June 22, 2025 - Renewal Through Repentance - Anabaptism at 500
Revelation 3:14–22
Mark 1:14–15
2 Chronicles 7:14

We're continuing our series on Anabaptism at 500 and today's theme is Renewal through Repentance.

Let me begin with a story about *refusing* to repent. My father-in-law sent it to me this week. It's from a Church Newsletter in the church I grew up in, First Mennonite in Berne, and appeared in the section titled "Mennonite Moments" which recalls moments from congregations's history:

> Rev. Vornholt of the Reformed Church married John
> Burke and Anna Bixler. [The First Mennonite] preacher had declined
> because John balked at making a public confession for playing pool.
> To John's credit, he refused to tattle on his pool-playing pal
> who also happened to be our preacher's son.

John Burke, who happens to be my wife's great-great-grandfather, couldn't get married in the Mennonite Church because he played pool. His Great-grandson, I know for a fact, has a pool table in his basement. And when I was an adolescent in the very same Church, there was a pool table in the youth room.

Sin and the things we are called to repent for are fickle things. They change. So we have to treat repentance with care and seriousness, because repentance can be used to control. It can be a way to exercise power over others by shaming them into conformity with the group. And the story of the Church and our Anabaptist movement contains much of that.

Still, repentance is also so basic to the christian life, an essential Christian posture and practice. "Repent, and believe in the good news," John the Baptist says in one of our readings today. You can't be Christian without repentance. You can't understand Jesus or the reign of God that Jesus preaches without repentance. It's what Christians do. We repent.

Let me make a few short points about repentance.

- We don't need to be saved from God. God's the one who saves us from sin.

  Sometimes it can seem like the way we talk about repentance in the Church that it is something we do to be rescued from God's wrath and punishment. (If and how God punishes is something to talk about another time, but today we're focused on repentance.) So let's affirm that God is actively saving us from sin, not actively trying to punish us. Repentance turns us towards God, and God is love. We don't need saved from God's love, we need saved from sin. That's why repentance is good news, it's a turning toward God's love.

  Strong's Lexicon, a dictionary for the words we find in the Bible, describes the essence of the Greek word for repentance, *metanoia*, that's used throughout the New Testament this way:

  > *[Metanoia] expresses a Spirit-[shaped] reorientation of mind and heart that issues in a changed life. It is never presented as a mere intellectual shift, nor as a work that earns salvation, but as the God-enabled turning that accompanies true saving faith.*

  Repentance is a gift from God that enables us to participate in the life of God. So again, repentance is turning toward God.

- A second point: Why do we repent? We repent because we sin. We look at sin, acknowledge it, and turn away from it by turning toward God.

  Let me suggest something that might sound a bit unusual at first: Oftentimes, sin isn't a problem, it's a solution. Sin is a solution to a problem.

  Let me unpack that. Why do we lie? Perhaps we're embarrassed by the truth. That's a problem we fix by hiding or changing the truth. Or we desire something we can't have, so we lie in order to attain what we desire. A solution to our problem.

  Or why do we turn to escapes into things like drugs, alcohol, or sex? Oftentimes, these aren't problems in and of themselves. Rather, they are solutions to the problem that life is often painful and hard, sometimes harder than hard. Searching for a solution to our problems, we find escape routes, a momentary release from the burden of our pains and hardship.

  Or consider more social and communal sins like racism or patriarchy. These sins are not simply explained, but surely at their root is fear and a desire for control. Faced with fear of difference or a challenge to structures that provide order and regulate behavior, we construct systems, as a solution, that dehumanize and repress in order to maintain control and power.

- Repentance gives us better and more worthy problems.
  I'm going to presume that most of us have had these two experiences of repentance, or least glimpsed them.

  One is maybe a life-altering experience of repentance. Maybe it was a general repentance, in which you tangibly felt the grace of the living

God overcome you. A moment of conversation, or a moment of finally being released into the all-embracing love of God. Or maybe it was repenting of something specific, that resulted in a healing of yourself and relationships with God and others.

You've perhaps also had the experience of repenting the same sins over and over again and not changing much. At our Bible Study this week, Mary taught us the phrase "besetting sins." These are the recurring or persistent sins that we struggle with, and find difficult to overcome. We might even repent knowing full well we'll likely to do the same thing tomorrow, because we know how weak we are and our experience tells us we're just not strong enough to overcome them.

Repentance isn't going to make it easy or make all our problems go away. Even those with the most profound moments of life-altering repentance, I think, will still testify that life can still be hard, and sometimes harder than hard.

