"How do we Sing the Songs of the Lord in a Strange Land?"
Opening Session, Central District Conference Meeting

Grace Mennonite Church, PandoraThursday, June 19, 2025 7:30 PM

P. Bush

Scriptures: *Romans 12: 1-2; II Corinthians 6:14-17; Psalm 137:1-6*

Good evening. Thanks for that kind introduction. It's good to be here with you all.

In line with the 500th anniversary of Swiss Anabaptism, my task this evening is to reflect a bit with you, as Mennonite historian, on this heritage and what it might mean for us today. At the same time, since this is also a worship service, I understand that I am to refrain from a straight history lecture and offer a message in that spirit. You can let me know afterwards whether I got this assignment right.

Let's begin again with a glance at early Anabaptism. Anabaptist scholars (and I am not one), argue that Anabaptism emerged simultaneously in several places in Europe in the first decade of the Protestant reformation. But this year we've been thinking about this magical historical moment on January 21, 1525, where a group of radical young Christians in Zurich, Switzerland, having wrestled and discussed hard with issues like the inadequacy of infant baptism and the sense of God's calling to new lives of

faith, gathered at the home of Felix Manz for a worship service. At one point that evening, a priest named George Blaurock asked a young Bible scholar named Conrad Grebel to baptize him. By the end of that service, fifteen of the worshipers had been rebaptized. As word of this spread, the Zurich city council soon branded rebaptisms as a capital crime, and within a year began executing the Swiss Anabaptists, first by drowning and then by torture.

However, there's something about the Christian faith, wherever and whenever it exists, that enables it to flourish under persecution. A few years later in the Netherlands, a Dutch priest named Menno Simons asked for rebaptism. He soon shaped a small pacifist faction into a religious movement that spread through Europe, despite horrific repression. In subsequent centuries it swept across North America, through the western hemisphere, and then into Asia and Africa, where Church is especially booming today. In five centuries that small Anabaptist spark has blown into flame a global church. Those of us gathered here tonight are all inheritors of it. So maybe the first thing we need to do tonight is to just thank God for that courageous Anabaptist witness.

At the same time, the story is, of course, more complicated. In his famous "Anabaptist Vision" statement in 1943, the influential Mennonite

church leader Harold Bender asserted that Swiss Anabaptism suddenly emerged spontaneously in Zurich solely out of an expression of Christian faithfulness. Subsequent generations of scholars, however, have argued that Bender was making more of a theological statement than an historically accurate one. Like everybody else, the early Anabaptists inhabited a cultural context that shaped what they were doing. John Roth, for instance, has recently outlined how they drew from such varied sources as the writings of Erasmus, Martin Luther and Catholic monastics. To quote Roth, "there is no… essential Anabaptism that floats free from culture, that Mennonite understandings of Christian faithfulness in North America today also reflect our social and economic location…" We certainly can and should celebrate, as we've been doing this spring, the radical commitment to God exhibited by the early Swiss Anabaptists. But we also need to avoid portraying them all as saints. Many were just as contentious, impatient and judgmental as any of their contemporaries, for which they were admonished at the time – I learned from Gerald Mast recently – by prominent leaders like Pilgram Marpeck.

In other words, the early Anabaptists and the church that emerged from their movement struggled with the same question that not just Christians but any religious person – any devout Muslim or Jew or Buddhist – must

face. To put it in Christian terms, we all have to struggle with how to be in the world but not of the world. We all inhabit specific cultures. There is so much in our culture that is wonderful in and of itself and can draw us towards God. But there are many other aspects of our culture that seduce us and pull us away from our true love. How do we manage this tension?

For five centuries, the church that emerged from the Anabaptist movement has wrestled hard with this question. Over time it has produced two different kinds of responses. On the one hand – not surprisingly, for a church emerging from a century of brutal persecution – our Mennonite forbears worked to strengthen the bonds of separation. As Anabaptist survivors fled to upland Swiss mountain valleys or the cities of Holland, they forged a Mennonite self-identity as a pilgrim people. The world, they taught, is not our home. If there was one scripture that our ancestors took to heart and set at the very foundation for their lives in Europe and America, it was Second Corinthians 16:17: "Come out from them and be separate, says the Lord." Or there's that clear admonition in the twelfth chapter of Romans: "Do not conform to the pattern of this world." Shaped by memories of Anabaptist martyrs, Mennonites established firm doctrines of nonconformity that shaped church life and practice for

centuries and reinforced it by associating rural isolation with spiritual purity.

