

## **Message for February 19, 2017**

Glennon Heights Mennonite Church

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Scripture passages: Matthew 5:38-48 and 1 Corinthians 3:10-11

### **Our foundation**

“No one can lay any foundation other than the one that has been laid; that foundation is Jesus Christ.” These words of the Apostle Paul were *foundational* for our Anabaptist ancestors. Menno Simons used this verse as his motto. In his little booklet entitled “What is an Anabaptist Christian?” theologian Palmer Becker puts it this way: “Jesus is the center of our faith.”

Well, duh. Isn't that self-evident? We're Christians, after all, Christ followers. Who else would we focus on? Ah, but there's the rub: Even with the best intentions and a strong faith commitment, we tend to get de-centered. We get off track. We get off track because really following Jesus is difficult. It's challenging. It often takes us out of our comfort zone.

For example, the teachings from Matthew 5 that Nina read for us this morning. "You have heard that it was said, 'An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.' But I say to you, Do not resist an evildoer. ... You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you." This is Jesus talking. The one whom we profess to follow. The one who is our foundation, the center of our faith. As Anabaptist Christians, we can't somehow find our way around this. We have to take it seriously.

What Jesus is telling his disciples and all of us who follow, is that faithfulness requires a willingness to throw a wrench in the works of revenge, hatred and oppression. Ah, yes, that makes sense: We're called to destroy that which destroys. We have to pit

ourselves against the oppressors. No, Jesus says, slow down. You're missing the point. That's not what I'm saying. I'm showing you another way. Do not set yourselves against any person. Do not insist on your rights as the injured party. Don't respond in these expected ways. Instead opt for surprise. Look for ways to respond that do not escalate the hostility. That's what I mean by throwing a wrench in the works. Break the cycle of revenge. Break the cycle of hatred and hostility by doing something completely different. Something that reflects your trust and deep belief in the God of love. Stand on that firm foundation.

Jesus gives some examples of responding in unexpected ways. "If anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also; and if anyone wants to sue you and take your coat, give your cloak as well; and if anyone forces you to go one mile, go also the second mile." "Love your enemies. Pray for those who persecute you." If you do this, Jesus says, it will really shake things up. It will turn things upside-down. And through you God's deep desire for the well-being of *all* the world will be made evident.

Sometimes it's hard to see how these ancient words apply to real life. I want to share two stories with you this morning that I think do a good job of illustrating what Jesus is talking about in our world here and now.

I found the first story in the January 16 issue of the Mennonite World Review. It was written by Fredrick Nzwili for the Religious News Service. Mr. Nzwili writes:

In northern Uganda retired Anglican Bishop Macleord Baker Ochola II is agitating for restorative justice in a region where wounds of a brutal war unleashed by the Lord's Resistance Army persist.

In the 1980s and '90s, the LRA rebels, led by Joseph Kony, terrorized civilians in northern Uganda. They abducted children and forcefully recruited boys as soldiers and girls as sex slaves. Kony turned child soldiers into killing machines against their own community. By 2005, the LRA had abducted 60,000 children and killed more than 100,000 people, while displacing 2.5 million.

Bishop Ochola buried the dead, walked with returning child soldiers and at one point was even forced into exile. The conflict took a toll on his family. His wife died in 1997 after a land mine blast hit a car she was traveling in. Ten years earlier, his daughter committed suicide after being gang-raped by the rebels.

But Ochola has refused to remain bitter, choosing instead to promote peace and forgiveness. "If there is no process of reconciliation, there is no healing, and if there is no healing there is no restoration and justice," he said.

The International Criminal Court in The Hague indicted five top leaders of the rebel group in 2005. Last month, it put on trial Dominic Ongwen, a 41-year-old former rebel commander who was himself abducted at age 10. He faces 70 charges, including murder, rape, torture, sexual slavery and forced marriage.

