

**2024-09-08 Membership Sunday**

**We Become Together What We Could Not Be Alone**

Michele Rizoli

Romans 12:5-13 (The Voice)

Last week Peter told us all about *Gelassenheit*, a favourite concept of Anabaptist spirituality in the 1500s. It essentially means submission to God or trust in God. (You may listen to his excellent sermon on our website for a more fulsome description.) Today I want to briefly reflect on another Anabaptist German concept called *Gemeinde*.

Neither Peter nor I speak German, so don't expect this letter G theme to continue or the German lessons, But *Gemeinde* was one of Menno Simons' favourite concepts. Menno Simons is the person from whom we take our name, Mennonites. In sociological terms *Gemeinde* means a community which holds a profound degree of social cohesion and political or spiritual views, visions or purposes in common.<sup>1</sup> It is at the heart of how Amish and Hutterite communities function, and it is a golden thread woven into how Mennonite churches understand ourselves to this day: a community with vision and with purpose. Christ followers in community with each other empowered by God's Spirit.

Next year will be the commemoration of 500 years of Anabaptism, the historical and theological movement that gave rise to Mennonites (and others). We are taking the opportunity of several people joining TUMC as church members this month to reflect a bit on some particularly Anabaptist/Mennonite perspectives about faith and church.

We've come a long way since that feted day January 21, 1525 when George Blaurock and Conrad Grebel gathered with others for a secret meeting to baptize each other in the house of Felix Manz in Zurich, Switzerland.<sup>2</sup> This re-baptism was not a trivial matter at the time. To put it in perspective, "on March 20, 1531..., an itinerant tailor named

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<sup>1</sup> [https://gameo.org/index.php?title=Gemeinde\\_\(word\)](https://gameo.org/index.php?title=Gemeinde_(word)) Global Anabaptist Mennonite Encyclopedia

<sup>2</sup> Tim Nafziger, "Beyond Blaurock", *Leader Magazine*, Fall 2024

Sicke Freerks was beheaded because he had been baptized a second time.<sup>3</sup> And Anabaptists were persecuted and killed for that and many other reasons... but that is all for another conversation.

With regards to being church, the Anabaptist movement was the beginning of a radical break from the institutional church of the time, and even from the idea of trying to simply reform that institution (as did the Reformation). They didn't want to reform it, they wanted a whole new church.

Anabaptists were going for a whole new way of being and doing church. They aspired to live out a restored vision of the church, more in line with how the Bible outlined it in the New Testament, in what we often call the Early Church. For example, in the book of Acts the church was described as believers holding everything in common, eating and praying together constantly, and upholding each other in faith, being led by the Holy Spirit.

Menno Simons' idea of the church was shaped by how he read Scripture. For example, he mostly pruned away liturgy, because he wanted to abide strictly by what was in the Bible. (Being strict was apparently big at the time!)

On the positive side Early Anabaptists did not separate the way they understood church from the way they lived their lives as Jesus followers. (Or to state it in a more complicated way I read: "it is difficult to separate the ecclesiology of the [Early] Anabaptists from their ethics.") As he understood Scripture Menno [Simons] felt that genuine compassion for the poor was one of the marks that distinguished his movement from that of the mainline reformers."<sup>4</sup>

Or as Carolyn's adapted hymn put it last week: We will **show** we are Christians by our love.

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<sup>3</sup> <https://dwrightgingrich.com/ecclesiology-of-reformers-5-menno-simons/>

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Menno and his followers were also striving for a purity which he believed would be present if people who were part of a church community were truly transformed by God's Spirit. Here's a quote from Menno:

*"They verily are not the true congregation of Christ who merely boast of his name. But **they are the true congregation of Christ who are truly converted**, who are born from above of God, who are of a regenerate mind by the operation of the Holy Spirit through the hearing of the divine Word, and have become the children of God, have entered into obedience to him, and live unblamably in his holy commandments, and according to his holy will with all their days, or from the moment of their call."<sup>5</sup>*

It is a high standard! This ideal of purity led to some fairly strict views about church discipline and accountability within Anabaptist congregations at the time and since. If you want to know how it went horrible wrong, you can just read all about "the ban." How you love someone so much you kick them out to "save their souls." I'm glad we've moved on.

The thing is, purity and perfection just do not fare very well in real, messy, human community life; even with the presence and action of the Holy Spirit, perhaps even *because* of the presence and action of the Holy Spirit. Her powerful wind is seldom very orderly or uniform.

For as much as it has inspired our ancestors in the faith, I like to think that our image of the Early Church has been photoshopped. Think about it, if they were perfect or pure we wouldn't have a significant portion of the New Testament (including the passage we heard earlier) which consists of fleshing out (see what I did there?) what it means to be a follower of Christ living in a church community and in the world.

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<sup>5</sup> <https://dwightgingrich.com/ecclesiology-of-reformers-5-menno-simons/>

I believe that, with God's help, it is good and appropriate to have a high standard and a clear vision of what we expect from being church together. We make significant mutual commitments when people become church members and we sincerely hope to uphold those commitments. And, most importantly, to uphold each other.

Yes, and. I also believe that God's Spirit always comes with the unexpected and new things we haven't imagined before.

We will continue to think about what it means to be church next Sunday, as we commit more people into membership. For now I leave you with a personal parable:

To what shall I compare the evolving church? The church of God is like my front garden.

A while back a landscape designer came and carefully planned out my garden, the paved paths, which plants went together for the best effect, exactly where they needed to be placed to flourish, sun or shade. That lasted a while and it was beautiful and orderly as predicted.

Then one day my daughter-in-law saw that there weren't very many native species in that garden, and she knew that the pollinators are in decline. They need those native species. And pollinators (insects) are, after all, what make things grow, including our food. So we added some new native plants alongside the others. They were a bit chaotic, but still beautiful in their own way. One might say they're growing on me. They spread out a bit more, grew a bit taller, jumped the stone boundaries, overflowed and indeed there are many many more pollinators.

Then we planted one or two milkweed plants, a host plant specifically for Monarch butterflies. I had visions of a picturesque garden full of butterflies fluttering around, and me feeling good about myself for nurturing that species. Indeed, the milkweed is very very happy and has spread out quite vigorously and crowded out some non-native plants. Sadly there were not that many Monarch butterflies this year, but the milkweed

did not lose hope. It readjusted and a few of the plants began to host aphids, snails, ants, wasps, a colourful variety of flies – an entire co-dependent ecosystem of pollinators and bugs. It is not quite the cute pollinator ecosystem I was going for with the butterflies. But I'm learning that it is what needed to emerge for insect life to thrive.

I am learning to see that growth and thriving take on many different forms in many different times.

As we go into this week, think about your experience of church. Where have you come from? What have been your surprises? What are your visions and hopes?

Let's hear again the scripture passage we heard earlier:

Romans 12:5-13 (The Voice)

We, too—the many—are different parts that form one body in the Anointed One. Each one of us is joined with one another, *and we become together what we could not be alone. ...*

Love others *well*, and don't hide behind a mask; love authentically. Despise evil; pursue what is good *as if your life depends on it*. Live in true devotion to one another, loving each other as sisters and brothers. Be first to honor others *by putting them first*. Do not slack in your faithfulness and hard work. Let your spirit be on fire, bubbling up and boiling over, as you serve the Lord. *Do not forget to rejoice*, for hope is always just around the corner. Hold up through the hard times that are coming, and devote yourselves to prayer. Share what you have with the saints, so they lack nothing; take every opportunity to open your *life and home* to others.