

An Anabaptist Advent (Luke 1.47-55)
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December 14, 2008

For the third Sunday of Advent our theme is peace. Peace is a word that conjures all sorts of images in our minds, covering the spectrum from thoughts of personal tranquility to concerns about international relations. But this morning I don't think we need to consider all of the possible meanings of peace. I think we need only wonder how the idea of peace relates to the child we are waiting for this season. What does peace, we might ask, have to do with the Jesus story? There was a man I once knew who was more interested in this question than anyone I have ever met. He was a man much older than I was, but he was only old on the outside. For he was a man who, at quite an advanced age, threw a pizza party for a bunch of college students. It was not like any pizza party I had ever been to before or have been to since. Because I left it hungrier than I had arrived, which I think had been the man's intention all along. But now I've got way ahead of myself, and I'm afraid I'll need to go back to the beginning if the pizza party in question is ever going to make any sense.

I remember when he walked in on that first day of class. It was a senior-level religion seminar and I can't remember why I chose to take it exactly. I think it was because he was the visiting distinguished professor from another university. I had taken all the requirements and a number of electives from the other religion professors and thought perhaps a new voice might help me pay attention as I coasted toward graduation. So I signed up for this curious class in Anabaptist history, of all things, with this unknown professor, whose name was Franklin Littell. And I remember when he walked in on that first day of class. There weren't many students, maybe six or eight of us. We were at our

desks making small talk when the door opened and in walked this very old man. He was dressed in a coat and tie, he had long, wavy white hair, and he shuffled in with a stoop, carrying the leather bookbag of another era. He looked like, if he hadn't been a Reformation-era Anabaptist himself, then perhaps he'd just missed them. So I'll admit I was a bit skeptical at first. But I warmed to his quirks almost instantly. Chalking his name onto the blackboard, Dr. Littell removed from his bag the course roster and began to call out our names. "Mr. Rutledge, sir?" he inquired. I answered and he moved on, completing the short list of students' names. From that point on, we were only ever addressed by a title and a surname. Dr. Littell advised us that he expected both punctuality and academic excellence of everyone in the class, including himself. Then he took a seat and began to tell us a story.

I can't remember what his first story was. I just remember how he set the tone with a narrative. Almost everything that would follow that semester would be offered in story form. We would read stories, we would be told stories, we would share from our stories, and we would consider the larger story of which every story was a part. For Dr. Littell, that was a story of peace if not tranquility. It was a story of pacifism if not quietude. It was a story of the religious if not the institutional. It was a story of Jesus' teachings as lived out by some of his most radical followers, the Anabaptists who emerged in Central Europe in the 16th Century to challenge even the Reformation for its conventionalism. Who were these Anabaptists, you might wonder? What does Anabaptist even mean? And why might any of this be relevant to us? Good questions all. Questions I no doubt was mulling at the beginning of that senior seminar. As I mentioned, Dr. Littell answered them each with a story.

My own story is that I learned in our seminar that the Anabaptists in question were both children of the Reformation, though they didn't think it had gone far enough, and parents of the modern day peace churches (like the Mennonites, Brethren, and others), though they probably wouldn't have thought that the churches have gone far enough to this day. At the core of their radicalism lay the idea that to follow the way of Jesus was first and foremost to reject the way into which they were born. And we should remember that this was the 16th Century. So the way into which people were born was the way of a state church, including mandatory taxation to support it and compulsory military service to defend it. The practice of infant baptism added to the inertia as everyone's name was placed on the state church rolls from the beginning.

The Anabaptists thought differently of things, and it was due to the dispute over baptism, in particular, that they were handed their names, which were originally an epithet. "Ana-baptizers" actually means "re-baptizers" because the Anabaptists began to baptize adults based on the free and conscientious choices those adults had made. They said that one could not be born into the way of Jesus but had to choose it for oneself. While their critics said that they were "re-baptizing" those who had already been baptized as infants, the Anabaptists maintained that the only baptism that made sense was the voluntary kind. Just as Jesus sought John in the wilderness and asked to go beneath the water, so must each of us, according to conscience, find the way that our lives will follow. Here the deeper issue was not about an ecclesiastical rite, but about the rabbi Jesus and how any of us might reach the radical conclusion to follow his teachings. And to follow Jesus was to reach a radical conclusion because, according to almost all of the early Anabaptists, Jesus was very clearly a pacifist. So not only did the Anabaptists do

things like challenge infant baptism and balk at paying taxes, they refused to serve in the state military or use weapons of any kind. “Put away your swords,” they quoted the rabbi, and a great many of them were martyred for it. These were the stories that Dr. Littell told us.

