

The “Isness” of Mennonites

*A Sermon Preached by Thomas Merton, First Mennonite Church of San Francisco
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Introduction by Sheri Hostetler:

A few years back, we did a series that resonated with many of you on the archetypes of the warrior, monk and mystic. We said that while we may gravitate toward one of these archetypes, to be a faithful follower of Jesus, we ultimately need to embody all of them. Thomas Merton has long been one of my spiritual teachers because he did faithfully embody all of them. He was literally a monk, a Trappist monk, at Gethsamani Abbey in Kentucky. He was a mystic with a deep connection to the Source of life, which he experienced in prayer and ritual but also in nature and music. And he was a prophet. Without leaving his Abbey, he became a powerful public prophet, speaking out against the war in Vietnam and militarism and violence in general and standing up on behalf of racial equality.

When I read a paper that Pat had written for a class in her Doctor of Ministry program — a class called Modern Mystics and Prophets — in which she “channeled” Thomas Merton to write a sermon to First Mennonite Church of San Francisco, I felt that it was important that she / he actually give this sermon to us! It was clear to me that Thomas Merton, who died in 1968, still had a prophetic word or two to say to us. What you are about to hear is a condensed version of the original paper. It is a sermon written in Merton’s voice, containing many of his verbatim words. Much of those quotes from a collection of his writings called *Passion for Peace: Reflections of War and Nonviolence*.

Of course this sermon is in reality a collaboration between Thomas Merton and Pat, for she chose the quotes and how to interpret them. But, if some of the language sounds – well, not like Pat – remember that it is primarily Thomas Merton who is speaking here this morning. Please welcome him now!

Please pray with me.

O Lord, my strength and my redeemer: Let the words of my mouth, and the meditation of my heart, be acceptable in thy sight. Amen. (Psalm 19:14)

Greetings, brothers and sisters in Christ! It is an honor to worship with you this morning at First Mennonite Church of San Francisco. And oh, what a beautiful, vibrant city you have! I have walked your hills and drunk in your vistas – from the noble mountain to the east, to the vast expanse of ocean to the west. I have lain in the meadows of Golden Gate park, and become one with the grasses and wildflowers, with the niggling ants and hovering honey bees. My soul still thrums with the hot jazz I heard last evening in your exquisite new hall on Franklin St. And this morning I stood in the early morning fog on Ocean Beach. With sand between my toes, and salt spray on my face, I attuned my breath to the surf... As I have written, “There is in all visible things an invisible fecundity, a dimmed light, a meek namelessness, a hidden wholeness. This mysterious Unity and Integrity is Wisdom, the Mother of All!”ⁱ

I could speak all morning about these natural ecstasies – but you have brought me here for a more sober purpose. You have asked me to share what wisdom I may have for you – as Mennonite Anabaptists, one of the three historic peace churches – in these tumultuous and dangerous times. I am honored that you covet my wisdom, and I shall endeavor, with God’s grace, to offer what I can.

I’d like to begin with an excerpt from a poem that I wrote in 1957. The poem is entitled “In Silence.” I invite you to listen with the ears of your heart.

Be still
Listen to the stones of the wall.
Be silent, they try
To speak your

Name.
Listen
To the living walls.
Who are you?

Who
Are you?
Whose
Silence are you?

Who (be quiet)
Are you (as these stones
Are quiet). Do not
Think of what you are
Still less of
What you may one day be.

Rather
 Be what you are (but who?) be
 The unthinkable one
 You do not know.

Do not think of what you are, still less of what you may one day be. Rather, be what you are. Be the unthinkable one you do not know.

Meister Eckhart said, “Isness is God.”ⁱⁱ And, “All creatures are words of God.”ⁱⁱⁱ I propose that Eckhart’s “Isness” and my “unthinkable one” are two ways of saying the same thing.

Who, my friends, is ‘the unthinkable one you do not know?’ Who is the unthinkable one you are called to be? (And please, let’s not use ‘unthinkable’ here as an ‘undesirable possibility,’ but rather as an ‘essence,’ a way of being so deep it eludes conscious thought. In other words, *Isness*). How are you, as a Mennonite community situated in this beautiful city, in these tumultuous times, a distinct, unique Word of God? I believe the key to your *Isness* is your Anabaptism. And your Word, your expression of God, lies in being *more of who you are*. Of claiming your deepest selves as Anabaptists – as individuals and as a community.

