

Who are we?

1 Corinthians 3: 10 – 15

Sept. 20, 2009

I. Introduction

A. Wow! It feels as though a lot has happened in the last few months

1. Since I spoke from behind this pulpit as a candidate for the position of pastor

a. I'm not sure if I was more scared then or now

2. At least then, if I really messed up, I could go back home

a. And figure I wouldn't ever see most of you again

3. Now we are stuck with each other...for better or worse, richer or poorer...

a. Oops! That's for a different occasion isn't it

A. Many things have changed for Dottie and me, and you have experienced change as well

1. I trust that as we begin this journey together

a. We have felt the hand of God leading us and working among us

A. I know there are challenges that many of you are facing in your lives right now

1. And I am sure there will be challenging times ahead of us as well

a. As individuals, as families and as a congregation

A. But I am just as sure that God has many good and exciting things in store for us

1. So whether you are a long-time member of this congregation

a. Someone who has, or may have had, various connections with Sonnenberg

2. Or if you are visiting among us this morning for the first time

A. As we travel our many different roads through life

1. I'm glad that our paths are crossing here in this time and this place

a. My hope would be that we can each one say that our way was made brighter

(1) And perhaps our load was made just a little lighter

b. Because of the light and the love of God shining forth in our fellowship together

A. Prayer (if not done before the message)

II. It has been said that a "16th century man who did not drink to excess, curse, or abuse his workmen or family could be suspected of being an Anabaptist and thus persecuted."

A. I found that comment in an online version of an encyclopedia -

1. A Wikipedia article on Anabaptists if you want to look it up

A. And I don't know if that statement says more about the Anabaptists in general

1. Or about the 16th century European society in which the movement began
- A. But if there is any truth to it at all, it does say something
 1. About a key element of the beliefs of our Anabaptist ancestors –
 - a. Those people who formed the roots of the Mennonite church of today
 2. That is, they believed that being a Christian made a person different
 - a. From the person they were before making a commitment to follow Jesus
 3. And different from the people around them who had not made that commitment
- A. In the centuries that have followed, there would be some people who might say
 1. That many, if not all, Christians in general, and Mennonites in particular
 - a. Have drifted away from that understanding
 2. That we have become so much like everybody else in our society
 - a. That one would have to look pretty hard to tell any difference
 - (1) Between those who profess to follow Jesus and those who don't
- A. If that is true, it would not be the first time such a thing has happened
 1. It was an issue that the nation of Israel - God's chosen people, if you will -
 - a. Struggled with over and over again throughout their history
 2. Looking to God for help in times of trouble
 - a. But forgetting, or ignoring, God most of the rest of the time
 3. Imitating the pagan lives of their neighbors, rather than inviting them
 - a. Into a relationship with a living, loving God
- A. And it was an issue in the early Christian church that had its beginning
 1. On the Day of Pentecost, after Jesus' return to his heavenly home
 - a. When the Holy Spirit was poured out in a special way on his disciples
 2. Filling those followers of Jesus with a new energy and power
- A. It was the Holy Spirit's power that changed those disciples – men and women
 1. From an improbable group of fishermen and tax collectors and homemakers
 - a. Into a force that has changed the world – starting in Jerusalem and Judea
 - (1) And from there on to the Roman Empire, and to the rest of the world
 2. I believe it was that Spirit, dwelling within the hearts and lives of those disciples
 - a. Who changed their lives so that the people around them noticed the difference
 - (1) And were drawn to experience the love and joy they displayed in their lives
 3. But then, as we read the letters of the Apostle Paul and others
 - a. We find the pattern repeating, believers tending to drift away, losing that first love

4. Becoming more and more like the non-believers around them
- A. But every so often, since then, it seems that there is a new outflow of that Spirit of God
 1. Shaking up a church that has become lax about living the Christian life
 - a. And calling the people of God to take a look at who they are
 2. And what life in the power of the Spirit should look like in our world today
 - a. Who are we as believers in God, and followers of Jesus Christ
 - (1) And how does that make a difference in our lives?
 - A. Who are we? It seems like a good question to ask ourselves every now and then
 1. You've been asking that question in different forms over the past couple of years
 - a. During the time of transition in leadership here at Sonnenberg
 - A. And it's a question that is also being asked across the broader Mennonite Church
 1. For some time, too – Who are we as a church/denomination in our world?
 - A. That discussion has prompted the writing of a small booklet
 1. Published as part of a series produced by Mennonite Mission Network
 - a. This one written by Palmer Becker, a former pastor and author
 2. I learned to know Palmer while he was serving as director
 - a. Of the Pastoral Ministries Program at Hesston College a few year ago
 - A. And he addresses the question in this way – “What is an Anabaptist Christian?”
 1. Note the order of those words Anabaptist and Christian
 - a. Because I believe Palmer would say that we are first of all Christians
 2. And then, more specifically, we belong to, and our church belongs to
 - a. A particular group of Christians known as Mennonites
 - (1) Whose roots go back to the early Anabaptists in the 16th century
 - A. The booklet suggests three things that set apart those Anabaptist reformers
 1. From other religious traditions that existed at that time
 - A. Those three things are –
 1. *Jesus* is the center of our faith
 2. *Community* is the center of our lives, and
 3. *Reconciliation* is the center of our work
 - A. These three statements are actually an adaptation of a vision statement
 1. Written by Mennonite historian, Harold S. Bender some 65 years ago
 - a. So we might think that they don't have much relevance for us today
 - A. But it may also be true, that as we understand better