Day after day, Dr. Littell would shuffle into class, several minutes early, of course, and arrange the notes to which he never really needed to refer. Then, at the chiming of the hour, he would take his seat, lean out over his desk and begin to tell us this story or that of some character who, following the way of Jesus, got into a terrible tangle with the authorities and then refused to yield, resulting in the predictably bad outcome. There was the story of Conrad Grebel, the brawling womanizer turned exegetical scholar who then reached a point of religious conversion after so much time spent with the biblical texts.¹ Incarcerated for publicly baptizing adults, Grebel wrote a treatise on baptism and petitioned his captors to please print it, challenging them to a public debate. His request was denied, but he escaped from prison and wrote pamphlets vociferously until he died of the plague. There was the story of Felix Manz, a son of privilege, accomplished biblical linguist, and friend of Grebel’s, who was taken into custody for his seditious views, including, ironically, his rejection of capital punishment on Christian grounds. Manz’s sentence was to have his arms and legs bound and be thrown into the river, where he drowned as his grief-stricken mother looked on. There was the story of George Blaurock, a brash and blustery man who is said to have elbowed parsons out of their pulpits saying that he had a word for the people and had come to preach it, invited or not. While

¹ All of the Anabaptists mentioned can be found in William Estep, *The Anabaptist Story* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1975).

imprisoned, Blaurock wrote several poems and hymns before he was tortured and eventually sentenced to burning at the stake. The stories went on and on, the names stretching into each other. Balthasar Hubmaier, Hans Denck, Pilgram Marpeck, Peter Riedemann, Menno Simons, each of them unique, but all of them committed to the idea that to follow Jesus was to make the most conscientious decision one could make.

I listened to all of the stories and thought, at first, that the Anabaptists were simply crazy. But the more their radical ideas sunk in (ideas about denying the violence and coercion of the world's culture and choosing instead the peace and voluntarism of Jesus' counterculture), the more I began asking questions about what exactly crazy was. And those are the questions that first open up the way of peace, though it is a way, I think, through a wilderness that is still foreign to most of us. For if we are ever to truly embrace the teachings of Jesus, then they will ask more of us than we may be prepared to give. They will ask us to turn our worlds upside down, shaking our culture and its conventions to the core, severing our church and state conglomeration, and challenging the violence that is so prevalent in our society and in our world. The way of Jesus is not the way we have now. The way of Jesus is radically different. Just take it from an old Anabaptist. Or take it from an old man. Dr. Littell would sometimes end his stories with a few whispered words to the wise. "The way of Jesus isn't really for everyone," he'd say. "It's very difficult. You might not want to try it at home." His unspoken challenge was, of course, that we just might.

It has always been true that the way of our faith is supposed to be different from the way of our world. We need look no further than this morning's lection to find the hope that one day the divine will be known as the powerful are brought down and the low are

lifted up. When Mary sang that song to the baby she was carrying, it was as the hope that any mother sings to her child. But our sacred stories tell us that Mary's child was also more than simply her own. He was to be a child who would grow up and push back against the culture and conventions of his day in the name of a certain kind of peace. His was to be a story of peace if not tranquility. It was a story of pacifism if not quietude. It was a story of the religious if not the institutional. It was a story that had to be lived out, not only by him, but also by anyone who would claim to follow him, if it was ever going to make its crazy kind of sense. For it was and is in life that Mennonite scholar John Howard Yoder reminds us that, "we find a reality and [also] the possibility of all that the teachings say."² Peace can only go so far as its living adherents are willing to take it. In Jesus' case, that was all the way. And it was in that spirit that his radical Anabaptist kindred would follow him, which is a strange sort of segue back to the pizza party, but it is back to the pizza party that we go.

At the end of term, I remember Dr. Littell pausing from his storytelling to invite us all to his "bachelor's quarters," as he called it, for a pizza party. Respector of conscience that he was, he polled us all for preferences, allergies, ethical dilemmas. I don't think there were any. Pizza with everything was fine. He gave us directions to his apartment, a short walk from the religion building and offered an evening time shortly after the completion of our final exam. On the appointed day, we came to class, wrote our test essays until our hands cramped and time ran out, and adjourned ourselves to the good professor's for the promised party. When we arrived, we found that Dr. Littell had

² John H. Yoder, *The Original Revolution: Essays on Christian Pacifism* (Scottsdale: Herald Press, 1971), 137.

arranged chairs into a circle in his living room with boxes of pizza stacked on the counter next to unopened bottles of soda and neat stacks of cups and napkins. He invited us to help ourselves, which we did, and then we gathered in the circle. I remember that our professor did not loosen his tie, nor did he quit calling us by our titles and surnames (“Mr. Rutledge, how is your pizza, sir?”), but he did offer us a final admonition. As we munched our slices and discussed what we made of the Anabaptists, Dr. Littell asked how we thought we would do on the test that was coming. For a moment, it sounded as if perhaps he had just slipped into senility in front of our eyes. After all, we had just come from the final. But, after a brief silence, we listened as Dr. Littell advised us that, as seniors, our test was about to begin. The pizza was his gift to us, a celebration of the work we’d done and the degrees we would soon earn. But the test was to figure out how we might give something to the world. What the world needed most, by his reckoning, was peace. And here a very old man spoke to some still young men and women, exhorting us, in the way of those oldest and most radical Christians. If there is to be peace, it is now you who must bring it. If you choose to try and follow that way, it will be very difficult. It will pit you against your culture and many of its conventions. It will ask for as much as you have, maybe even everything. It will turn you into a person that other people will probably call crazy. And it will make you into something that has always been in short supply, from the days of the Anabaptists on to our own: a living follower of the way of Jesus.

At the end of the meal, Dr. Littell formally shook our hands. I remember him saying, “Goodbye, Mr. Rutledge,” as I closed the apartment door behind me. But that is not the last time I have heard his voice. Amen.