then turn around and attack you.

“Ask, and you will receive. Search, and you will find. Knock, and the door will be opened to you. For everyone who asks, receives. Whoever seeks, finds. And to everyone who knocks, the door is opened. Who among you will give your children a stone when they ask for bread? Or give them a snake when they ask for fish? If you who are evil know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your heavenly Father give good things to those who ask him. Therefore, you should treat people in the same way that you want people to treat you; this is the Law and the Prophets.

Is Menno in the Coach? A Mennonite Myth, ca. 1550

Background: In the mid-16th century, it was illegal to be an Anabaptist in the Netherlands. Menno Simons, a Dutch Anabaptist pastor, was a traveling teacher and networker among hidden groups. Because Menno was influential, political leaders wanted to silence him and offered a substantial reward to anyone who would arrest him. The following story about the itinerant Menno circulated widely and was retold repeatedly even though it may only be a legend. That the Anabaptists retold this story so frequently may point to their discomfort with the idea of telling a half-truth. In the contemporary Dutch language dictionaries an idiomatic expression for half-truth is “Menist leugen” (Mennonite lie).

Narrator: One day Menno was riding on a stagecoach. Instead of getting into the coach, he was riding in the high seat, up front with the driver. Suddenly, policemen searching for Menno dashed up on horses. One of the policemen shouted,

Policeman: *(directs question to Menno and the driver)* Is Menno Simons in the coach?

Narrator: Menno leaned down:

Menno: Is Menno in there?

Narrator: Someone from inside the coach replied,

Passenger: No, he's not in here.

Narrator: So Menno told the police,

Menno: They say Menno's not in the coach.

Narrator: Foiled, the horsemen rode away. *(As the policeman leaves, Menno and the driver exchange a glance.)*

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SERMON:

The early church was born on Pentecost when the Holy Spirit came upon a group of Jesus' followers gathered in Jerusalem. On that day the apostle Peter stood before the crowds and pleaded for the people to repent of their misplaced loyalties and to accept Jesus as the center of the faith. (IMAGE)

For the first 250 years, Christians were seen as a people who lived visibly new lives in obedience to Jesus.

It's said that during the Battle of the Milvian Bridge, in 312, that Constantine, the emperor of the Roman Empire, had a vision of the cross with Greek words above it: "In this sign, conquer". (IMAGE - painting by Raphael) He won the battle and, as a result, stopped persecuting Christians, instead, making Christianity a recognized religion of the Roman Empire.

About 100 years after Constantine, the theologian Augustine rose to prominence. (IMAGE) Like Constantine, he also had a profound conversion experience - because of his teaching, church leaders began to focus more on Christ's death than on his life. Instead of saying "Jesus is the center of our faith", followers of Augustine tended to say "Christ's death is the center of our faith."

For the first 250 years, followers of Jesus were a persecuted minority who worshiped in secret or under pressure in close, intimate communities. Now, under Christendom, they met in ornate buildings financed by government and church taxation, with religious ritual replacing the work of reconciliation and transformation.

Almost all early church Christians had rejected military service. By the fifth Century, Christians, like everyone else, were expected to serve in the military.

In 1517, in an attempt to bring correction to the Christian faith and renewal to the church, (IMAGE) Luther nailed a list of ninety-five theses to a church door in Wittenberg, Germany, launching the Protestant Reformation, from which the Anabaptist movement emerged.

Luther and other Protestant leaders sought to restore the church to its original core values, yet in response to the peasant uprisings of 1524, these early reformers sided

with the political authorities and feudal lords, reverting to a structure similar to the one initiated by Constantine. In many ways, little had changed.

It was in 1525 that Greb, Manz, and Blaurock gathered for bible study and prayer in Switzerland. (IMAGE) Denck, Marpeck and Hutter began similar practices in South Germany. A few years later, Hoffman, Mennos Simons and the Phillips brothers brought new thinking to the Netherlands. These individuals, each in his own way, rediscovered an active, living Jesus. These early Anabaptists broke completely with the concepts of Christendom held by both Catholic and Protestant leaders and institutions.

For those early Anabaptists, faith by itself was insufficient. Love was the chief mark of the church - a love that expressed itself in mutual care for each other, for those around them, and even for their enemies. Only those willing to repent of false loyalties and be obedient to Christ in daily life could be members.

Within 2 years, by 1527, the anabaptist movement had grown to about 2,000 members.

The first Anabaptists became a hybrid that was both, and neither, Catholic and Protestant. In contrast to Catholics, Anabaptists had no holy words or places, and no sacred persons. In contrast to Protestants, they thought of themselves as being transformed rather than being justified by faith through grace. The Anabaptists spoke more about the Holy Spirit - and became the 'third way' of Christianity.

In their small groups and church gatherings, the early Anabaptists continued to rediscover Jesus and the ways of his first disciples, living according to the Sermon on the Mount, all of this made possible by the presence of the Holy Spirit.

The Anabaptist framework has been articulated in many ways. One recent summary is found in Palmer Becker's book *Anabaptist Essentials*¹. (IMAGE- BOOK) Becker summarizes the history and theology of the tradition as having three core values: (IMAGE)

Jesus is the center of our faith,
community is the center of our life,

¹ Becker, Palmer, 2017. *Anabaptist Essentials: Ten signs of a unique Christian faith*. Herald Press, Harrisonburg VA.

and reconciliation is the center of our work.

