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Different, Yet Related: The Anabaptist Tradition – Rev. Seth D. Jones

Scripture: Romans 12:1-5; Matthew 5:1-14

Before we discuss the Methodists and then the Pentecostals, I want to backtrack and talk about one group that is very influential in the background of post-Reformation history. The Anabaptists come into focus when we look at them from what we now know.

Let me begin by saying I love the Anabaptist tradition. When I was in seminary in the 1990s, I had the privilege of hearing a Mennonite peace-worker speak to our school. He had been part of the Truth and Reconciliation Committees in South Africa after apartheid ended. The willingness to walk into incredibly dangerous places with the intent of Christ-like loving-peace has always impressed me. I find the simplicity and attention to how to live together in both Mennonite and Amish communities very appealing.

The Anabaptists came into being almost immediately after Luther posted his 95 theses on the Wittenberg church door. It was as if people with radical ideas were waiting for permission to worship freely and they were immediately involved in the Reformation. As radicals, the Anabaptists were quite beyond what Luther intended.

Anabaptists considered Luther a compromise position. They rejected all state control of the church. They rejected all iconography in the church. They rejected the Catholic Church. By 1522, 5 years after Luther's 95 theses, the Anabaptists were being persecuted by Lutheran princes and burghers and ministers, and by the Catholic Church. In a few more years, they were persecuted by followers of John Calvin. As with all movements, political or religious, if the leaders and the followers are brutally martyred, the movement is reinforced rather than eliminated.

The Anabaptists were strengthened by their persecution in part because the ideas surrounding Anabaptism have lurked the edges since the beginning of Christianity.

Many persecuted Anabaptists headed to the safe haven of the Netherlands. They settled in Amsterdam, primarily. Some were called 'The Brethren', and still today, there is the Church of the Brethren. The Anabaptists never forgot their German roots, however.

I have a deep affection for the Anabaptists, but let me tell you a story. This is the short version of the story of Muenster, Germany.

In the late 1520s, Bernhard Rothmann became the leader of religious reform in Muenster, a large, cosmopolitan city in northern Germany. By 1530 Rothmann was recognized by the Lutheran authorities as a proper preacher of the Reformation. A treaty was signed in 1533 with the surrounding area, called Westphalia, making Muenster a Lutheran city. Rothmann was a large man and was well known in the city for his passionate preaching of the Gospel.

That summer, a visitor came to town, named Jan Matthys, who was from Holland. Matthys was a radical Anabaptist. He rejected infant baptism, non-violence, and believed oppression demanded resistance. Bernhard was immediately converted to this ideology. Upon his conversion and rebaptism,

he dressed in black robes and walked through the streets of Muenster with Matthys preaching the end of the world and repentance.

Within weeks, Matthys and Rothmann set up a new government in Muenster. They rebaptized thousands of willing people, who were taken with the new radical theology of Matthys. The new leadership was made up of a council of elders with Matthys as the administrative head and Rothmann as the spiritual leader. The Lutherans and Catholics were ejected from the city, along with anyone who wanted to leave. The city walls were locked down. Within the space of a few weeks, the town of Muenster became a massive Anabaptist cult. Anabaptist worship practices were instituted. A harsh and strict behavioral code was applied to all the residents who remained.

Matthys believed himself to be a modern-day Gideon or Samson, and on Easter Sunday 1534, with only 30 fellow warriors, he charged out of the gates of the city.

This was Matthys' downfall because the ejected Catholic bishop of Muenster had called upon the surrounding towns and even other countries to help rout the crazed Anabaptists from his city. The bishop laid siege to Muenster and encircled the city. When Matthys exited the gates of the city, he and his tiny army ran into a huge mercenary army. He was beheaded and his head was put on a pike in front of the central gate as a warning to everyone inside the city.

