**Gratitude and the Martyrs**

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Scripture: Acts 7:54-8:3 (Stoning of Stephen), 1 John 5:6-12

Perhaps some of you are familiar with this rather intimidating volume: *The Martyrs Mirror*. For many Mennonites, this book recounting the stories of Christians who died for their faith from Jesus Christ himself to the mid-1600s, was almost on par with the Bible in terms of sacredness. Complete with often grisly illustrations, this book especially celebrates the courage and unwavering faith of early Anabaptist martyrs, who were brutally killed for their ostensibly “heretical” faith. It was compiled by a Dutch Mennonite pastor named Thieleman van Braght in the mid-1600s for the purpose of reminding his privileged and rather complacent fellow-Mennonites of the radical faith of their spiritual forbears.[[1]](#footnote-1)

Because about half of the people martyred during the 16th-century Reformation were Anabaptists (a huge percentage for such a small movement), martyrdom stories came to be important and identity-shaping for the early Anabaptists and for many Mennonites today.[[2]](#footnote-2) The recent (2010) book, *Tongue Screws and Testimonies*, a collection of poems, stories, and essays inspired by *The Martyrs Mirror*, attests to the ongoing hold that martyrdom has on the Mennonite imagination. Editor Kirsten Eve Beachy writes that “In church, we tend to treat our martyrs with the same reverence as other groups treat their saints.” She recounts her own experience with this book:

I learned about the *Martyrs Mirror* by osmosis, when I read it in my grandmother’s basement . . . . It thrilled me to the core, it was too horrible to speak of, it challenged me, it humbled me, it made me proud. I was intrigued by the radical women, the revenge fantasies, the transmission of historical trauma, the implicit question: ‘Could you do it?’”[[3]](#footnote-3)

More often than not, these heroes of the faith are depicted in the Martyrs Mirror as going to their deaths not only fearlessly, but gladly. Maeyken Wens, who was burned at the stake in Antwerp in 1573, reportedly said, “The Lord takes away all fear; I did not know what to do for joy, when I was sentenced.” Similarly George Raeck apparently “cheerfully stepped forward to the executioner, and exclaimed with a joyful heart, ‘Here I forsake wife and children, house and home, body and life, for faith and the divine truth.’”[[4]](#footnote-4) But how close is this to what actually happened? Were the martyrs really grateful, or even overjoyed, to be going to their deaths?

As you might have noticed from our Scripture this morning, the template for martyrdom stories comes from the Bible. Our passage from Acts tells the story of Stephen, the first early Christian martyr (and his story is also found in the *Martyrs Mirror*, after Jesus’ story of being crucified). Before he was put to death, we’re told in Acts 6 that Stephen was one of the seven people chosen as the first deacons in the early church, known for his wisdom and Spirit in speaking about matters of faith and in performing signs and wonders. All the attention he’s getting makes a few of the people angry, and they spread a rumour that he is saying blasphemous things against Moses and God. So he is arrested and brought before the Jewish council of high priests. They ask him about the blasphemy charge, and he gives a long speech – or really, a sermon – recounting the history of the Israelites and ending with how Jesus was the fulfillment of the promises of a Messiah or “Righteous One.” And he ends by telling these leaders off for their role in Jesus’ own death, saying, “You stiff-necked people, uncircumcised in heart and ears, you are forever opposing the Holy Spirit, just as your ancestors used to do. Which of the prophets did your ancestors not persecute? They killed those who foretold the coming of the Righteous One, and now you have become his betrayers and murderers. You are the ones that received the law as ordained by angels and yet you have not kept it” (Acts 7:51-53). He’s not exactly being diplomatic here, is he? But we have to remember that this was the same council before which Jesus was tried and condemned to be handed over to Pilate. This is pretty personal for the early Christians.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, the council is not happy with Stephen’s speech. We’re told “they became enraged and ground their teeth at Stephen.” And they decide to drag him outside of the city walls and stone him. But like the early Anabaptists, Stephen remains sure that God is with him – he has a vision of heaven, with God and Jesus there waiting for him, as it were, and as they are stoning him, he is able to repeat words much like Jesus’ last words. He prays, “Lord Jesus, receive my spirit” – much like Jesus’ “Father, into your hands I commend my spirit” (Luke 23:46). “Then he [Stephen] knelt down and cried out in a loud voice, ‘Lord do not hold this sin against them” – again, much like Jesus’ “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do” (Luke 23:34). And after speaking these words, Stephen dies. And a certain young man named Saul – who will later, after a dramatic conversion, become the Apostle Paul, the writer of all of those letters – approves of the killing of Stephen (Acts 7:54-8:1).

Here we see that already in the Bible, the first Christian martyrdom is understood as an echo of Jesus’ death – in the words Stephen uses and in the attitude with which he accepts his death. And the early Anabaptists, in their context of hostile persecution, would have looked to the biblical portrayals of martyrdom to make sense of the violence they were experiencing. It wouldn’t have been difficult to make strong connections between early Christian persecution by the Romans and Jewish leaders and early Anabaptist persecution by Catholics and Protestants.

