

2 Timothy 4:1-2, 5-8, 16-18

Good morning! I hope everyone is doing well. It is good to see you all this morning!

As I hope that you have noticed, we are taking time this Sunday to focus on the some of the traditions that shape the Mennonite denomination, collecting wisdom from sources as far removed as the early Anabaptists who first differentiated themselves from the broader Protestant stream during the reformation to the people today who continue to give shape the odd amalgamation of people who choose to worship God with the title "Mennonite."

I confess to being a fan of Mennonite history. I was a history major in college, as well as a Bible and Religion major, and the combination of both of my interests in one Sunday morning is always a cause for celebration. It brings me joy to hear good stories like the one Peppy shared, stories of heroism under fire, of people who spoke truth to power without flinching about the consequences. I love history because it brings us real stories of real people who acted in very human ways, that challenge us and compel us to imagine how future generations might look at us. Consider the story of Michael Sattler. In the Martyr's Mirror, this big book full of horrific stories of what happened to the early Anabaptists because of their faith, it is recorded that Michael Sattler, while on trial for his life said to the judges that true Christians would not resist the Turkish armies that were threatening Europe, and if he were to fight in that war, he would rather fight against the "so called Christians, who persecute, apprehend, and kill pious Christians than against the Turks" because "The Turk is a true Turk, knows nothing of the Christian faith; and is a Turk after the flesh; but you, who would be Christians, and who make your boast of Christ, persecute the pious witnesses of Christ, and are Turks after the spirit."

Can you imagine saying that on trial for your life? There was a good reason the Anabaptists got in trouble and were considered treasonous-the war on terror was nothing in comparison to the war against the Ottoman Empire when Islamic armies were knocking on the gates of Vienna, and if I were to proclaim that no true Christian could fight in Iraq, I could make myself pretty unpopular as well—there is a big difference between a claim I would feel comfortable making, like the war in Iraq is not a very Christian war, then to make the claim that if I was going to fight in the global war on terror, I'd rather fight on the side of the terrorists!

But whenever we as a congregation spend time focusing on any one particular collection of stories-our story as a congregation, the story of America, the story of the Mennonites, even the story of Jesus it behooves us to think about why we have chosen this story in particular-what does it mean to tell these stories, what do we hope to learn, and what are we trying to teach?

I firmly believe that one of the key tasks that we face as humans is deciding which stories will shape our lives. It is the narratives that we live by that give us meaning, that provide us strength, that shape our communities, and that influence our decisions.

Thus, it seems worth spending a few minutes as we celebrate the stories of the Mennonites thinking about why their stories are significant and why we choose these stories to tell rather than a different collection.

First, and most obviously I don't want to leave this particular elephant in the room unspoken-many of us tell these stories because they are the stories we grew up with. I first learned the story of Dirk Willems pretty much as soon as I could read because there was a picture of Dirk reaching back to save his pursuer from the ice and the corresponding story in the church where I grew up. From a very early age, he has embodied what it means to me to be a Christian.

But I hope that this is not the only, or even the primary reason that we tell these stories. Consider with me some of the other reasons we tell these stories.

I think that we tell these stories because they are fascinating pictures of people trying to live and die as ethical people. These stories give us tangible ways to think about how we might follow Christ in both life and death. This is not to suggest they are the only stories of faithfulness and bravery-because they are not. Martin Luther in front of the Emperor defying his attacks with the bold line "here I stand, I can do no other" Gandhi leading a people in Satyagraha to overcome the most powerful empire in the world, Buddha finding enlightenment not through acquiring more and more things or by giving up more and more, but being satisfied by existence itself, these stories are the very fabric of what it means to be human-to live lives of faithfulness making and living out commitments that have meaning. The stories of the Anabaptists are just one of many stories of faithfulness, so that cannot be the only reason we tell these stories.

I think we tell these stories, because they are full of people who faithfully lived out Christ's calling. These men and women were on the front lines of kingdom building work, proclaiming the gospel and giving up wealth and status for God. But I don't think that the protagonists in them are perfect, or necessarily the best examples of Christian living. I think it is worth asking, for example, if Michael Sattler would have been better served by being a little less antagonistic. My mother, who is with us this morning-hi mom! Suggests that there is something inherently violent about pushing people to kill you-as Sattler almost certainly did. Theologically, I think the early Anabaptists said a lot of really good things, but Menno Simons also suggested that Mary played no part in Jesus' substance-she was just a vessel that he passed through like light, that her flesh and blood was not involved in his birth. I think he's wrong-both historically and theologically-to suggest that Jesus did not receive his substance almost entirely from the body of his mother, like all other babies. I do not preach everything Mennonite tradition would have me preach-most obviously the question of women in ministry, but on a host of other issues as well. We don't tell these stories because these people fit perfectly in line with our own beliefs.