With the death of Matthys, a new leader arose, a man by the name of John of Leiden who had recently arrived in Muenster. John of Leiden was even more 'passionate' than either Rothmann or Matthys. In the spring of 1534, the story of Muenster gets even more bizarre. John believed Muenster was the locus of Armageddon and the New Jerusalem. He believed Muenster was the location of Christ's second coming. He believed he was a prophet who received God's direct word on these things. And so did the rest of the city!

John of Leiden pronounced himself king of Muenster, drawing a direct line from himself to King David. Sometimes, John walked around town nude, preaching repentance and the second coming of Christ. For various reasons, the number of women outnumbered men then in Muenster by 3 to 1, so John instituted polygamy. He preached violent revolution against all who stood against them, since they were God's chosen people and location for the second coming of Christ.

You might think people would be attempting to escape this incredible scene en-masse. This is an entire cosmopolitan city here – thousands and thousands of people. The bishop, who if you remember is now sitting outside the gates of his city with the mercenary armies, had leaflets thrown into the city by catapults – the first time leaflets were used in history – offering sanctuary for anyone who wished to leave, especially women with children. No one left the city.

In the spring of 1535, the bishop and the surrounding authorities had enough. They raided the city, which was starving by this point, which is the point of a siege, and decimated it. Many people died. No one knows how many. The armies captured John of Leiden, Bernhard Hoffman and other leaders.

They were hoisted in cages by the mercenary army to starve and die in front of the city. The cages still hang from the bell tower in the town square today.

You know how superheroes and villains have incredible origin stories? How the tragedy of their past molds them into who they become in the future? Imagine this as part of the origin story for the Anabaptists. I present this story to you as a model, not as a one-off, isolated incident. It is a story of how a beautiful idea – simple worship, simple sacraments, simple community in service to Christ –

can be rapidly warped into something insane. These situations are spectacularly unique, but the pattern is similar.

I have a lot of questions. But here is the question I walk away with. It is a little like the “Catch-22” question from Joseph Heller’s novel.

If everyone around you appears to have gone insane, and the leadership everyone chose and agreed to appears to be insane, how do you know you are NOT insane?

There are issues with everyone we have looked at so far – the Children’s Crusade from the 1200s, where the Catholic Church organized thousands of children to march upon Jerusalem to face Islamic armies; or the use of Scripture to justify brutal slavery practices, a practice brought over by the Anglicans to America; or the hunting of witches in early Congregational America? It is really, really easy to manipulate beautiful things and turn them into ugly things. How far down the road will any of us get before we realize what was once beautiful has been twisted into something horrific and ugly?

One of the elders in Muenster during all this had a brother who was also an Anabaptist. The brother did not move into Muenster. It seemed off to him. His name was Menno Simons. By circumstance and situation rather than great intelligence or leadership ability, Menno became a person around whom refugees from Muenster gathered. Menno had an intuitive sense of how far from anything resembling Christian faith the Muenster situation had taken people, so he reformed the radical reformation.

Menno Simons established two platforms that are still adhered to today by Anabaptists communities – non-violence and complete separation from the state. By complete separation he meant no oaths of allegiance to country or king, no military participation, no involvement in civic affairs, no working for the government. He, and the people who followed him, the Mennonites as they were and are now called, took very seriously our reading from Romans 12 today, *Do not be conformed to this world*. The adherence to non-violence is built upon Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount.

Later, in the 1600s, a gentleman named Amman reformed the radical reformation again and made even more clear the separation from the surrounding world. His followers were called the Amish.

The three primary Anabaptist expressions are the Church of the Brethren, the Mennonites, and the Amish. All of them hold up the Sermon on the Mount as the clearest expression of how to be a follower of Christ in the world. All of them believe they are a holy people. The word *Holy* means *set apart*.

We, here, take that to mean the *things of the faith* are set apart – worship, the elements of the sacraments, prayer time. An Anabaptist knows that *set apart* means the *people of the faith*. If we follow Christ, we are set apart by Christ in every way. Thus each Anabaptist community or church is set apart from the rest of the world so they will not be conformed to it, but instead will be shaped by Christ.