1. Jesus is the center of our faith. Anabaptists worship a risen Christ. By placing Jesus at the center of our faith, we view the rest of Scripture through the lens of Jesus. The early Anabaptists rooted their obedience to Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount. Following Jesus then, and now, is more than mere believing.

Michele Hersherberger wrote in *God's Story, Our Story*²: "It's not enough to be able to explain what everything means in the (Biblical) Story and how it all fits together. Knowing all this, you must make a choice. Will you follow Jesus?"

2. Community is the center of our life. We are committed to each other, both in expressions of forgiveness in community and the reading and interpretation of Scripture. In reading Scripture together, we gain a fuller picture of what God is like. When we encounter life and Scripture together in community, we build a better and fuller picture of how God is moving in our midst.

3. Reconciliation is the center of our work. This reconciliation is both personal and social. We seek justice and we seek right relationships with ourselves, others, and God. This creates a theology built around a constant dying to self, not a one-time ticket-to-heaven conversion experience.

The Holy Spirit is essential to the understanding and practice of these values.

This work of transformational living requires ongoing discernment - discernment as individuals led by the Spirit, and in community.

Menno is one who discerned the movement of the spirit in his life. (IMAGE)

Menno's brother, Pieter, had been killed in an uprising involving Anabaptists in 1535³, after which Menno experienced a spiritual crisis - and it was the following year, in 1536, that he left the priesthood and threw his lot in with the Anabaptists.

² Becker, Palmer, 2017. *Anabaptist Essentials: Ten signs of a unique Christian faith*. Herald Press, Harrisonburg VA.

³ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Menno_Simons

That story we heard of Menno on the coach makes some uncomfortable. What does it mean to follow the gospel in all things? In that story, whether myth or fact, Menno made the choice to live. Menno was not martyred, serving, teaching, writing another 25 years after his conversion. In today's story we see a bit of a trickster, the shadow side of what it means to live in constant danger.

“Do not judge” - Jesus tells his listeners. How can you say to your brother or sister, ‘Let me take the splinter out of your eye,’ when there’s a log in your eye? You deceive yourself!... Jesus continues -

“Don’t give holy things to dogs, and don’t throw your pearls in front of pigs.”

- Menno was valuing his life and work, using humor, holy humor, choosing life.

Later in Matthew’s gospel, Jesus said to his disciples as they headed into danger: “Look, I’m sending you as sheep among wolves. Therefore, be wise as serpents and innocent as doves.” (Matthew 10:16).

What does it mean to live AND discern in community, and to listen for the movement of the Spirit in our own lives? How do we live fully, wisely - at this time and place?

STORY:

Pastora Lara⁴ works with the broader Mennonite church in Colombia, SA.

She works and lives with her husband and 2 daughters in a region (IMAGE) where six different armed groups related to drug and arms trafficking, money laundering, and more vie for control. It’s an area saturated in violence.

“We have always had boys staying at the house,” Pastora Lara said.

Boys from broken families, boys that have been left alone as their families are forced to look for work elsewhere. Boys that need a home, need a community.

Ernesto was one of these boys - his mom implored Lara to take him in - mom was headed 100 miles away to search for work and wanted her son to have someplace safe to live.

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[So that sorrow does not finish us - Global Ministries](#)

Ernesto moved in, eventually choosing to be baptized in that community, becoming a committed church and community member. In 2019, at the age of 23, Ernesto was the leader of the youth ministry in his neighborhood.

Pastora Lara remembers the day vividly - October 26, 2019, Ernesto had just finished having lunch in her home when someone showed up on a motorcycle asking for him. He got on the bike and they drove off together. That's the last they saw of him. With church keys in his pocket, he disappeared.

The church was very involved in serving the community, and had little time to grieve his disappearance. It's a common story in that war torn country. There are more than 200,000 people missing due to *forced disappearance* as a result of the armed conflict in Colombia, leaving open wounds for family, friends and communities who never know what happened to those they love.

What are we doing - What are we participating in, so that sorrow does not end us?
asks Pastora Lara.

What are we participating in so that sorrow does not end us?

When asked if this event affected her faith and life choices, she answered: "Right now, a young person is staying with us. I host them, and they come to the table."

What are we participating in so that sorrow does not end us?

For Lara and her faith community, practicing gentleness, mercy and grace that's sustained by God's love doesn't allow the sorrow to have the last word. Sounds like those early Anabaptists.

How about for us, today, here?

The stories of Dirk Willem, of Pilgram Marpeck, of Menno Simons. The stories of Pastora Lara and her ongoing work of inviting those in need to her table. The stories of

those at Oak Flat - these are stories of suffering and stories of transformation - stories that remind us that injustice will not have the last word. We come from a long line of those rooted in the core values - (IMAGE)

Jesus is the center of our faith,
community is the center of our life,
and reconciliation is the center of our work.

Rooted in this ongoing discipleship of love - led by the Holy Spirit, may we, too, find ways to faithfully follow Jesus, here, now.