

01-26-2025 Worship Service

Morning Prayer--

Gracious God, we thank you for the voices of the children, full of praise and enthusiasm, joy and energy. Thank you for Jason and Eric and Kevin and all the other adults in their lives who teach and encourage them and support them and cheer them on. We thank you God for the many opportunities there are in our towns and communities to support our children – I'm especially thinking now about the Kansas Day celebration that was held yesterday at Kaufman Museum and all the people who worked hard to make that a special day of learning and fun. I thank you for the years that John Fast has given, working at the Museum to plan and lead school children's tours and classes and the many years he's given to the education and nurture of children in general. Bless him and Jenny now in these coming weeks and months as their focus shifts and they pay attention to the nudges of your Spirit in some new ways.

Help us all to pay attention to the movement of your Spirit today, God, as we continue to worship you by remembering your presence and faithfulness to the early Anabaptists and those who were a part of the Radical Reformation those hundreds of years ago. Their courage and openness to reading and understanding the Scriptures in new ways helped bring us to where we are today in our faith. We thank you for those early reformers who understood that to follow Jesus meant to take seriously his words and also his actions.

While we know that The Church, in general, and our congregation specifically, is far from perfect, we know that you're present with us in it, God. We know that you've called us and you long to be in relationship with us as we move about our lives from day to day and make decisions, individually and together, that shine your light into the darkness. We ask for your wisdom and guidance to be with us as we have our Annual meeting here in a bit, after lunch. Give us clear-eyed vision and the will to make decisions that are in line with your will.

We pray for those in our church and our community who are struggling with health concerns – many are sick with flu and other viruses in this season of the year. We ask for speedy return to health for them. We pray for Ann Hiebert as she faces surgery on Wednesday to repair her broken leg. Be with the surgeon and others who will care for her in the recovery process.

God of love and compassion, we pray for our nation and the other nations of your world. We pray for your children who are fearful for their lives or their future. We pray for those whose work and passion is to care for those who don't have enough – food, clean water, safe shelters, the basic necessities of life. We pray for your Spirit to convict and move your people in ways that motivate and bring about the blessing of the poor and of those who mourn. We pray for the blessing of the meek and of those who hunger and thirst for righteousness. We pray for the blessing of those who are pure in heart and for the peacemakers, for those who are persecuted for the sake of righteousness and for those who are insulted and bullied on account of speaking your good news. May they – and all of us – know your comfort and your peace. Amen.

Let's worship now by giving our tithes and offerings. We'll sing #749 as our prayer of dedication. This is a contemporary tune that uses writings of Pilgram Marpeck, another early Anabaptist, for the text. Jason will play it for our offertory so we can learn the tune.

Reading of I Corinthians 3:1-11

Message—Pastor Lois Harder**What's In a Story?**

The folks in first century Corinth were having a hard time staying together. They disagreed with one another vehemently over certain aspects of their faith – and then they would split up, creating different churches that were led by different people. Maybe THEY were the original Anabaptists!? That sure sounds a lot like what we've done over the course of our history! The Apostle Paul was reminding the Corinthians, in this letter, that each of those different leaders (including himself) had God-given gifts and some valuable contribution to make to their growth and their faith. But that ultimately, they were all human – gifted and flawed. And what's most important is to remember that Jesus Christ is the solid foundation upon which all the other details of our faith are built.

This last verse that Gretchen read for us, verse 11, has, perhaps been the verse most often cited in Anabaptist circles because it was a favorite of the Anabaptist leader named Menno Simons – after whom Mennonites take our name. But I'm getting ahead of myself... our theme this morning is "Renewal through Story", so I'll try to tell you a few, brief stories about some important things that happened 500 years ago in many part of Europe. And now... try to stay with me here, because these old stories are important parts of OUR story.

From the fourth century through the sixteenth century – and beyond, Christianity had become the official religion of the huge and mighty Roman Empire. The church and the state were one entity, closely knit together creating what we call "Christendom", a Christian kingdom. If you were a citizen of Rome, you belonged to the church and if you belonged to the church you were a subject of the Roman Empire. It was the law that infants needed to be taken to the church and baptized soon after their birth, partly because it was believed that their salvation depended on it and partly because parents bringing their children for baptism were, at the same time, registering them with the state church. So baptism was also the way the census was kept and taxes were levied. Taxes, for the general population became heavier and heavier while the ruling class – both state and church – became more and more wealthy.

The local priests were responsible to keep track of the population in this way and to maintain law and order through the rituals and obligations of the church. People were expected to believe and behave in certain ways that were regulated and implemented by the church. As the state church became more and more corrupt and less and less concerned about the well-being of their subjects, a movement began. Among the poorest of the people this movement became the Peasants' Revolt. Some of the priests and religious teachers were also unhappy with the status quo.

You may remember from your history lessons that in 1517 an Augustinian priest and teacher at the University of Wittenberg named Martin Luther, experienced an epiphany when he realized as he was reading the book of Romans, that God, in mercy, justifies people by grace through their faith – NOT according to a powerful and demanding system of hierarchical sins, forgiveness for a price, or baptism of infants who have no voice or choice.

