

CMCL
1/21/18 Sermon
How Anabaptist Are We?
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When I lived in Atlanta, it was always a shock for folks when I told them I was Mennonite. Where's your buggy? Where's your little hat-thing? They'd say, with some curiosity, but oftentimes with a look that made me feel that I'd become ever so slightly alien in their eyes. One of the bluegrass bands I played with used to get a big kick out of cracking a very low-brow joke onstage and then saying, "now we'd like to bring up our Mennonite pastor on fiddle..." as if I was a particularly interesting circus sideshow.

As we all well know here in Lancaster, whether you identify as Mennonite or not, you know very well that Mennonites dress all kinds of ways, and that many, many, many of us aren't outwardly identifiable as Mennonite, at all. As we delve into our Mennonite and Anabaptist heritage this month, we ask: what does an Anabaptist look like? And how Anabaptist are we ... here at CMCL?

I've been a part of a Mennonite church my entire life, but it was in 5th grade that I learned about Anabaptism in Sunday School and it was a game-changer for me. I was interested to learn about what the early Anabaptists believed – it was the first time I remember paying attention to anything remotely theological. But really, what I was drawn to, was the people in those stories, and knowing that people somehow connected to me had believed these things so strongly that they were willing to die for them. They believed that all people could read & interpret the Bible themselves; that you needn't rely on a priest to mediate between you and God; that baptism was a choice you could only reasonably be expected to make as an adult; because you were choosing the path the rest of your life would take - that taking care of one another was important; not just socially, but financially; that things like loving our enemies and turning the other cheek, and sharing all you had were meant for us now, not just some stories about olden days, or pipe dreams of heaven.

But the belief that really caught me was non-conformity "Be not conformed to this world," Romans says, "But DO be transformed by the renewing of your minds." The early Anabaptists believed in not doing what they were told unless they actually agreed with what they were told; and they believed in speaking and living the truth as they understood it, even if no one agreed with them. For me, as a pre-teen, it was absolutely riveting to hear about these people who completely eschewed popularity and conformity. I was entering that phase of life where "fitting in" felt like the goal of life; and a very disempowering one at that. So, I held on tight to the connection and inspiration I felt with these faith ancestors of mine; taking comfort that even if it seemed I was alone, or in a situation where no one was like me, or everyone else was making choices I didn't want to make; I no longer felt alone. I could be a non-conformist, too. In many ways, I believe that this connection saved me. It gave me a grounding in my life and in my faith – knowing I was connected to these people across time.

Moving to Lancaster as a teen was a hard adjustment; I had equated Mennonite with non-conformist, and then we moved to the Mennonite mother-ship, and suddenly being Mennonite was a constant act of conforming, to everyone and everything around me, it felt like. It was here in Lancaster, among so many Mennonites, that I learned of *Gelassenheit*. *Gelassenheit* is a German word, and it means yieldedness. Specifically for Mennonites, it has been used in reference to yielding one's self and one's desires to the common will of the community. This felt like the very opposite of non-conformity, and it baffled me.

But I think that this interplay between non-conformity and yieldedness is potentially a really powerful one. There are probably whole books written re: the concept of “the world” in the New Testament, thinking here particularly of the phrase in Romans about not being conformed “to the world”. For Mennonites, “the world” has often meant anything outside of church so there was non-conformity to everything but the church, but an expectation of yieldedness within the church. Almost all schisms within the Mennonite church over the last centuries have been over these issues of non-conformity and yieldedness, and often about outward physical appearance of separation, or non-conformity with the world and the church community's attempts to define that, and expectation of yieldedness to it, with often little success. Menno Simons himself, who visited us last Sunday, apparently wrote many tracts urging adoption of plain dress, so it's a long-standing issue.

Reflecting on this has helped me put the current community divides within MCUSA in some perspective – because yieldedness and internal conformity have been given such high value over time it's almost no wonder that current differences of conviction about gender identity and sexual orientation are making our fragile schism trigger fingers itchy - it's a long and glorious tradition. But as is true for individuals, I think is also true for communities: sometimes one's potential weaknesses and strengths come from the same source. The same non-conformity that launched the radical Reformation has been interpreted differently over time. Mennonites have, as I've said, interpreted non-conformity to be about issues of appearance, and made assumptions that Christ could not be found outside of church.

But as the passage in Romans says, non-conformity is not really about appearing like the world or not, but about the capacity and choice to stay aware and say no when we begin to consciously or unconsciously abdicate our own will to the uses of others. And yieldedness should be to Love in Christ, to justice; to respect and hear the discernment and concern of others; it's not a blank check written to religious or communal authority. The goal is transformation ultimately: neither non-conformity in and of itself NOR yieldedness alone are the goal – but necessary capacities in the pursuit of a heart and mind and life that are transformed in Christ.

I think we carry tremendous gifts from our Anabaptist heritage, but part of our job is the question posed by Stuart Murray in his book, *The Naked Anabaptist: The Bare Essentials of a Radical Faith*. What does Anabaptist theology look like; when the contentious clothes of Mennonitism are removed, what is left? When you dress Anabaptism up in CMCL clothes, what does it look like? Feel like? To whom and what are we being beckoned to conform? It's easy to see unhealthy conforming happening when you're looking across a political aisle, for example, and seeing others wed themselves to a party. One of Martin Luther King's oft-preached sermons was on this topic: “This hour in history needs a dedicated circle of transformed nonconformists. Our planet teeters on the brink of atomic annihilation; dangerous passions of pride, hatred, and

selfishness are enthroned in our lives; truth lies prostrate on the rugged hills of nameless calvaries; and men do reverence before false gods of nationalism and materialism. The saving of our world from pending doom will come, not through the complacent adjustment of the conforming majority, but through the creative maladjustment of a nonconforming minority. Everybody passionately seeks to be well-adjusted. We must, of course, be well-adjusted if we are to avoid neurotic and schizophrenic personalities, but there are some things in our world to which people of goodwill must be maladjusted. I confess that I never intend to become adjusted to the evils of segregation and the crippling effects of discrimination, to the moral degeneracy of religious bigotry and the corroding effects of narrow sectarianism, to economic conditions that deprive men of work and food, and to the insanities of militarism and the self-defeating effects of physical violence. Human salvation lies in the hands of the creatively maladjusted...."

I'm especially drawn to this sermon because King makes the move I think I've intuited, and sensed and yearned for and felt my own tradition preparing me for, but never quite making the leap he makes, which is that non-conformity is not primarily about purity, or about our own salvation but about necessary conditions for transforming the world. This is a most radical yielding -- to God, to love, to justice. We have the gift of a tradition that has shown us power, perils and potential that come with non-conformity and yieldedness. Let us be not become conformed to anything such that we can no longer step back and critique and see through God's eyes. Let us no be conformed to powers and principalities and wealth and security seeking and self-righteousness. Let us be yielded to Love and Justice, and willing participants in communities that work toward them. Amen.