The early Anabaptists in fact found a rather obscure term for martyrdom in 1 John 5 – “the baptism of blood.” According to the early Anabaptist reading of 1 John, Jesus’ example shows us three kinds of baptism: baptism of water (the outward, public sign or ordinance), baptism of Spirit (the inner, personal transformation of receiving the Holy Spirit), and the baptism of blood (the suffering or even death that could result from the life of faith). This is how they interpreted the statement that “There are three that testify: the Spirit and the water and the blood, and these three agree” (1 John 5:7-8). During the middle ages, the baptism of blood had come to take on a rather more spiritual significance – the idea of dying to sin in the “old Adam” and new life in Christ as the “new Adam” – in other words, the spiritual disciplines which led to new life in Christ. But for the early Anabaptists facing the very real threat of martyrdom, the baptism of blood took on a much more literal meaning. As historian Arnold Snyder notes, “The testimony of the Bible, read through the lens of brutal persecution, convinced the Anabaptists that the ‘baptism of blood’ was to be expected for those who had accepted the baptisms of the Spirit and of water, and had set out to follow Jesus in life.”[[5]](#footnote-5) Jesus’ life had led to the cross, so why shouldn’t their lives lead to violent deaths? This wasn’t guaranteed, of course, but was nevertheless highly likely in their context. And they understood John’s statements about “God’s testimony” being greater than “human testimony” to mean that God’s promise of eternal life was more trustworthy than the human promises of their captors and executioners that their earthly lives would be spared if they only renounced the Anabaptist faith.[[6]](#footnote-6)

Using passages like this one, the early Anabaptists made sense of the suffering they were experiencing, linking it to the triumph of Jesus’ own violent death, which was overcome in resurrection, and to the depictions of the early Christian martyrs as triumphant and victorious, and as receiving their reward from God in the book of Revelation, etc. On one level, it was a way of resisting – of refusing to be defeated by persecution and martyrdom, of refusing to be victims by insisting that God was on their side, that their deaths were not meaningless, but were holy sacrifices. But what starts out as a way to make sense of a terrifying reality over time comes to be seen as God’s will – in other words, by the time of the *Martyrs Mirror*, the martyrs are idealized as superhuman examples who harboured no doubts and went joyfully to their deaths with God’s blessing. Their deaths were celebrated rather than mourned. The tragedy of the violence and trauma they suffered went unacknowledged.

But such tragedy is undeniable in the story of Anneken Jans, for instance. She was martyred by drowning in 1539 at the age of 28. As a widow, she had somehow been permitted to keep her baby with her while in prison; we don’t really want to think about the kind of conditions they endured there. On her way to the river to be executed, she calls desperately into the crowd, trying to find someone to take care of her one year old baby son, Isaiah. Here was a young mother, forced to choose between her faith and her life, which included being the only parent her son had – what a cruel and terrible choice! And I honestly don’t know if I would have held it against her if she had chosen her son, who needed her; I’m not as sure as the *Martyrs Mirror* that she made the right choice in that impossible situation.

Luckily for Anneken, a baker in the crowd volunteered to adopt Isaiah, even though he and his wife had six children of their own. Anneken was wealthy, so she was able to offer the family money, which was added incentive. She also left a letter to Isaiah, encouraging him to follow her Anabaptist faith. But he ultimately didn’t choose that path; he received a good education, became wealthy, and eventually became the mayor of the city of Rotterdam. I can’t help but wonder – would he have become an Anabaptist if his mother had chosen survival rather than martyrdom? Would he even have become an Anabaptist leader? We’ll never know, and that’s part of the tragedy too. Isaiah didn’t even take on the faith that his mother died for.

I don’t think it dishonours Anneken’s memory to admit that she wasn’t overjoyed to be going to her death. Other martyrs were also likely not thrilled to be facing brutal torture and death. Their deaths also aren’t the only thing we remember about them – instead, we remember the lives of faith they were able to lead before being snuffed out. Anneken Jans’s letter to her son is interesting in this light: she did instruct her son to die for the faith, if need be, but she spent more time instructing him on how to live the life of faith. She wrote, “where you hear of a poor, simple, cast off little flock which is despised and rejected by the world, join them. . . Honour the Lord in the works of your hands, and let the light of the Gospel shine through you. Love your neighbour. Deal with an open, warm heart thy bread to the hungry. Clothe the naked, and suffer not to have anything twofold; for there are always some who lack.”[[7]](#footnote-7) She called her son not primarily to die, but to live – simply, generously, and faithfully.

