

2021-10-17 WORSHIP SERVICE

MORNING PRAYER – PASTOR CALEB YODER

Our God, who we cannot own or control, creator of the universe and of each of our moments,

we do not see you, yet you are nearer than each breath and each heartbeat.

You are the God of quasars and quarks. We cannot comprehend your mystery. We can only trust that your nature is love, and receive your gifts as unmerited grace.

We believe we see your great power most clearly in Jesus the crucified, who boldly proclaimed your reign.

We believe you are at work bringing all things to completion -- reconciling all things, moving the created world closer to your purposes.

Show your mercy to our world – on the places of violence and poverty, on people whose prayer is for peace and the most basic of needs.

We pray for migrants anywhere in the world, leaving home for safety. We pray for people in places like Lebanon, overwhelmed by unrest and economic meltdown, as well as Haiti, overwhelmed by brazen gang-rule.

We pray for the earth itself, as our consumption patterns and abuse change climate and stress the earth's ability to sustain our basic needs.

Restore your people, O God, and sustain our hope.

Our hope is in your unseen purposes prevailing.

Let us to see your Way reflected in our lives and our surroundings in the present. Help us to live according to your Way, when the world seems to have no place for it.

We are tempted to ask for what would make us feel comfortable and secure in our own strength and status. Instead, we ask for your provision of our most basic needs, physical and spiritual, so that we can learn to embrace the ordinary as the joyful gift that it is.

Give us gratitude for the simple things.

We give thanks for fall, with the cool air and change of color, fall activities like meets, concerts, and games.

We give thanks on behalf of Judy Unruh as she improves at home after a time of rehab at Newton Medical Center. We pray for her continued healing, and for all in our congregation whose daily life is complicated by health concerns.

O God, we confess that we cannot free ourselves from our sinful ways and our sinful desires. In your mercy, forgive us, and free us to live in the way of Christ.

Free us to forgive those who hurt us as you forgive us. Give us wisdom to hold ourselves accountable and practice a restorative accountability in the church.

Show us how to live in the way of Jesus, so that when testing comes, we will remain true to your love. Keep us from the temptation to despair or to be callous and preoccupied. Soften our hearts and infuse them with gutsy hope.

As an expression of that hope, we together pray the words Jesus taught us to pray:

Our Father...

SERMON – PASTOR LOIS HARDER

Acts 2:42-47

Anabaptist Essentials – Accountability

Accountability – the toughest job you’ll ever love

Accountability – the toughest job you’ll ever love”. I need to add, with apologies to the Peace Corps. That was the unofficial slogan of the Peace Corps when it started back in 1961, so I borrowed that phrase from them. But I have a bit of a confession to make... when I hear the word accountability I have to fight the urge to run away, screaming. Does anyone else feel that way? I haven’t always felt that way!

In fact, when I was much younger (a student at WSU) I attended the Mennonite Church of the Servant in Wichita. I’m not sure whether they still function this way, but 35 years ago, the house church was the primary worship unit and met weekly and all the house churches gathered for corporate worship once a month. House church groups were the entryway into the church and they were no more than 12 people, usually fewer. We had full-blown worship services in each others’ homes with scripture readings, study, discussion, singing, sharing and prayer. We learned to know each other very well. We laughed and cried with one another, we ate supper together every week, the children in the group played in our midst and often disrupted things (which seemed normal). Each year during the season of Lent, we would take turns listening as each one offered their “spiritual pilgrimage” from the previous year – responding to several prompts that called us to be attentive to our spiritual growth. Then on Maundy Thursday as we washed one another’s feet, ate together, and took communion, we also signed a covenant, indicating our willingness to enter into another year of commitment to

one another. Some years there were hard experiences in people's lives that made it impossible for them, in good conscience, to sign the covenant. And they could be honest about that and say, "I'm not in a position to commit to a level of responsibility or accountability to you all this year. I want to continue to worship with you, but I need to heal, or... I need to search, or... I need to rest." Or... whatever they needed to tend to. And the next year, the opportunity came again for each of us to review our spiritual growth and to sign the covenant.

Accountability was real in that experience. And it was positive! We spent time together. We had fun and good fellowship; and we also had structure and expectations. We came together to worship, to remind ourselves and one another that our purpose was to try to follow Jesus faithfully every day. Once, my husband Tom, who used to be a really big tennis fan, decided to stay home from house church to watch the U.S. Open. When I arrived by myself and the leader of the group (who we called shepherds) learned about Tom's absence, she said, gently – almost under her breath – "Oh no... that won't do." She immediately got on the phone and I could hear her, in the other room, calmly and gently insisting, "Well... I understand that you really love tennis and you haven't had any time all week to watch it, but we need you here. We need your insight and your gifts as we study and discuss. We'll wait for you to get started – see you in a few minutes." There wasn't anger or judgment in her voice. There was, maybe a bit of impatience. But it was overwhelmingly the sense that Tom was valued and needed. That it was important for us to hear what The Spirit had to say to us through him – and through each of us! He showed up in a few minutes – and we carried on, as usual.

