**Love One Another: Anabaptist Discipleship**

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*Scripture: James 2:14-26, John 13:1-15, 34-38*

Mennonites have a reputation as “doers,” as people who get things done. If you ask other people what they know about Mennonites, it usually has to do with the relief, development, and peacebuilding work of Mennonite Central Committee, or the disaster response and rebuilding work of Mennonite Disaster Service. Whether as farmers, or professionals, or families, or volunteers, Mennonites typically don’t shy away from hard work. But why is this? Have Mennonites simply internalized the “Protestant work ethic” to a greater degree than other Christian groups? Does it have to do with our agrarian roots as farmers or the children of farmers? Maybe. But what if I told you that it is because of our distinctly Anabaptist theology of salvation through discipleship – that is, the belief that our faith calls us to live in the way of Jesus, to follow Jesus in daily life?

At the beginnings of our tradition, during the sixteenth-century Reformation, this understanding of faith was decidedly strange to both Catholics and Protestants. At the time, the Catholic church had set up an elaborate system of penance which was, frankly, getting a bit out of control. Within the Catholic understanding of the time, the church had a kind of monopoly on grace and on salvation. Ordinary people could access God’s grace and forgiveness only through the church and its sacraments (communion, confession, penance, etc). In other words, the church understood as the church hierarchy dispensed God’s grace to – or withheld God’s grace from – ordinary Christians. But this system had gotten corrupt over the years, to the point that church leaders were asking for money in return for forgiveness in practices such as indulgences, which were supposed to shorten a deceased loved one’s time in Purgatory for a small fee. In other words, this system had devolved into essentially selling God’s grace or forgiveness to people – which rightfully made reformers like Martin Luther furious! His response was to insist that salvation is not for sale – in fact, it cannot be earned by any acts of penance or sacraments. No human actions or “works” can assure our salvation, only faith in God’s grace alone. In Latin, he spoke of this as “sola gratia, sola fide” – salvation by grace alone through faith alone. We only have to believe and trust in God and we will be saved.

Well, the early Anabaptists agreed with Luther that contact with God did not require the mediation of the church hierarchy as “middle men” – salvation was available to all. But where they parted ways with Luther (as well as Calvin) was what the life of faith looked like. Luther and Calvin taught that since human beings are tainted by sin, there is nothing we can do to affect our salvation – that it is God’s act on our behalf. But Anabaptists saw things differently. For them, salvation did not depend on “faith alone,” but on “faith that obeys”[[1]](#footnote-1) – that is, faith that is lived out as women and men become disciples of Jesus, following in Jesus’ way of love, justice, and peace.

This contrast between Luther’s and the Anabaptists’ way of understanding salvation is perhaps clearest in their different responses to the book of James in the New Testament, which is one of our Scripture passages this morning. Luther famously hated the book of James, calling it worthless, “an epistle of straw,” and practically advocating for it to be cut out of the Bible! But the early Anabaptists loved the book of James, and quoted it often when talking about Christian life as one of discipleship, which had everything to do with their different interpretation of the role of “works” or human action in salvation.

Now the book of James speaks at length about the strong link between faith and good works, and our passage comes after he has spoken about not only hearing the word of God, but being both “hearers” and “doers” of the word. He continues, “What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if you say you have faith but do not have works? Can faith save you? If a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food, and one of you says to them, ‘Go in peace; keep warm and eat your fill,’ and yet you do not supply their bodily needs, what is the good of that? So faith by itself, that has no works, is dead” (James 2:14-17). James is here criticizing empty piety, an abstract belief in God that does not actually translate into one’s daily living, a disembodied faith that does not follow through with acts of love. Here, in James, faith means more than an inner belief that God exists or general well-wishes for other people; it means concrete action, especially to help those in need. He says a bit further on: “I by my works will show you my faith. You believe that God is one; you do well. Even the demons believe – and shudder. Do you want to be shown, you senseless person, that faith apart from works is barren?” (2:18-20). It’s hard to show that you have faith if it doesn’t affect or shape how you live your life in any way. In more modern terms, we would call this the problem of “nominal Christianity” - that is, the problem of people being Christian in name only, without living the way Christ calls us to live. At the end of the day, our actions reveal what we truly worship, and what we truly hold most dear. My favourite theologian, Dorothee Soelle, puts it this way:

The question which is often put to me, “Do you believe in God?”, usually seems a superficial one. If it only means that there is an extra place in your head where God sits, then God is in no way an event which changes your whole life …. We should really ask, “Do you live out God?” That would be in keeping with the reality of the experience.[[2]](#footnote-2)

James goes on to give two examples of people who lived out their faith in the Hebrew Scriptures, one of whom we expect to hear about as an example of faith, and the other who is a bit unexpected. The first example is Abraham, who was willing to sacrifice his only and long-awaited son Isaac based on a single command from God. This seems to have been a kind of cruel test on God’s part, however, and we all breathe a sigh of relief when Isaac is spared (perhaps that understanding of God is a discussion for another time). Still, Abraham’s willingness to obey this terrible command from God is held up as a willingness to put his faith into action as a “friend of God,” and is held up by James as proof that “a person is justified by works and not faith alone” (v. 21-24). The second example is far less reputable: it’s the prostitute, Rahab, from the beginning of the book of Joshua (chapters 2 and 6). She is the Canaanite woman from the city of Jericho who protects and hides the two spies whom Joshua sends to scope out the city so the Israelite army can attack it. For her risky act of protecting these enemy spies, Rahab and her family are spared when Joshua and the Israelites defeat Jericho. She is credited with making the Israelite conquest of Canaan possible (again, we’ll have to leave the murky ethical questions for another time). Suffice it to say that Rahab’s faith translated into courageous action, as James recognizes (v. 25-26).