I think we tell these stories because they provide a framework. They shape who we are, and what our calling is in the world. These people-Menno, Michael, Margareta, Jean, give me someone to talk to, someone to bounce ideas off of, someone who is a

little bit out of the ordinary. I like that I know stories of obscure people that most other people have never heard of. They serve as a testing ground for what it means to be ethical and good in this world in contrast to mainstream Christianity and in contrast to popular culture.

These stories are a testimony of faithfulness for me to live up too, and a challenge to stretch beyond the limitations of those who have gone before. Which is why I think the scripture for this morning is so apropos.

The passage from Timothy is a message about keeping the faith, about passing on traditions, about making a place for yourself in the footsteps of someone who has gone before, in the same way that all of our journeys are in the footsteps of other Christians who have wrestled with the same God and the same doubts that we do. Some of us wrestle more directly with the past—those of us who were brought up in the church, either this one here in Saint Louis, or a Mennonite Church elsewhere, or a Christian church anywhere are faced with the challenge of living up to our parents' desires for our salvation and our grandparents' vision of what it means to be faithful. Families are beautiful and complicated things, and when you throw faith into that mix it can be quite explosive.

Can you hear the plaintive hint, the touch of sadness in passing on the reins to a less worthy generation in this scripture text? "I have finished the race, I have kept the faith" even though "at my first defense, no one came to my support, but all deserted me." This may be Paul writing, or someone who has taken on the mantle of Paul, but it is clearly an older person, reaching retirement age from the apostolic mission, attempting to graciously pass the torch—but it's a hard task. Giving up control and power is a constant wrestling match for all of us, particularly when we have put a lot of investment in the path of a particular endeavor—as parents letting our children make mistakes, or as founders of a company or institution letting new leaders set a new vision, as a church with new racial or ethnic groups asking for a seat at the table, letting go and giving space to those who come with new eyes and a different goal is difficult.

But I confess I speak of the challenges of passing power largely from the other side. Sure, I've seen freshmen screw up East High and Bethel College when they grew up, but on the whole, I've done more receiving of power from those who were struggling to give it up than giving up control myself. Many of you have more experience with the challenges inherent in our desire to pass on the stories we cherish to the next generation while not imposing our wills in such a way that they will not think or act for themselves.

So I speak with more authority when I discuss the blessing and the curse that is embracing the narrative of faithfulness that I have received from those who have gone before.

Looking back at where the church has come from gives me a framework for exploring my identity, but the weight of the past sometimes offers me burdens I do not

wish to bear. Listen to this, and imagine your parents, or important mentors in the church offering you this commandment:

"I solemnly urge you: proclaim the message; be persistent whether the time is favorable or unfavorable;...always be sober, endure suffering, do the work of an evangelist, carry out your ministry fully."

That is a lot of expectations to carry. If I get caught up envisioning what Menno Simon's might think about the Mennonite church today I can drive myself nuts thinking about all the things that would have rightly horrified him. As recipients of the tradition, it is too easy to forget that unless we invest ourselves in the story-unless we hear God's call with our own ears, and feel the spirit in our own hearts-unless we love with our own love, and not the love of others, then the tradition we preserve has no meaning and has no life. Our stories should be tools to help us think about God, about who Jesus was and is. The Mennonite edifice, constructed over half a millennium cannot stand on its own weight-it has to be infused with life, mine and others, to make it breath.

So where do you find yourself in this dynamic? Are you feeling more like Paul this morning, recognizing the value and the beauty of the tradition you have received from the Lord, having fought the good fight and ready to rest after a race well run, only to worry about who is going to stand in your place?

Or do you feel more like Timothy, excited to have the chance to spread your wings and explore your own visions, but feeling pressured by expectations and the weight of the past?

We all face both of these dilemmas in our lives, often both at the same time, because they are both part of living in community, that delicate dance between fitting in with the people you love and finding your own path in the wilderness.

As we grow, change, and learn, throughout our lives, I pray that we might be able to both listen and teach with grace.

Listen to the heavy handed voice of tradition, pushing and prodding us to shape up knowing the fear and uncertainty behind those voices.

Teach, knowing that our words can only be gifts, never commands, and that it is beyond our ability to change people. We can only offer love for who they are, not who we might wish they would be.

Grace-so that we might all come in community, delighting in new stories of amazing faithfulness, frail human brokenness, and rich interactions with God.

This morning we remember the Mennonite tradition-the stories of martyrs, saints, and human beings who over the last 400 years have carved out a place in the world, proclaiming a Gospel of peace, and the promise of God's love. It is good to remember, and learn from those who have gone before. May we remember, learn, and grow from strong foundations.

Amen.