The Historical Jesus & The Cosmic Christ

As Anabaptists you know already what I have been preaching for years – much to the consternation of the church authorities! – that, “Christ our Lord did not come to bring peace to the world as a kind of spiritual tranquilizer. He brought to His disciples a vocation and a task, to struggle in the world of violence to establish His peace not only in their own hearts but in society itself.”^{iv} Your ancestors died for the right to study the Gospels – to interpret the parables, the sayings, and the actions of Jesus – as he crossed social boundaries and preached that the “last shall be first and the first shall be last.” (Matthew 20:16, NRSV) Furthermore, in the words of the Anabaptist scholar, Harold S. Bender, your faith calls you to radical discipleship, “a transformation of the entire way of life of the individual believer and of society so that it should be fashioned after the teachings and example of Christ.”^v I have always liked Anabaptists!

But, your inheritance does not stop there. Your ancestors *also* believed in a radical incarnation of faith made manifest through the celebration of the Lord’s Supper. In a powerful sermon your pastor, Sheri Hostetler, preached on Anabaptist community a couple of years ago, she stated the following: “The early Anabaptists believed that when the living Spirit of God worked in regenerated believers to knit them together through the outward ceremonies that signified their unity [such as communion], the result would be the establishment of the very Body of Christ in the world, visibly working through them. Christ became physically present in their community, not in the bread or wine. *They* were the Body of Christ. *They* were the place where Christ’s body became real, actual. Their bodies became Christ’s body on earth.”^{vi} Wow.

Consider both this mystical understanding and your call to radical discipleship. Ponder their implications and responsibilities. Be still. Listen. Do you hear what these ‘living walls’ of your faith tell you about yourselves? *You* are the rich inheritors of a

tradition that embraces both the profound, empire rattling teachings of the historical Jesus, AND the mystical, powerful Cosmic Christ. The Christ who, as Meister Eckhart says, “is all and in all.”^{vii} And whom Teilhard describes as the “‘center of things,’ present ‘even in the heart of the tiniest atom’ as well as encompassing the vast universe.”^{viii} The Christ who manifests as tree and gazelle, as mountain and river... and yes, as YOU, a gathered body of somewhat terrified Christians trying to do their best in these apocalyptic times. Deep in your souls you know how to follow Jesus. You know how to struggle in the world of violence to establish God’s peace – not only in your own hearts but in society itself. AND, you understand the mystical side of this work: *that you are in Christ and Christ is in you*. This is your *Isness*. This is your Word. You, my Mennonite brothers and sisters, are a gift to the world.

Realized Eschatology

I would like to explore now the topic of eschatology, the part of theology concerned with death, judgment, and the final destiny of the soul and of humankind.

Today’s world is in a frightening mess for many reasons, not the least of which is an eschatology that says, in the words of contemporary theologian Matthew Fox, we live our lives only to “barter our way to heaven in an afterlife.”^{ix} Such a story allows us to kill each other in so called holy wars, to plunder our planet, and to destroy the heavens with the carbon emissions of our toxic industrial lifestyle. For what does the here and now matter, really? We are destined for another life, an “afterlife,” which matters more.

Yet, my friends, you have inherited a *different* story. Menno Simons, the founder of your faith, “suggested that people develop a consciousness of living in a time of grace that began with Jesus. In other words, he thought that followers of Jesus were to live out the peaceful reign of God wherever they happened to be, until the time that Jesus would return. The followers of Menno have carried this legacy of a *visible nonviolent kingdom* into the present day.”^x This, I would say, is a ‘realized eschatology’ – an eschatology that teaches “the transformation of life and of human relations by Christ *now*.”^{xi} “I am coming to see clearly the great importance of this concept. ...Realized eschatology is the heart of genuine Christian humanism and hence [it has] tremendous importance for the Christian peace effort.”^{xii} Why? Because we choose to live here, now – and to bring justice and peace to this place, these times. We choose to live out the peaceful reign of God, and we grapple daily, moment by moment – in our relationship to all of creation – with what this means.

This too is part of your “Isness” as Anabaptists! You know that the Kingdom of God is justice and peace. You know that the Kingdom is not yet here, but already here. You know that by grace, you are called to partner with God to manifest God’s Kingdom in this place, in this time. This knowing situates you as change makers in a world that desperately needs you. It calls you to birth a new, more functional story of the destiny of humankind, one in which we learn to reside humbly within the fragile ecosystem of our planet. Can you claim – really claim – this knowing? Will you allow it to give you courage? Will you allow it to infuse everything you do with compassion – for yourselves, for your brothers and sisters, for the creatures of this earth, for the planet herself?

