

A wise Canadian once said, “All of life’s great answers must be in the form of a question.” - Alex Trebeck This summer, some of the youth sponsors went camping together, and while sitting around the campfire, Alyse posed one of life’s beautiful questions, “What do you find beautiful?” We started sharing answers, and I think I said something like, “I find ‘perfect moments’ beautiful. A perfect moment is more than just a pretty sunset over the prairie, the beautiful arc of a well shot free-throw, or the first sip of cold Dr. Pepper... no, perfect moments are the instances in which all the strands and elements of a story resonate in harmony with what is right. Let me give you an example of what I mean:

This beautiful moment happened just last Tuesday following the recent U.S. elections... perhaps you heard it too. Danica Roem was in a fevered political battle with Bob Marshall in the State of Virginia for a seat in the state and Danica Roem won. Following the historic campaign and victory. She was asked by a reporter, “What would you say to your opponent after a night like tonight? It must feel very vindicating.” She responded, “I have nothing but nice things to say about Bob. I would never attack one of my constituents, and Bob is now one of my constituents.”

Now, that response alone is beautiful... it’s a great response, which in the current political climate, harmonizes with what is right... it’s refreshing, but what makes it divine – what makes it perfect -- is when you realize who Bob Marshall and Danica Roem are.

The reporter said, “It must feel very vindicating...” and I’m confident it would, because Bob Marshall is the legislator who wrote the Anti-transgendered Bathroom bill that made headlines a few years ago attempting to force people – but specifically transgendered individuals - into certain bathroom facilities. Mr. Marshall ran a campaign that centered around, at least to some extent, Anti-LGBTQ policies... and he was defeated by Danica Roem... the first openly transgendered state legislator in U.S. history. Vindicating? I would say so... But Ms. Roem simply said, “I would never attack one of my constituents, and Bob is now one of my constituents.”

Beautiful. All the strands and elements of a story resonating in harmony with what is right – in fact, that’s what God’s peace... shalom, is all about. Shalom... one of the few Hebrew words that have made it into our regular Christian vocabulary... has many definitions but the one that I gravitate to the most is in connection to “All relationships being good, whole, and right.” “Right-relationship” – wholeness – tranquilo -- where things are as they should be. Where we’re right with God, each other, nature, ourselves... Shalom.

We are a people who believe God’s divine project is best summarized in “shalom.” In re-creating shalom; establishing, maintaining, and eventually immersing the world in the baptism of shalom... when all is made right. That’s the divine, cosmic, Endeavour... the project God is bringing to completion and one in which he invites us, and works through us, to complete.

On this Sunday, when we as a Anabaptist/Mennonite world remember and intentionally focus on our peace position together, it’s good remember what shalom is all about. But, I’d like help us understand WHERE our commitment to and pursuit of shalom falls within our faith and theology, and why it matters. In other words, how will we define “success” as Anabaptist/Mennonite Christians?

By the way, if this is your first encounter with terms like “Anabaptist” or “Mennonite” let me quickly say, Anabaptists are a theological strand that began 500 years ago during the protestant reformation. Since Christianity was nationalized such that anyone born in a certain region was automatically considered part of the Christian Church [whether Catholic or Protestant] Christianity had near 100% attendance in churches and fairly low commitment to the faith. The Anabaptists were a group who discovered one of life’s great answers in the form of **this** question: “What would a Christian community be like if every member of the community was committed to following Jesus?” That’s the beautiful question that drove and drives our theology. “What would happen if we were committed to really following Jesus?” [That’s why CHOOSING to join the Church became so important... and why baptism became our symbol of commitment... and therefore why we stopped baptizing infants, and started baptizing those old enough to make a commitment.] We also recognized peace and non-violence as one of several distinctives that identified followers of Jesus. In other words, all

*faithful* followers of Jesus love their enemies and opponents and are non-violent in the midst of conflict. It doesn't mean followers of Jesus do this perfectly... it means we're at least trying to.

As you might imagine this theological position (along with several others) was not received well by governments and peoples who not only disagreed, but saw it as a threat to their systems of governance, power, and stability. That is as true in the 21<sup>st</sup> century as it was in the 16th. When I was in ministry with the U.S. Mennonite Brethren I frequently presented on our commitment to non-violent conflict resolution at our youth conventions. I presented 4 essential questions that I'd like to share them with you this morning. Here are the questions:

- 1) Who are we?
- 2) Who's in charge?
- 3) What does the one in charge direct us to do?
- 4) How do we define success?

Normally, I'd introduce the first question with a short quiz. I'd ask people just to shout out their responses to this question: "Following the terrorist attacks of Sept. 11 what were options we could have enacted in response to the terrorist attacks?" The responses would often be creative and varied: everything from not responding at all to impose economic sanctions, hire mercenaries, or nuke 'em... Once a room gets going, it's easy to see that if take just a moment to think we can come up with several creative responses to go along with the less imaginative.