Luther posted his 95 ideas or theses on the church door at Wittenberg. His arguments flew in the face of the state church and their authority and thus began the Great Reformation.

There was unrest all around. This is where the story of the three fellows pictured here, on the worship table fits in. While Luther was having his conversations in Germany, there was a similar conversation going on in Zurich, Switzerland led by a popular preacher and reformer named Ulrich Zwingli. Zwingli wanted to bring reform to the church but gradually and in an orderly way. These young men, Conrad Grebel, Felix Manz and George Blaurock wanted reform more quickly and more radically.

As they read the scriptures together they believed more and more firmly that the teachings of Jesus had to be lived out by his followers as closely as possible. This was what it meant to be true disciples. This is what Jesus clearly called his disciples to do!

Conrad Grebel is considered the main founder of Swiss-German Anabaptism. He was the son of a wealthy and successful iron merchant and community leader in Zurich. Grebel was a loose-living humanist as a college student. He was sent to the most prestigious institutions – in Basel, Paris and Vienna. Somewhere along the line he experienced a genuine conversion and, although there aren't written records of exactly what happened or when, there was a clear change in his life-style and his habits. He returned to Zurich became good friends with Zwingli as well as with Felix Manz and George Blaurock.

There were disputations – public arguments in the presence of the civil and religious leaders – about issues of the state church, the laws and biblical interpretation. They argued about how much control the civil state should have in the life and faith of the church. And while there were many arguments over details of how this looked, the ultimate disagreement came over infant baptism being used as a way to keep track of census numbers and taxes. On this point Zwingli and Luther sided against the young members of the new movement. They opted to support the established institution claiming that these young upstarts were pushing too much change too fast. The zealous young students of scripture felt betrayed and forsaken by the reformers. They could read nowhere in scripture of a time when Jesus ever baptized infants or encouraged the partnership of church and state. In fact, quite the opposite. They read in the Gospels stories of Jesus also challenging the powerful status quo in order to bring justice and mercy to all people.

Felix Manz was a young and well-educated student in Zurich. Along with Grebel, he also studied Hebrew, Greek and Latin. He and George Blaurock joined Conrad Grebel in his disputations, using all their rhetorical skill to plead their case and try to convince the leaders that their Biblical interpretation was correct. As they preached and taught more and more vigorously they did not convince the leaders, but they did convince many people NOT to take their babies for baptism. Soon the civil leaders declared it illegal to not baptize your infant and failure to do so would result in being banished from the city.

The men were ordered to cease and desist from their preaching. Grebel and the others asked for scriptural proof that infant baptism was commanded. This, of course, could not be given. Zwingli and the church state leaders would have to resort to creating more legal avenues to silence these zealous young students of the Bible. They were forbidden from meeting together for Bible study and the immediate baptism of all un-baptized infants was ordered. Grebel and his

group would not compromise. Their consciences were bound by the Word of God. The movement grew as they continued to preach from house to house and village to village.

When the small group of radical reformers met on that evening of January 21, 1525 in the home of Felix Manz and his mother Anna, there's no evidence that they had planned to baptize one another. They were praying, trying to decide what to do, how to proceed. In a moment of inspiration George Blaurock asked Conrad Grebel to baptize him upon his confession of faith in Jesus. Grebel did so and then the others asked George to baptize them, which he did. They shared communion together, serving one another rather than being served by a priest. These actions made their break from the Zwingli reformation and the state church final. They were given the name Anabaptists. Re-baptizers. This was not a complimentary label and to be identified as such was a serious threat.

There were on-going disputations and arguments, arrests and escapes by the Anabaptists. They left Zurich and preached in other places, staying only long enough to share the Gospel, argue their convictions and then move on to evangelize and baptize adult believers in the next town.

In November of 1526 Zurich established the death penalty by drowning for any who participated in the Anabaptist movement. Soon this was the law in all of Switzerland and in some areas beyond.

Conrad Grebel died of the plague in a mountain town where he had retreated to the home of his older sister, weary and ill from such vigorous travels, preaching and many imprisonments. Felix Manz was captured and imprisoned for the final time and sentenced to death by drowning on January 5, 1527. He was the first Anabaptist martyr. Blaurock also continued to preach and baptize. He left Zurich and went to Bern and continued to travel from there. He continued his mission enthusiastically until September 6, 1529 when he was captured and burned at the stake.

Finally, Menno Simons. He was a Catholic priest in the Netherlands. He became acquainted with the Anabaptists and learning about them caused him much questioning, studying, contemplating. Finally he was "called out", requested to give leadership to the movement at a crucial time for its survival. He left the Catholic church and joined the Anabaptists in 1536. He and his wife and children lived and met with Anabaptist congregations in secret until 1554. Menno wrote extensively about his stalwart commitment to immersing himself in scripture and trying to live it out peacefully. He died on January 31, 1561 and was buried in his own garden.

These are the stories of 4 of the men in the Anabaptist movement. Now we'll hear the story of one of the women – Elisabeth Dirks.

Sources:

GAMEO articles on Conrad Grebel, Felix Manz, George Blaurock and Menno Simmos

Brothers in Christ by Fritz Blanke

An Introduction to Mennonite History editor, Cornelius J. Dyck