Gelassenheit

And what of *gelassenheit*? I know that *gelassenheit* was extremely important to your ancestors; it was at the heart of everything they lived for, everything they died for.

Gelassenheit is a concept that Meister Eckhart – who has been a ‘lifeboat’^{xiii} for me at pivotal points in my development! – returned to again and again. It is a concept he translated as “letting be.” In your tradition *gelassenheit* came to be understood as the characteristic of “yieldedness” – specifically a yieldedness with calm and serenity to God’s will, especially as revealed in the communal interpretation of scripture, a central tenant of Anabaptist practice. Arnold Snyder, one of your historians and theologians writes: “Believers were called to yield inwardly to the Spirit of God, outwardly to the community and to outward discipline, and finally, in the face of a hostile world, believers could be called upon to give way before God’s greater purposes by accepting a martyr’s death.”^{xiv} And I myself have written, “The Christian is one whose life has sprung from a particular spiritual seed: the blood of the martyrs who, without offering forcible resistance, laid down their lives rather than submit to the unjust laws that demanded an official religious cult of the Emperor as God. That is to say, the Christian is bound, like the martyrs, to obey God rather than the state whenever the state tries to usurp powers that do not and cannot belong to it.”^{xv} We are on the same page here: this is *gelassenheit*!

As Anabaptists you still tell the stories of your martyrs, and indeed I have read a few of them in your celebrated book, the *Martyrs Mirror*. They are gruesome tales, to be sure – of burnings at the stake, drownings, hangings, executions by the sword, all preceded by terrible torture. I shudder, and my stomach roils, when I read these accounts of how your ancestors suffered. Your martyrs enacted a profound commitment to *gelassenheit*. In a hostile world, they gave themselves to death before they would succumb to the oppression of the state church.

Brothers and sisters, can you let these stories form the ground of your work for justice and liberation today? Will you allow them to be profound inspiration, a reminder to empty yourselves, that you too might *yield* to the higher law of God, rather than to submit to unjust laws of the state? You know such a *gelassenheit* in the very depths of your being. This is part of your “Isness.”

Prophetic, Nonviolent Provocation

Finally, I would like to look directly at your work for justice in the world, which I know is rich and varied. There are so many ways you as individuals and as a congregation are working to confront and change systems of oppression. Your work encompasses advocating for environmental justice, supporting those in need of housing, creating life-saving medicine, saving the rainforests, dismantling the doctrine of discovery, honoring histories of resistance and diversity, creating prophetic art and music, and caring for vulnerable people as teachers, counselors, therapists and physicians.

Each and every one of these forms of justice work is important and noble. And, because of the formation I underwent during the turbulent 60’s in this country, nonviolent direct action is one form of justice work that I know something about. So I’d like for a moment to address the group of you who are witnessing in the world through this type of

work. And, I invite everyone to stay with me here: some of the questions I will pose around non-violent direct action surely apply to all forms of witnessing to and working for justice.

To begin, I invite you to listen to my analysis of our nation almost exactly fifty years ago. These words were published in an essay called “Note for Ave Maria,” in *Ave Maria* magazine in September 1968. “The country is in a very edgy psychological state. Americans feel terribly threatened, on grounds which are partly rational, partly irrational, but in any case very real. ...In such a case, the use of nonviolence has to be extremely careful and clear. People are not in a mood for clear thinking: their fears and premonitions have long ago run away with their minds before anyone can get to them with a cool nonviolent statement. And it has long ago become automatic to interpret nonviolence as violence merely because it is resistance.”^{xvi} When I revisited this article for this sermon, I thought to myself that in some ways it sounds like I am talking about 2018! As a nation we are again in an ‘edgy psychological state’ and many Americans again feel terribly threatened, for a combination of rational and irrational reasons. However, some things are different. Specifically, it seems to me that some fresh, new creative forms of nonviolent direct action are being birthed. People – of all ages – are taking to the streets in ways they never have before, and for this reason, I believe it is worthwhile to revisit my thoughts from the tumultuous late sixties. Let us look together at some of the ideas in my essay, the original title of which was, “Non-Violence Does Not... Cannot... Mean Passivity.”