The early Anabaptists took this message that “faith without works is dead” to heart, building their understanding of salvation on it. While they agreed with Luther and Calvin that God’s grace isn’t mediated through priests or church sacraments, they disagreed that sin has the last word, or that we’re too corrupted to do good works through God’s power. Historian Arnold Snyder puts it this way: “The Anabaptists agreed that salvation was a gift of grace, and could not be earned. But they read in many places in the New Testament that believers were to do their part as well. God’s gift of faith, they believed, brought with it responsibility. Human beings needed to do their part in response to God’s gift of faith.”[[3]](#footnote-3) This is what made adult baptism so important – it was a sign that God doesn’t just save us in a way that changes our status in heaven, but that our free choice to be faithful matters to God. And when we make this choice, we are also empowered to do the works of love through the transforming power of the Holy Spirit. So we are not held back by sin, but are freed to follow in the footsteps of Jesus here and now. To put it another way, our salvation isn’t just God’s act on our behalf – we don’t just sit by passively while God saves people and redeems all of creation. Salvation instead requires a response from us, involving our choice to follow and our participation with God in the work of love which builds the kingdom or kindom of God on earth. We don’t have to choose, as Luther seemed to, between faith and works, but can view works as the “good fruit” that a vibrant and living faith bears.

Sounding much like James, early Anabaptist leader Menno Simons wrote his famous lines about true faith:

True evangelical faith … cannot lie dormant, but spreads itself out in all kinds of righteousness and fruits of love; … it clothes the naked; it feeds the hungry; it comforts the sorrowful; it shelters the destitute; it aids and consoles the sad; it does good to those who do it harm; … it prays for those who persecute it; it seeks those who are lost; it binds up what is wounded; … it becomes all things to all people.[[4]](#footnote-4)

Of course, James is not the only place in the Bible in which we find these calls to live out and embody our faith in daily life. James’ examples already point to the examples of Abraham and Rahab in the Hebrew Scriptures, and the words of many of the prophets also come to mind, such as Micah’s question: “what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?” (Micah 6:8). But the Gospels introduce us to this notion of disciples as students or followers or friends whom Jesus calls. There are the twelve male disciples, several of whom have their call stories recounted in the Gospels. Mostly, these take the pattern of Jesus finding them at their places of work – as fishers, or tax collectors, or Zealots (a type of revolutionary!) – and calling them to leave their former way of life to follow him. There are also women who are disciples and friends of Jesus’, such as Mary and Martha, and Mary Magdalene. Sometimes those who are healed (such as Mary Magdalene) follow Jesus after these experiences. So all of these people in the Gospels especially are examples for the early Anabaptist theology of discipleship, which emphasizes imitating Jesus’ life and being shaped by his teachings.

John 13 paints a picture for us of what kind of example Jesus set – that is, the content of his way in which we are to follow as disciples. Now the other Gospels – Matthew, Mark, and Luke – place the narrative of the Last Supper at this point in the story, lining it up with the Jewish festival of Passover. John also has the disciples gather with Jesus for supper, but he doesn’t focus on the part about bread and wine. Instead, he has Jesus wash the disciples’ feet. We’re told that Jesus “got up from the table, took off his outer robe, and tied a towel around himself. Then he poured water into a basin and began to wash the disciples’ feet and to wipe them with the towel that was tied around him” (John 13:3-5). But when he gets to Simon Peter, Peter protests loudly, not wanting Jesus to stoop to wash his feet. This was a lowly, filthy task that was usually the role of the servants. Jesus, their rabbi/teacher and leader, is acting like a slave here, and Peter is scandalized. “You will never wash my feet,” Peter insists. But Jesus replies, “Unless I wash you, you have no share with me” (v. 8).

And the disciples seem to remain perplexed by this footwashing (I guess they hadn’t come across the term “servant leadership” much!), so Jesus goes on to explain the meaning of his actions: “After he had washed their feet, had put on his robe, and had returned to the table, he said to them, ‘Do you know what I have done to you? You call me Teacher and Lord—and you are right, for that is what I am. So if I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another’s feet. For I have set you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you’” (v. 12-15). How could it be clearer? This act of tender service which Jesus has done for the disciples is to set an example for them – they are to imitate it and also wash one another’s feet; they are to mutually care for one another, not compete for power or status over each other. A few verses later, Jesus even goes so far as to make this what defines them as disciples, saying, “I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another” (v. 34-35).