The other major Anabaptist-Mennonite answer to the question of how to be in the world but not of the world is seen in the way that they engaged in a process (as did many other Christians) of selective borrowing from outside society. The Old Orders have furnished marvelously instructive examples. As scholars have outlined in depth, groups like the Amish are not hostile to technology per se. They have managed to reinforce their bonds of separation from the world by engaging in a careful process of discernment about how to use technology in a way that strengthens their community. This is why, for example, the Amish will accept rides in cars but not allow their members to own one. Owning cars would mean the rapid dispersal of their community.

It seems to me that when Mennonites have managed this process of selective borrowing best, they did it by exercising a similar degree of discernment. Here in North America, the process accelerated in the later nineteenth and early twentieth century as the outside world grew closer to rural Mennonite communities and the mechanisms of separation became weathered and frayed. Mennonites discovered that they could learn a lot from nearby Christians. Outside innovations like missions,

revivals and Sunday Schools (and, later, colleges) could revitalize Mennonite communities. This was the path charted by leaders like John C Coffman, Menno Simons Steiner, Johannes Moser and – out in Illinois -- a craggy old Amish-Mennonite bishop named Joseph Stuckey. In those leaders and their innovations lay the origins, in fact, of the Central District Conference.

Not that all this happened without conflict, and the ironies that resulted are fascinating. Take, for instance, the dispute between Mennonite fundamentalists and "modernists," which raged with destructive effect through much of the early twentieth century. Both were defending what they saw as pure Mennonitism and accusing the other side of borrowing, in this manner betraying the church. Yet both were doing so based on outside influences – progressivism on one side, fundamentalism on the other – which they themselves had borrowed.

In this manner, the two answers to the problem of how to be in the world but not of the world -- separation on the one hand and selective borrowing on the other -- have existed in a good deal of tension. This is true not only in the history of the Central District Conference but in the history of what we today call the denominations that, much later, merged into MCUSA. As Mennonites took useful ideas from their protestant

neighbors, like denominational structures, revival meetings, and English language hymns, some consciously worked to widen the distance they had from society in other ways. They reinforced the plain dress and passed all sorts of prohibitions against things like attending baseball games, circuses and other amusements, or joining unions, secret societies: things like that. Even as they borrowed from the world and let the walls come down, they simultaneously tried to put the walls back up.

Yet in the end, at least for MCUSA Mennonites, those walls did come down. I don't have time to walk you through in detail the remarkable process of Mennonite acculturation that escalated through much of the twentieth century. It happened for a variety of reasons. Two major causes seem to have been technology and war. Think for a moment about the impact on isolated rural people of such wonderful technological developments like the telephone, the radio, the CAR (and for farmers, its spin-off, the TRACTOR and TRUCK), the movies, then TV and later, the Worldwide Web. All these factors would work to break down the social isolation of rural people, Mennonites included.

There was also war. Years ago I spent some time with the draft census data that MCC undertook in the middle of World War II to try to discern why so many young Mennonite men were disobeying church

teaching on pacifist nonresistance and accepting military service (in the old Mennonite church, this percentage of Mennonite draftees entering the military was about forty percent; in the old General Conference church, the percentage was close to seventy percent). What leaders found, in sum, was that the church could no longer rely on rural isolation to keep Mennonites safe from the world. In particular, they discovered that the public high school was a secularizing agent. So the church responded with all sorts of mechanisms that sociologists call defensive structuring. In the immediate postwar years, for example, they built a host of Mennonite high schools. The old Mennonite Church excommunicated returning military members and lengthened the rule book on many other issues.

In the end, however, the attractions of outside society and culture were too strong. The walls Mennonites had erected with outside society came down. At the same time, the church responded with more positive means of knitting members together. As men and women returned home from the conscientious objector labor camps and service sites at mental hospitals, they brought back with them new ideas of what it meant to be Mennonite, namely as people of peace and service. To use Heidi Simones' example in the children's story, they discovered they could be

good compost for their values in new and unexpected places. The wider church responded with an explosion of Mennonite energies towards service through the twentieth century, creating new agencies like Mennonite Central Committee, Mennonite Voluntary Service, and Mennonite Disaster Service, in which Mennonites physically demonstrated Christian compassion. This new identity, it turned out, could be tremendously attractive to other Christians from a variety of other traditions, and the church blossomed with the new vitality they brought. To a great degree, this is also part of our story in the Central District Conference.

So where does this all leave us today, as we continue to try to navigate the tension between being in the world but not of the world? Sure: we're going to borrow, and good can come from it. But we need to admit that there have also been some less helpful imports. Historically some Mennonites also borrowed aspects from outside society that they should have run screaming away from, like its racism, its patriarchy, and its homophobia. And even as we have worked, with diligence and repentance, to rid ourselves of that kind of sinful ugliness, other non-Christian aspects of our culture have come creeping in.