But THAT'S when I'd give them the quiz... I'd invite them to raise their hands, if they thought when I said, "WE" when I asked what options "WE" could have enacted... that I was referring to "WE" citizens of the U.S.? (Some of you might be raising hands in your mind too)

Don't feel discouraged... you're not alone. When I was first posed this question, that's citizenship identity is exactly what my mind presumed was the reference too. It was nearly automatic! It's automatic for many, many of us... and I've found that is an especially prevalent problem in U.S. churches... that "WE" usually means "American" or "Canadian" first... not 'Christian'. Imagine how much that first question changes and how much our world would change if Christians identified their citizenship in the Kingdom of God as their primary community! If "WE" meant the Christian community.

That's the first question to wrestle with – who are "we"? Because you and I will behave and conduct ourselves differently depending on who "WE" refers to! What was the modest proposal for peace? That the Christians of the world commit to not doing violence to one another. "What would it be like if ***every member*** of the Christian community was ***committed*** to following Jesus?" What changes when WE recognize which "WE" we are actually committed to being a part of?

Question 2: Who's in charge?

A Christian I deeply respect, let's call him Theo, was once selected for jury duty. When he arrived at the courthouse and sat in the juror's box to be interviewed for jury selection, the judge began giving some instructions. The judge said, "I need you to commit to doing whatever I tell you to do. Does anyone have a problem with that?" Theo raised his hand, and the judge called on him. Theo responded, "Your honor, I don't mean to disrupt these proceedings and I certainly don't mean any offense to you or your authority, but I simply cannot commit to doing whatever you tell me to do." The judge asked Theo to clarify, and Theo said, "Your honor, I don't anticipate you ever asking me to do something that would conflict with my religious beliefs, but you need to know I've already made a commitment to do what Jesus tells me to do, and I can't very well maintain the same commitment to another authority. So, I can commit to doing anything that doesn't conflict with my commitment to Jesus, but I cannot promise I will do whatever you say.

Theo was selected for the jury.

After figuring out who “WE” are, we need to figure out what authority “WE” follow. There’s nothing inherently wrong with being under multiple authorities, or even submitting to them. But obedience can only be assured to one. So who or what is it going to be? When we don’t intentionally think about it, more often than not we adhere to a more complex set of intersecting and overlapping authorities... sometimes adhering to these and at other times following those... Who’s the authority we follow? Prime Ministers? Presidents? Generals and Commanders? Bosses? Spouses? Authors, artists, scientists? Pastors? Most often, the authorities we obey are simply ourselves. But Theo persuades me... for Christians, we can’t have any other authority than Jesus. Now, it’s great when Jesus’ directives parallel and resonate with the rest of society – but occasionally, Jesus’ directives run counter to those of society. “What would it be like if every member of the Christian community was committed to following Jesus?”

Question 3, which is deeply connected to question 2, might be seen as most important question for determining our peace position. After all, once we’ve identified who we belong to and who we’re directed by, all we have to do is figure out what our authority is directing us to do. Here’s where being a Jesus’ follower obviously steers the rest of the discussion.

Jesus, by instruction, command, and modeling, directs his followers to love enemies, do what would be for their good, endure persecution without retaliation, conduct ourselves creatively and nonviolently in conflicts, submit to but not obey oppressive systems by being committed even to the point of crucifixion.

Jesus doesn’t directly talk that often about peace and shalom... Jesus doesn’t talk that directly or that often about repentance or believing in the good news either... but throughout the gospel accounts it’s clear Jesus’ ministry and model is intricately connected to these priorities. Jesus constantly invites people to repent and set their lives in line with his gospel... he just doesn’t SAY it very often. Jesus lives thoroughly in line with God’s divine shalom project, even if he doesn’t explicitly mention it often. Jesus far more frequently lives, teaches, and invites us into a life that embodies these priorities.

It’s easy to think *that* ought to be enough to firmly establish our peace stance... and I think for many Anabaptist/Mennonites it might be... but I’d like to propose that there’s one more question that adds a subtle but decisive addition to the Christian faith.

Question #4 – the question I think is most central – and for we Mennonites – perhaps the most deceptively challenging: How will we define success? And this one is trickier than it sounds.

There are MANY definitions of success, many of which are incompatible with who we are, who our authority Jesus is, and what Jesus directs. Some people define success as: living as long as possible... but that’s not Jesus’ definition of success. For some it’s dying wealthy (or just wealthier than they started)... for some it’s being happy, or comfortable, or well-loved. For some it’s leaving behind a big family. For others it’s leaving behind a better world. Lots of definitions of success... in some we can hear a few reverberations which the Bible speaks to.