WORSHIP

Worship in the Anabaptist tradition is very, very simple. Prayer, the reading of Scripture, preaching, and the singing of hymns. A service can be 3 hours long. In an Amish service, the hymn book is called the Ausbund and it is all in German. It is filled with early Reformation hymns going all the way back to 1522. In most Anabaptist churches, the singing is done acapella. Any instrumentation must have a biblical foundation – so trumpets, tambourines, harps and drums are allowed.

Communion in the Anabaptist tradition is primarily a memorial, a remembrance.

The word *Anabaptist* means *baptized again*. Therefore, adult baptism by confession of faith is foundational for the movement. If you were baptized as an infant or as a child, it is not a valid baptism because you did not choose your baptism. By the way, the Anabaptists take their history of persecution very seriously, rightly. The Catholic Church, in the most insulting way possible, executed Anabaptists by drowning. To push the knife deeper, they called the punishment “the 3rd Baptism”.

THEOLOGY

There are several formulations of Anabaptist theology, but all of them resemble something like the Mennonite understanding of Christ, Community, and Peace. It is worth noting that the formulation resembles closely the NACCC’s watchwords of Faith, Freedom, and Fellowship. I do not think it too big a stretch to consider one of the large influences on the Pilgrims were the Anabaptists, who, if you remember, were a large and influential presence in the Netherlands at the time the Pilgrims lived there.

As for a condensed, Biblical expression of what the Anabaptists are all about, Romans 12 and Matthew 5 are the verses to go to for understanding.

STRUCTURE

The Anabaptists are very decentralized at every level. There are loose associations of Mennonite, Brethren, and Amish gatherings, but each community is self-governed. What defines an Anabaptist is primarily which Anabaptist they follow: Mennonites follow the teachings of Menno Simons, the Amish follow the teachings of Amman, and you’re a Brethren if you attend a Brethren church.

The church is often run by a group of elders. The minister in Brethren and Mennonite churches are considered more like lay-leaders than in the way we would consider a minister. The Amish, though, do not have ministers. The Amish also do not have churches. They gather in people’s homes for worship. An Amish elder will choose who preaches at the service. It could be anyone.

OUTREACH

The Anabaptists are very insular groups governed by the Sermon on the Mount, so any outreach is promoted through acts of mercy and service locally. If you live near an Amish community and your barn burns down, there is a high likelihood that a group from the Amish community will be at your house the next day to rebuild your barn in a day.

The Mennonites base their outreach on peace activities. They were instrumental in setting up the Peace and Reconciliation Committees in South Africa after apartheid. If there peace is needed, the Mennonites will be there working for it. To learn about how best to foster Christian peace and love, the Mennonites will have an abundance of resources.

Heifer International is a worldwide relief agency that provides animals such as cows, rabbits, chickens, bees, and horses to impoverished communities to build a sustainable local economy. We can thank the Church of the Brethren for their incredible ministry through Heifer.

SPIRITUAL DISCIPLINES

Like the Baptists, who were heavily influenced in the early days by the Anabaptists, the main spiritual disciplines are prayer and the reading of Scripture. But there is one other discipline to add: the

Christian discipline of learning to live in community with one another. Most Protestant churches are all about church – where we go and what we do on Sunday, and while we at RCC might think of ourselves as a close-knit family of faith, most of us come here on Sundays and leave. We can participate at our leisure. We may only see each other for a couple hours on Sunday morning.

If you are a Mennonite or Amish, particularly, the people you see at worship are the people you see every single day all the time. You cook with them, you farm with them, you build with them, you pray with them, you sing with them. The discipline of community is profound in the Anabaptist movement.

O Lord, the history of your followers is unusual, unique, and sometimes strange. Let the light of Christ continually shine through our wrong paths and our right paths. Guide us out of darkness and into light always. May we always be reforming your reformation of our being and may we always be deepened in humility and service to you through the model of Your Son Jesus Christ, who, in his ministry showed us the true values of Peace, Community, and most of all, Your Presence with and for us through Your Son. Amen.