But it does change our problems. When we repent, we discover that we are beloved Creatures of God, held in the embrace of an all-loving God. That's nothing to be ashamed of. We don't need to be embarrassed about who we are and contrive a false-story. We no longer need to strive for status or esteem, the great Creator of all the Cosmos loves us.

Our new problem is loving God and loving our neighbor. And that's not always easy. Neighbors can be hard to love.

And when we repent and turn toward God, we discover we are not alone amidst the pain and hardship. The God who breathed life into Creation, is with us, is God-with-us. We're no longer driven to find an escape from this world, but to enter into it more fully.

But a new problem emerges, how does our own pain join in solidarity with all Creation that longs and groans for redemption? How do we learn the humility to receive the love and care of those around us? Loving ourselves isn't always easy, receiving the love of others isn't always easy. And joining in solidarity with those who suffer is costly.

And when we repent, we open ourselves to receiving God's grace, which we are wholly and utterly dependent on. We no longer need to feel responsible to control and exercise power over this world, we simply need to dwell in God's grace and promise to redeem all things.

And that raises all kinds of new problems about how we begin to disentangle ourselves from systems and structures like racism, patriarchy, or homophobia, and how we bear witness to God's reign of justice and love and extend the same grace to the world around us..

So repentance gives us new problems, worthy problems. God hasn't given us a play book with easy one-size fit's all solutions. But God has given us the Spirit to comfort, guide, direct, stir us. And God has given us the gift of repentance.

The worship resources created for this Anabaptism at 500 series quote the Anabaptist Scholar Gerald Mast commenting on how Menno Simons (for whom Mennonites were given their name) understood repentance. He writes,

> *Menno made it clear that the life, example, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ constituted the time of grace in which we live. This grace was not merely a matter of Jesus' sacrifice on the cross by which humans could be declared righteous before God…. The grace of Jesus Christ made visible the kingdom of God and defeated the grip of sin. . . . [It was] a time of*

> *awakening—of discovering that the kingdom of God has become visible in Jesus Christ and of becoming conscious of the sin that is repudiated in this kingdom.*

For Menno and other early Anabaptist, repentance wasn't merely the outcome of faith -- something you do once you believe in God's salvation, or to ensure your salvation. It was a gift of grace, a practice of faith that itself bore witness to God's reign.

The nuance here is a little hard to grasp. But for Anabaptists, repentance wasn't simply a pardon of sin. It wasn't simply a matter of having faith that your sins were forgiven. It was a gift of grace that formed you more fully into the body of Christ. That is, through repentance, we become more Christ-like.

Here's Menno Simons in his essay "Sincere and True Repentance":

> *Alas, beloved …, it will avail us nothing to be called christians, and boast of the Lord's blood, death, merits, grace and Gospel, as long as we are not converted from this wicked, impious and shameful life. It is in vain that we are called christians; that Christ died; that we were born in the day of grace, and baptized with water, if we do not walk according to his law, counsel, admonition, will and command and are not obedient to his word.*

That can sound a bit harsh to us, but in Menno's context, he was speaking against something we might call "cheap grace," a term coined centuries later by the German theologian Deitrich Bonhoefer. "Cheap grace," is a type of grace that doesn't require a transformation on the part of the repentant. It's a kind of pardon for your sins, without any commitment to change and orient your life around the way of Jesus.

Repentance for Menno, was a way of entering into faith, of trusting oneself to the transforming work of God. It's a grace, because it forms the

repentant into the Body of Christ, and through the Spirit makes a transformed life possible.

This is a very different kind of person that simply goes to confession, or pays an indulgence in order to be forgiven. It's a type of person committed to being a disciple of Jesus.

I once heard Sarah Nahar, someone that many of you know, talk about the reasons Christians should be committed to nonviolence. And I remember something she said kind of in passing, but was really profound for me, "We are committed to nonviolence, because if we're wrong, we can apologize later to the people we've harmed."

In this way repentance calls us deeper into faith, into the life of Jesus, and is at the heart of a life committed to the way of Jesus, because we don't always know the right thing to do, and we mess up. Repentance offers us the grace to apologize and make amends. And Repentance propels us onward and forward. It allows us to act with convictions, while also being open to the need to convert and change course. Repentance keeps us from trying to overpower our enemies with violence, and instead calls us to a faithful witness to the way of Jesus.

Faith without repentance is merely certainty. A certainty rooted in hubris and pride that can't be reconciled with the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

As we consider repentance in the context of honoring 500 years of Anabaptism, what do we need to repent of? Where have we gone wrong? What structures have we created out of fear and the need to control? What do we need to turn away from?

These are pertinent questions for our own fellowship right here, as we continue in a time of discernment about our future together. How can we

practice repentance as a gift of grace, as an opportunity to turn back towards God? How might repentance reinvigorate our faith?