Bishop Ochola has been urging the court to carefully reconsider the circumstances under which children-turned-commanders were trapped in LRA captivity. While he does not deny the court's charges, he fears the court is seeking punishment or retribution instead of offering restorative justice. He is also concerned that the court's decisions will further divide his community, which is in dire need of unity in the aftermath of LRA atrocities.

Like many other cultural and religious leaders in Uganda, Bishop Ochola stresses

a traditional justice system known as Mato Oput. Centered on forgiveness, it involves truth telling, compensation and a ritual in which food is shared and the accused drink bitter herbs. “The court system, which is retributive, promotes polarization, alienating both sides,” said Ochola. “The Mato Oput process brings restoration to broken human relationships, transforms lives and heals the hearts of those involved.”

[End of words by Mr. Nzwili]

The second story is an excerpt from an article entitled, “What we’re fighting for.” It was written by Phil Klay and appeared in the New York Times Sunday Review last week. Mr. Klay writes:

Midway through my deployment in Iraq a Marine arrived on base with severe wounds. He’d been shot by an enemy sniper. The medical staff swarmed around his body, working frantically, skillfully, but it wasn’t enough. He died on the table.

Normally, there’d be a moment of silence, of prayer, but the team got word that the man who killed this young Marine, the insurgent sniper, would be arriving a few minutes later. ... The injured sniper arrived at our base. And the medical staff members, still absorbing the blow of losing a Marine, got to work. They stabilized their enemy and pumped him full of American blood, donated from the “walking blood bank” of nearby Marines. The sniper lived. They put him on a helicopter to go to a hospital for follow-up care. One of the Navy nurses was assigned to be his flight nurse. The nurse told me later of the strangeness of sitting in the back of a helicopter, watching over his enemy lying peacefully unconscious, doped up on painkillers, while he kept checking the sniper’s vitals, his blood pressure, his heartbeat, a heartbeat that was steady and strong thanks to

the gift of blood from the Americans this insurgent would have liked to kill.

[End of excerpt from the article by Mr. Klay]

In both these stories I see Jesus' words being played out in real life. It's true that the Marines who saved the life of the enemy insurgent were just following protocol, but the result was the same and I find it remarkable. Instead of retaliating for the death of their fellow soldier, medical personnel provided blood and careful, conscientious care for the enemy, the one who had killed their comrade. There on the battlefield in the midst of violence, the "rights of humanity" took precedence over hatred and the desire for revenge.

In Uganda Bishop Ochola longs for peace and unity to be restored to his deeply injured and divided community, a community that includes both those who have suffered horrifically and those who perpetrated the brutality. He is well aware of the depth of the pain and loss. He also knows that punishment and retribution will not result in wholeness. Only following the commands of Jesus – to not set oneself *against* but instead to go the second mile, to turn the other cheek, to offer respect and dignity to all who have been caught up in this brutal web – only this will make any real difference. So, standing firm on his foundation of faith and undergirded by tradition, he offers a surprising alternative, a way to break the cycle of revenge, hatred and hostility by doing something completely different.

Sisters and brothers, Jesus calls us to a life of wholeness. Just as God is wholly good, fully compassionate, steadfast and merciful, so are we called to be. "Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect." This is a high calling. A difficult calling.

A calling which takes us out of our comfort zone. It requires a willingness to stay focused and to follow even when following puts us at odds with the world. We may not be sure exactly where we are going, but never are we left to flounder. For we are on building on a firm foundation. That foundation is Jesus Christ.

Please turn to the back of your bulletins and read with me the Praying words that are printed there:

Heavenly Father, your words challenge us today:

“Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you,” in a world that teaches us to hate our enemies, to speak ill of those who disagree with us, to give the silent treatment to those who hurt us.

We want to live according to your love and perfection, but sometimes it’s so hard!

Teach us to love. Teach us to pray for our enemies.

We offer up our prayers on their behalf.

*(silent prayers)*

Thank you, God, for your generosity to the just and the unjust.

May we soak up the rays of your love, and the rain of your blessing over all.

Amen.