In our Mennonite tradition, we sometimes slip into the martyr narrative a bit too easily, convinced that we are still that persecuted minority that must stand against the world and give our lives for our faith. But many Mennonites, especially creative writers and poets, have questioned this way of viewing the place of our tradition in its current context. In her novel *Irma Voth*, Miriam Toews has one character receive the advice: “YOU MUST BE WILLING TO DIE!” and respond in this way: “I pondered his dark advice. I scratched out the word DIE and wrote LIVE.”[[8]](#footnote-8) Writer Stephanie Krehbiel reflects that “Jesus himself didn’t live up to these standards” of the martyrs who welcomed a painful death – he prayed in Gethsemane for this cup to pass from him. She continues,

I need stories that give me hope. I also need stories that offer me agency, the power to act and to create change. The best stories, the honest ones, won’t hide the sometimes deadly cost of defying oppression. But here’s the point I believe is essential to morally instructive stories: the purpose of the action is to make the world a better place. Death may be a consequence, but death is not the point. The thing I dislike about the way the martyr stories are told in Mennonite circles is how we’ve come to focus on the dying, as though dying is a thing that makes us great. If that’s really it, then we might as well skip the rest – we might as well just lie down and die.[[9]](#footnote-9)

Putting it more succinctly, poet Audrey Poetker-Thiessen wonders, “Out of so many martyrs, how do we live?”[[10]](#footnote-10)

So as we think about what we’re thankful for this weekend and as we continue on our journey through early Anabaptist history in worship and adult ed., I invite us to remember the martyrs in two ways:

1. **With gratitude** – We can continue to be grateful for the witness of the early Anabaptist martyrs. They faced unspeakable violence with what was probably a mix of courage and fear. Those who joined the movement in those early times did so at great risk. And we are grateful to them.

But part of our gratitude also stems from the fact that we no longer face martyrdom for our faith in our context. We no longer have to go through the suffering that they did. Partly because of them, the Christian world eventually changed to become more open to theological diversity, to make room for multiple understandings of what it means to be the church of Jesus Christ, including our Mennonite view. So we are grateful for that also.

1. **With sorrow** - The second way we can remember the martyrs is to acknowledge the tragedy of what they endured. Though God was with the Anabaptists in their times of persecution, that doesn’t mean martyrdom was God’s will or that God was happy to see these people slaughtered. If we acknowledge the tragedy of these deaths, we can also allow ourselves to mourn the early Anabaptist martyrs, and begin to heal from the trauma that has been passed down through our faith tradition. A major step toward this healing is also the reconciliation which is underway between Lutherans and Mennonites, a process which led the Lutheran World Federation to issue an apology to Mennonites in 2010, asking for forgiveness for their condemnation and persecution of Anabaptists almost 500 years ago. Larry Miller, then General Secretary of Mennonite World Conference, attended the Lutheran gathering and expressed appreciation for the vulnerability of the Lutheran church in taking. He continued,

“We are dealing with holy histories, yours and ours. We are dealing with our most basic self-understandings, yours and ours. For you, the witness of the Augsburg Confession is foundational and authoritative, an essential shaper of your identity. For us, the witness of the Anabaptist martyrs is a living and vital story, retold in our global community of churches to build group identity.

How can you distance yourself from the condemnations and their consequences while still honoring your history and strengthening your identity? How can we distance ourselves from use of the martyr tradition which perpetuates a sense of victimization and marginalization—and your reaching out for forgiveness pushes us to do precisely that—how can we thus distance ourselves while still honoring our history and strengthening our identity?

Surely these things will happen best if we continue to walk together in the way of Jesus Christ, our Reconciler and the Source of our common history and identity.”[[11]](#footnote-11)

Larry’s questions remain with us as we contemplate the significance of remembering the early Anabaptist martyrs. Maybe in this mix of gratitude and mourning, we can continue to remember them in a way that brings healing, focusing not on past wrongs perpetrated against us, but on the ways we have freedom of conscience, while remaining aware of and standing with those who are still in fact persecuted in our world today for matters of conscience or faith. May this be the ongoing legacy of the martyrs among us. AMEN

1. John S. Oyer and Robert S. Kreider, *Mirror of the Martyrs* (Intercourse, PA: Good Books, 1990), 10. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. C. Arnold Snyder, *Following in the Footsteps of Christ: The Anabaptist Tradition*, Traditions of Christian Spirituality Series (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2004), 160. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Kirsten Even Beachy, ed., “Introduction,” in *Tongue Screws and Testimonies: Poems, Stories, and Essays Inspired by the Martyr’s Mirror* (Scottdale: Herald Press, 2010), 22, 24. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. *Martyrs Mirror* quoted by Stephanie Krehbiel, “Staying Alive: How Martyrdom Made Me a Warrior,” in *Tongue Screws and Testimonies: Poems, Stories, and Essays Inspired by the Martyr’s Mirror* (Scottdale: Herald Press, 2010), 136-137. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Snyder, *Following in the Footsteps* *of Christ*, 162, 160. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Snyder, *Following in the Footsteps* *of Christ*, 164. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Margaret Loewen Reimer, ed., *Christians Courageous* (Herald Press, 1980?), 39. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Miriam Toews, *Irma Voth* (Toronto: Knopf Canada, 2011), 251. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Krehbiel, 136, 142. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Quoted in Beachy, “Introduction,” 23. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Ishmael Noko and Larry Miller, “Preface,” in *Healing Memories: Reconciling in Christ: Report of the Lutheran-Mennonite International Study Commission* (Geneva, Switzerland: Lutheran World Federation/Strasbourg, France: Mennonite World Conference, 2010), 7-8. See also <https://www.therecord.com/sports-story/2562824-lutheran-apology-to-mennonites-means-community-can-move-on/> [↑](#footnote-ref-11)