But I’d like to propose a somewhat controversial thought – especially on “Peace Sunday” – we shouldn’t define “success” as establishing peace... it’s NOT actually establishing shalom. Yes, “shalom” is the divine cosmic project that God– through Jesus – invites us to help establish. But that shouldn’t be the basis for our definition of “success.” Because, in the end, how one defines “success” is intricately tied to what one’s **GOAL** is.

The youth group will tell you that I’m a big proponent of distinguishing between GOALS and TASKS. A GOAL is what someone wants to accomplish, A TASK is what one needs to do to accomplish it. For example, there are MANY ways to travel to Carnegie Hall... drive, fly, hitchhike, sail, swim... practice, ... all the ways one could get there are examples of tasks... getting there is the GOAL. Accomplishing the tasks and accomplishing the goal are different things.

Being a Jesus’ follower creates an unanticipated goal, and therefore an unanticipated definition of “success.”

Christians may be, and I think Anabaptist Mennonites, specifically, are, tempted to think that “establishing shalom” is the goal, therefore success is accomplishing it. After all, establishing shalom is God’s divine cosmic project... but... it’s *not* God’s goal. God’s goal isn’t “shalom.” THAT’S God’s **TASK!** God’s GOAL is to be CHRISTLIKE... more accurately, God’s goal is to be Godself... in other words, to be like Jesus. That’s the more significant declaration in calling Jesus “Lord.” It’s not just declaring that Jesus is God... it’s declaring that God is Christlike! God’s GOAL is to be Christlike.

The same is true for us! The goal is to be Christlike. “Success,” for the Jesus-follower, is based on whether we followed Jesus faithfully in faithfulness to Jesus’ life, teaching, and directives. The Greek word for faithfulness – *pistueo* – is sometimes translated as faith, belief, trust, and faithfulness. It’s one Greek word that we often translate with three or four English words, and that creates problems. Some of those English words, like “belief” and “trust” are less actions as they are mental assertions. In other words, someone could “believe” an idea and never have it affect their actions. “Belief,” in English, is just maintaining a mental assertion... *pistueo* on the other hand is fuller than that. *Pistueo* is tied to living out one’s mental assertions. That’s why “faithful” and “faithfulness” is often a better translation. I like the illustration of a chair... you can see a chair, know what a chair should do... you can even believe and trust that the chair you’re looking at will perform the function a chair should perform... but it isn’t faithfulness... it’s not *pistueo* until you sit down.

WE followers of Jesus define success by being faithful – living out our *pistueo* to Jesus. The Bible points out that salvation is intricately connected to this *pistueo* – faithfulness—to Jesus. I’m more and more persuaded, that while “salvation” has an aspect which is a life-after-death, a heavenly experience, that’s only part (maybe even a smaller part – or at least less of a priority) for the Biblical authors than the life-BEFORE-death salvation... the kind we start to experience and help others experience right now that is planted, cultivated, grows, produces, and is harvested in faithfulness to Jesus.

Now arguing that “shalom” is our TASK while being faithful to Jesus is our GOAL and, therefore, our definition of success might sound like semantics, or an ultimately pointless distinction, but it’s more crucial than that. Here’s why:

FIRST: Jesus is not primarily “about” non-violence... Jesus is about love and love is non-violent. In other words, we don’t gravitate to Jesus because we’re **peace** people... we gravitate towards peace because we’re **Jesus** people.

SECOND: When success is determined by whether one is faithful to Jesus, success ISN’T determined by whether or not non-violence resolved the conflict (and that’s a good thing!)... we can be faithful to Jesus and not live as long... not live as comfortably... not live as populously... Sometimes we end up getting crucified... non-violent persuasion might not “SUCCEED” based on the world’s definitions... but we can still be successful – because in cross-bearing we are faithful to Jesus, and **THAT’S** the GOAL!

FINALLY: It opens the conversation up to Christians who disagree about the place of non-violence in our faith. If we claim our Christian GOAL is shalom and peacemaking... we’ll quickly realize that there are MANY Christians who don’t uphold that recognition or GOAL. When we uphold the goal of Christians to be faithful to JESUS... and define “success” accordingly, we find common ground with others who desire to follow Jesus. I envision much of our 21<sup>st</sup> century ministry as Anabaptists will need to be engaged with fellow Christians. Calling ALL to the GOAL of “faithfulness to Jesus” is a more shared vocabulary to engage in the important discipleship conversations that lay ahead of us.

Let us go from here inspired by great questions... and on THIS peace Sunday, the questions are:

Who are we? Who’s in charge? What does the one in charge direct us to do and be? How do we define success?

-and-

“What would it be like if every member of the Christian community was committed to following **Jesus**?”

**Since all of life’s great answers must be in the form of a question... what could be more beautiful than that?**