The very first quote in chapter 6 of *Anabaptist Essentials*, on page 95, took me back to those experiences of house church. They were formative for me as a college student. I was taken in completely, cared for deeply, challenged, valued, held to account and invited to lovingly do the same for others. The quote was from a Japanese scholar who had studied doctoral dissertations on Anabaptist beginnings. He wrote, "The uniqueness of both the early church and the early Anabaptists was that they met in small groups where they confronted each other and made each other strong enough to confront the world." I keep hearing that Alexanderwohl is a congregation full of introverts (possibly with the exception of those with the surname Schrag). For introverts, or really anyone who doesn't care much for confrontation which, let's face it, that's pretty much all of us, this idea of church being small groups of people who confront each other to make each other strong enough to confront the world might sound absolutely horrible and terrifying! And yet, I know from my own experiences that it can be church in the most full sense of the word.

But why is this idea of church being done primarily in smaller groups so strange to us? Let's have a really brief church history review.

In the gospels we read about Jesus preaching and teaching about the kingdom of God. Jesus taught that "God's kingdom is made of loving relationships, not political power." (pg. 96) Jesus turned the idea of power on its head and taught that all power belongs to God. People, like the rest of Creation, are called to live in ways that always point back to God as the Creator, the Source, the one to whom we are all accountable.

And so, those earliest followers of The Way of Jesus understood their task as helping each other to be and to continue this kind of countercultural message that Jesus had taught.

But already by the mid 4th century the church had taken on a life of its own; it had become an institution and Constantine and Augustine were teaching people that the character and meaning of the institutional church was interchangeable with the character and meaning of the kingdom of God. The Church became an entity of corporate power, joining with the State to maintain the status quo of systemic injustice. Right doctrines, organizational systems and elaborate buildings replaced deep relationships, extending the peace of Christ and exchanging genuine accountability. As we know, that went on for several hundreds of years, dominating the culture. Now let's jump to the 16th century.

The early Anabaptists were reading the Bible on their own (without hearing it through the interpretation of a priest) and discovering many things about Jesus that had not been obvious or explained to them before – how he lived, what he taught, how he understood the kingdom of God. And they began to reclaim some of those understandings of kingdom living that they read in the gospels. Much of what they were reading put them in direct conflict with what was then the State/Church and they began to be persecuted. At that point it was crucial for them to meet in small, undetected groups in order to keep themselves and their faith alive. So accountability for the early Anabaptists was often “experienced (as) close fellowship, forgiveness, and encouragement to follow Jesus in daily life... it was the basic unit of church.” (pg. 99)

Ironically, as Anabaptists experienced increasing freedom to worship as they felt called to, the perceived need for close, personal relationships of vulnerable trust decreased. The idea of Biblical accountability began to move toward more rigid systems of rules and regulations. When those were broken it led to painful communal actions of shaming, shunning or excommunicating.

That brings us into the 20th and 21st centuries and the North American culture in which rugged individualism seems to be valued above all else. Church has become a commodity – something we shop for and consume, expecting it to entertain us and feed us. It's easy enough to simply stop attending a large church using the argument that it “just doesn't meet my needs” when it's fairly certain that it might be 2 or 3 months before anyone really notices your absence. And even when we miss someone, there isn't really a good way to communicate that because we often don't have strong enough relationships that we can gently and genuinely confront one another.

So what can we say about accountability at the Alexanderwohl Mennonite Church in October of 2021? Is it an essential part of our faith journey? What would it look like for us to reclaim this Biblical practice?

Maybe it would help if we could understand accountability as a practice, something we take on ourselves and enter into voluntarily. It's something that we want, that we welcome and look forward to, not something imposed on us from outside. And it's not something we can impose on someone else. Too often, it seems, we've confused holding one another accountable in safe and trusting relationships for passing deep and humiliating judgment on one another without any relationship at all between judge and plaintiff.

To think of holding and being held to account as a practice would mean that we would each begin with asking ourselves, in what areas and how might I benefit from being held accountable? Who do I trust enough to invite into that kind of relationship? Who do I trust already that I would value building even deeper trust with in order to have true accountability in my life of discipleship? This is a kind of vulnerable knowing each other that reaches far beyond simply knowing each other's business.

Consider what the Holy Spirit might be able to do if even just a few of us could practice this kind of accountability.

Has anyone ever experienced accountability in a positive, life-giving way that you'd be willing to share about?

What do you think about the kind of church Becker describes – a church made up of small groups? Is that realistic?

Anyone willing to share a step you could take to seek accountability for yourself?

SONG OF RESPONSE – a prayer, asking God to help us help each other – VT 722