1. What it is that has shaped our core values and beliefs in the past
 - a. And how those values and beliefs intersect with our world today
 2. We may become better equipped to live out our faith
 - a. In a way that makes **us** stand out from our culture and society
- A. And in a way that shows to the world, to our friends and neighbors near and far
1. An alternative to the way of living, in constant fear
 - a. And turmoil and cynicism, that is so prevalent around us today
- A. I want to look at the first of those three statements this morning, and then, Lord willing
1. We'll look at the other two over the next two Sundays

III. Jesus is the center of our faith – that seems like a no-brainer for a Christian church

- A. But the truth is, it can be very easy to get away from that key belief
1. Even as we call ourselves followers of Jesus Christ
- A. For example, the church in the past, and some would say the church of today
1. Has at times shifted its focus away from faith in a living Jesus
 - a. To a faith that is based wholly on the death of Jesus, that is -
 2. Jesus died for the sins of the world – just believe that and you will be saved
 - a. There is truth in that statement, but it is not the whole truth
- A. Think back for a moment to the first disciples of Jesus – what made them disciples?
1. Was it only because they believed in him after he died? No!
 - a. They became “disciples” as they **lived** with him and **followed** him
- A. Certainly the death of Jesus is a part of God's plan for our salvation
1. But Anabaptists have always declared that salvation and discipleship
 - a. Must go hand in hand
 2. We cannot be forgiven for our sin and then go on living as though
 - a. It doesn't make any difference in our hearts and lives
- A. There is a quote that you may have heard before -
1. “No man can know Christ truly except he follow him daily in life”
 - a. That quote is attributed to a 16th century Anabaptist leader
 - (1) By the name of Hans Denk
 2. And it simply states one of the core values of early Anabaptist Christians
 - a. We are followers of a living Christ not a dead Savior
- A. That in no way puts down the importance of salvation through faith
1. In the death and resurrection of Jesus, it only affirms the words of James

- a. The NT writer who said – Faith without works is dead
- 2. Anabaptist Christians are disciples of Jesus – Jesus is the center of our faith
- A. Another example of how we can sometimes move away from that truth
 - 1. Is to recognize our human desire to have everything spelled out for us
 - a. Our life, our future, and yes, even our religious beliefs and practice
- A. Again, this is nothing new for the people of God
 - 1. One of Jesus’ primary complaints against the religious leaders of his day
 - a. Was that they had taken the written commandments of God
 - 2. And based their whole relationship with God on their obedience to that law
- A. Jesus said – you are outwardly conforming to even the tiniest details
 - 1. But inwardly, you have no desire to know God, and no love for God in your heart
- A. The Christian church, down through the years, has sometimes felt a need
 - 1. To write out statements of belief, sometimes called doctrines or creeds
 - a. Those can be helpful for understanding and sharing our faith with others
 - 2. But Anabaptist Christians recognize that creeds are important
 - a. Primarily as they help us keep our focus on the person of Jesus Christ
- A. That’s where the power comes from for living the Christian life
 - 1. Not in trying to measure up to a certain set of expectations
 - a. As good as they may be, but in knowing God loves and cares for me
 - 2. “Jesus loves me, this I know, for the Bible tells me so”
 - a. That song is not just for little kids, we need to be reminded of it every day
 - 3. Jesus is the center of our faith
- IV. Jesus is also the center of our focus when it comes to understanding the Bible
 - A. Many of the disagreements that come up in discussions of ethics and morality
 - 1. In the church, could be resolved with the understanding that
 - a. Jesus is the ultimate revelation of God, and of God’s character and will
 - A. As the writer of the Book of Hebrews put it – In the past, God spoke to us
 - 1. Through the prophets and in various ways
 - a. But in these last days, God has spoken to us through his Son
 - 2. Who is the radiance of God’s glory and the exact representation of his being
 - A. Jesus himself said – You have heard it said [thus and so], but I say to you...
 - 1. Anabaptist-minded Christians seek to interpret the Bible in the Spirit of Jesus
 - a. Who said – The law can be summed up in these two commands –