Do you know what the last Church Member profile Survey has revealed about our social class position? It showed that over the past several decades, partly because of the way that Mennonites have gravitated towards the "helping professions" and away from blue-collar occupations, growing numbers of us have achieved higher levels of education. As a result, we Mennonites are increasingly situated in comfortable, middle-class, professional occupations to a higher extent than even other American protestants, and certainly at a much higher rate than American society as a whole. The data I saw didn't break this down to Mennonite sub-groups, but I suspect that this is even more true of congregations in the Central District Conference.

So let's reflect a bit about what acculturation has done for us, us Middle Class Mennonites. We got rid of the dress codes and most of the prohibitions. Most of us, me included, would regard this as a good thing. We can go to a ball game, or a movie, without risking a reprimand from a church official. I am quite confident that you pastors here do not want this as part of your job descriptions. We can look like, recreate, consume, vote and mostly act like our non-Mennonite or and non-Christian neighbors. We embraced all those technological wonders, and as a result, a very attractive culture penetrated our Mennonite communities. In fact,

that culture has made itself right at home. Its message – to consume, enjoy, waste, consume more, enjoy, waste -- come at us from nearly every possible outlet. Heck, I can't even put gas in my car now without a screen on the pump blasting it at me, a message that is so antithetical to the Gospel.

Any of us who have been parents and have tried to raise good Christian children might have some sympathy with our traditional, old, non-conforming Mennonite ancestors who were trying to keep some distance from the world. I recall a time, decades ago now, when our kids were making the transition from Disney type stuff to mainstream TV shows. Like many of you, my spouse Elysia and I had been keeping an eye on their media content. So we thought it a good idea to sit down and watch one of the new shows with them. We went to college in northern California in the later 1970s. I have never thought of myself as puritanical in any way. But we were shocked at what we watched with our kids on mainstream, prime-time TV. The show seemed to be not just teaching promiscuity but celebrating it. So we told them that we are raising you as Christian young people. We don't want you watching that stuff. Meanwhile, my wife and I looked at each other with a knowing look of

horror. That's it, our eyes conveyed. It's finally happened. We have become our parents.

But that was just one TV show. We knew we couldn't protect our kids from the other negative channels of influence that were flooding into our lives. Sometimes we felt like that Dutch kid in that old story, standing there with our fingers in the dike. If we stop up that stream of cultural influences in one place, it's sure to break through someplace else. We can't put back up the walls. As a result, we Christian parents sometimes feel like we're standing neck-deep in the muck.

How does Psalm 137 go? "By the rivers of Babylon we sat down and wept when we remembered Zion," writes the psalmist. "There on the poplars we hung our harps, for there our captors asked us for songs, our tormentors demanded songs of joy; they said 'Sing us one of the songs of Zion!' How can we sing the songs of the Lord in a foreign land? If I forget you, Jerusalem, may my right hand forget its skill."

Listen to the words of one of my favorite poets, a Catholic mystic poet named Anne Porter. This is her poem titled "After Psalm 137":

We're still in Babylon but
We do not weep
Why should we weep?

We have forgotten
How to weep.
We've sold our harps
And bought ourselves machines
That do our singing for us
And who remembers now
The songs we sang in Zion?
We have gotten used to exile
We hardly notice
Our captivity
For some of us
There are such comforts here
Such luxuries
Even a guard
To keep the beggars
From annoying us
Jerusalem
We have forgotten you.

So what do we do? How do we Anabaptist Christians today remain in the world but not of the world? It's a tough question. I'm a Mennonite historian, not a theologian or an ethicist. But as I move to close, I owe you an answer. In fact, I have two: initial, tentative, incomplete, but two.

First, since we're in the world, we're going to borrow. We can't escape it; we are products of our culture and our society. But let's at least

do what our Old Order friends do. As best as we can, let's be intentional and discerning about what we are borrowing. Let's identify it and name it, lest our culture seduce us unawares.

Secondly and finally, it's useful to remember the sense of rapturous joy many of us felt when we first encountered the living God. These dayswe are thinking back these days to the Swiss Anabaptists in their earliest beginnings, when they were caught up again in that rapturous moment, and how it led them to such stunning, unfathomable courage. Think, for instance, of the words of Anna Manz in her trial, when her interrogators pushed her hard, wanting to know what you Anabaptists were discussing in those secret meetings. She just said that they had "talked of nothing other than the love of God."

Sometimes just the memories can help us keep maybe just a bit of distance from the world. This is why it's been important to do what we've been doing this spring: gathering to reflect on our spiritual ancestors, their bravery and their commitment and their struggles to be faithful. And we do this, as we do tonight, in services of worship, where we remind ourselves that we are a pilgrim people, in exile, as we sing the songs of the Lord in a foreign land.