Here we have the essence of discipleship spelled out, and the early Anabaptists enthusiastically embraced this depiction of mutual love among disciples, instituting the practice of footwashing as one of the “ordinances” or central practices of the church community, alongside adult baptism and a memorial or symbolic (vs. literal) Lord’s Supper.[[5]](#footnote-5) It came to represent the importance of humility and service and the rejection of worldly definitions of power and pride within this small, persecuted group.[[6]](#footnote-6)

But perhaps focusing on discipleship predominantly as humility clouds a bit of what’s going on here, because it wasn’t simply about humility or obedience. Rather, I think it was about vulnerability, which is different. Vulnerability means it was also about being empowered by God to love one another. In other words, this is one of the “good works” that we are empowered to do as disciples.

You see, theologian Lydia Neufeld Harder reminds us that there is actually another, previous footwashing scene in John’s Gospel, in chapter 12, when Mary anoints Jesus’ feet with perfumed oil, and dries them with her hair. At that footwashing, too, there is a strong objection, this time from Judas, who thinks this was too extravagant a gesture, and that the perfume money should have been given to the poor (though he seems to have had other motives, since he was skimming off of the communal funds). But Jesus there accepts the act of love that Mary has shown to him, perhaps when no one else thought he as a leader needed to be shown tenderness and care. He affirms Mary’s initiative and her act of joining the inner circle of disciples. Not only that, in the next chapter, as we’ve seen, he imitates her example in washing the disciples’ feet, and calls them to do the same for each other (maybe another reason why Peter is scandalized). This act does not therefore call us just to humble service – a call which can make us feel we must be made small in order to be true disciples – but empowers us to mutual acts of care, through which we build each other up. A couple of chapters later, Jesus will confirm this by insisting on calling his disciples “friends” instead of “servants” (John 15:12-15) thus depicting discipleship as an equal and mutual relationship.[[7]](#footnote-7) “By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.”

But even in the Anabaptist-Mennonite tradition which so values discipleship, these lines have become blurred, as mutual love has become caught up in ideas about church discipline. At their worst, these ideas have become ways of policing one another’s levels of obedience, humility, and submission to the church rather than ways of building each other up within the faith community. It has led to a certain perfectionist streak within our Mennonite discipleship – an insecurity that we are never doing enough, that we never measure up to the perfect example of Jesus, whom we are trying to follow. But neither Jesus nor any of the Gospel writers are under the illusion that discipleship means perfection! More often, the disciples of Jesus are depicted as bumbling people who misunderstand what Jesus is trying to teach and show them. Even in this paradigmatic story of footwashing, Peter gets things wrong, protesting Jesus’ actions and later, claiming that he “will lay down his life” for Jesus. Is he claiming here to be the perfect disciple? Perhaps. But Jesus says, “Will you lay down your life for me? I tell you, before the cock crows, you will have denied me three times” (v. 37-38). Jesus knows that after he is arrested, even Peter will disown him and deny even knowing him. Talk about falling short of ideal discipleship! And yet Jesus continues to call Peter and the others his friends and disciples, and encourages them not to be perfect, but to love one another as the sign that they are his true disciples.

So where does this leave us as Mennonites today, in our place and time? Are we still shaped by an understanding of faith that bears the good fruit of works? Do we still try to live as disciples? I think so. We still have a profound sense that faith involves care for one another within this community, as well as caring work among those struggling in our city, among those affected by poverty and disasters and war elsewhere in the world, and care for the earth itself, which is now hurting. But it struck me this week as I was thinking about footwashing that I’ve never actually participated in a footwashing service within worship; I haven’t belonged to any churches who practice this ordinance. What does that say about us? Are we too squeamish these days to get down on our knees and wash each others’ feet? Is it too messy, and we don’t want to get our hands dirty? Is it too intimate, and we don’t want to be that vulnerable with each other? I’m not sure. And yet, in other parts of our lives, we wash feet all of the time – as parents bathing our children, as children caring for our aging parents, as nurses caring for patients, etc. These too, I would argue, are acts of discipleship, ways that we show our faith is alive in works of love and in mutual care, loving one another as Jesus has loved us. “By this [– all of this –] everyone will know that you are my disciples.” AMEN

1. C. Arnold Snyder, *Following in the Footsteps of Christ: The Anabaptist Tradition*, Traditions of Christian Spirituality Series (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2004), 26. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Dorothee Soelle, *Thinking About God* (Philadelphia: Trinity Press International, 1990). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Arnold Snyder, *From Anabaptist Seed: Exploring the Historical Center of Anabaptist Teachings and Practices* (Intercourse, PA: Good Books, 2007), 14-15. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. See https://themennonite.org/feature/true-evangelical-faith/. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Snyder, *Anabaptist Seed*, 31-32. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. See Lydia Neufeld Harder, “Singing a Subversive Song of Hope,” *Conrad Grebel Review* vol. 19, No. 3 (Fall, 2001). Cf. Draft Chapter 6, p. 54-55. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Harder, Draft Chapter 6, 55-56. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)