- (1) First, love God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength
 - (a) And second, love your neighbor as yourself
- A. The written Word of God is our primary source of information about God/Jesus today
 - 1. But learning **about** God is fruitless until we come to **know** God
 - a. And we know God when we allow the presence of Jesus, through the Holy Spirit
 - 2. To live in us and through us, the way Jesus talked about in the parable
 - a. Of the vine and the branches – abide in me as I abide in you
- A. Interpreting scripture is an important work that we do as a congregation
 - 1. It's how we learn to live the alternative lifestyle that I mentioned earlier
 - a. It's where we turn to for our cues about how to be the people of God
 - 2. It's what sets us apart from people who know nothing except what they hear
 - a. From society and from the mainstream media of our day
- A. That's not to say we shouldn't be aware of how the world around us thinks
 - 1. But we need to be constantly on the lookout for how that compares/measures up
 - a. To the Word of God as revealed in the life and teachings of Jesus Christ
- A. Jesus is the center of our faith, Jesus is the center of our interpretation of scripture
 - 1. And Jesus is both our Savior and our Lord
- V. We live in very different conditions today, than the early 16th century Anabaptist Christians
 - A. Who experienced the almost total union between the church and civil government
 - 1. If you were a member of the state, you were a member of the church, and vice versa
 - a. Loyalty to one was equated with loyalty to the other - but it was not always so
 - A. In the years following the establishment of the Christian church
 - 1. Jesus' followers were often at odds with the secular/Roman government
 - a. As well as the established religious institutions
 - A. Peter's statement before the Jewish Council, that Christ's disciples
 - 1. "Must obey God rather than men" was a key element of the Reformation
 - a. That swept through Europe in the mid 1500's
 - A. Anabaptist's recognized this as a core value of Christianity
 - 1. That Jesus is not only our Savior, but he is our ultimate master
 - a. And authority for all of life
 - A. The idea of the separation of church and state, on which our nation was founded
 - 1. Was born out of this understanding of divided loyalties
 - A. Civil government has its place in our world – to maintain order and promote justice

1. But loyalty to government can never take the place of, or precedence over
 - a. Our allegiance and loyalty to Jesus Christ
 - A. For the early Anabaptists, this sometimes meant that they were willing to suffer
 1. Persecution and even death for their stand on following Jesus
 - a. Rather than blind obedience to government or even to church leaders
 - A. The word Anabaptist itself comes from the practice of re-baptizing adults
 1. Who had already been baptized as infants into the state church
 - a. And who now wanted to make a clear statement of personal commitment
 - (1) To be followers of Jesus Christ
 - A. In our world today, issues that call into question our allegiance to the teachings of Jesus
 1. Are decisions about the use of power and force – do we accept the notion
 - a. That we must fight for our protection and our rights
 2. Or do we follow the words and example of Jesus, who said – my servants do not fight
 - a. Love your enemies and do good to those who hate you
 - A. Or when our society considers it unpatriotic
 1. To consider the needs of people outside our borders as equally important
 - a. As the needs of people fortunate enough to be born in this country
 2. Will we stand up and say that God cares for everyone and so do we
 - a. Or will we keep silent for fear of being ridiculed or persecuted
 - A. Anabaptist Christians believe we should obey our government
 1. As long as we can do so without compromising our commitment
 - a. To follow Jesus as our Lord and Master in all ways
 2. Anabaptist Christians promise their highest loyalty to Jesus Christ
- VI. I share all this with you this morning, knowing that it might sound as though
- A. I am somehow holding the Anabaptist/Mennonite traditions higher or better
 1. Than other Christians, or people of other faith traditions
 - a. I want to make it clear that I am not intending to do that
 - A. We have much in common with the wider Christian community
 1. And much to be learned from people who have differing perspectives
 - A. My purpose here this morning is simply to remind us of who **we** are as God's people
 1. And that "who we are" makes us different than we would be otherwise
 - a. And different from a world that does not confess to follow Jesus
 - A. Can anyone tell me what verse is printed at the bottom of the church stationery?

1. Anybody besides Ellen? Maybe she's the only one who has seen it
- A. I don't know who made the choice, but I like it
 1. And it comes from the scripture text that was read for us –
- A. ...no one can lay any foundation other than the one already laid, which is Jesus Christ”
 1. The Apostle Paul is addressing the issue here
 - a. Of a variety of evangelists coming into the Corinthian community
 - (1) Teaching about how to practice the Christian life
 2. Some of that teaching, Paul would flat out rebuke as wrong
 - a. But here the emphasis is on recognizing that **how** we live may be different
 - (1) But our lives must, first of all, rest on the foundation of Jesus Christ
 - b. Otherwise, nothing else matters – nothing else makes us true disciples
- A. We're running out of time this morning so we'll pick it up here again next Sunday
 1. Are we different from the world around us? Do we live as though –
 - a. *Jesus* is the center of our faith
 - b. *Community* is the center of our lives, and
 - c. *Reconciliation* is the center of our work
 2. Does our faith make a difference in the way we speak and act?
 - a. Would anybody notice the difference?
 - (1) Who are we, anyway?