On May 17, 1968, the Berrigan brothers and several of their followers, a group who became known as “The Catonsville Nine,” were arrested for an action in protest of the Viet Nam war. They gathered in the parking lot of the draft board in Catonsville, MD and, using a homemade form of napalm (a very clever detail!), burned draft files. “What were the Berrigans and the others trying to do? It seems to me this was an attempt at *prophetic nonviolent provocation*. It bordered on violence and was violent to the extent that it meant pushing some office workers around and destroying some government property. The nine realized that this was a criminal act and knew that they could go to jail for it. They accepted this in the classic nonviolent fashion. The standard doctrine of nonviolence says that you can disobey a law you consider unjust but you have to accept the punishment. You are ‘doing penance’ for the sin and injustice against which you have protested.”^{xvii}

“The classic (Gandhian) doctrine of nonviolence, even in a much less tense and explosive situation, always emphasized respect for the just laws in order to highlight clearly and unambiguously the injustice of the unjust law. In this way, nonviolence did not pose a sort of free-floating psychological threat, but was clearly pinpointed, directed to what even the adversary had to admit was wrong.”^{xviii} Furthermore, “For Gandhi... political action had to be by its very nature ‘religious’ in the sense that it had to be informed by principles of religious and philosophical wisdom.”^{xix} “Politics had to be understood in the context of service and worship in the ancient sense of *leitourgia*”^{xx} or liturgy, as public work.

There are many questions for exploration here. Among them: How are you, as an historic peace church, resolving for yourselves the question of what is violent and what is not? And, how is *all* your justice work grounded in the deepest values of your faith tradition and wisdom? Do your service and worship merge into *leitourgia* – a true and sacred “work of the people?”

I do not pretend to know how you might answer these questions. What I *do* know is that the work of justice and liberation is hard, and it must be engaged with fierce reflection

and analysis – of oneself, one’s community, society, and the injustices being perpetrated. If it includes direct action, this must be grounded in the history of the nonviolent movement in its classic forms. And, all liberation work must be rooted in the study of scripture and in an unceasing practice of contemplative prayer, which allows action to flow from one’s heart, in love.

Finally, our action for justice and healing must be pragmatic, yes. After all, we want it to topple and reform unjust laws and structures. And, it must be more than this: it must be rooted in the sacredness of deep time. “The whole point of nonviolence is that it rises above pragmatism and does not consider whether or not it pays off officially. *Ahimsa* [the principal of nonviolence toward all living things in the Hindu, Buddhist and Jain traditions] is defense of and witness to *truth*, not efficacy. I admit that may sound odd.

But someone once said, did he not, “What is truth?” And the One to whom he said it also mentioned, somewhere: “The truth shall make you free.” It seems to me that this is what really matters.”^{xxi}

So, my friends,

Be still.
Listen
To the living walls of your faith.
Who are you?

You are the body of Christ in the world. You are Co-Creators of the Kingdom of God, which is not yet here, but also already here. You are Courageous Ones, who yield to God’s way, through prayer, bible study, and practices of deep community. You are Change Makers in a world that desperately needs you.

Will you join me in saying, “Amen?”

Notes

- ⁱ Thomas Merton, “Sophia,” in *When The Trees Say Nothing*, ed. Kathleen Deignan, (Notre Dame, IN: Sorin Books, 2003), 179.
- ⁱⁱ Matthew Fox, *Meister Eckhart: A Mystic-Warrior for Our Times* (Novato, CA: New World Library, 2014), 128.
- ⁱⁱⁱ Fox, *Meister Eckhart*, 172.
- ^{iv} Thomas Merton, *Passion for Peace: Reflections on War and Nonviolence* (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 2006), 43.
- ^v Rudy Baergen, *The Mennonite Story* (Newton, KS: Faith and Life Press, 2016), 59.
- ^{vi} Sheri Hostetler, “Meditation: Anabaptist Community,” preached at First Mennonite Church of San Francisco, 9/25/16, unpublished. Also see C. Arnold Snyder, *Following in the Footsteps of Christ: The Anabaptist Tradition* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2004), 103-104.
- ^{vii} Fox, *Meister Eckhart*, 25.
- ^{viii} Fox, *Meister Eckhart*, 23.
- ^{ix} Fox, *A Way to God*, 135.
- ^x Lisa D. Weaver and J. Denny Weaver, *Living the Anabaptist Story* (Telford, PA: Cascadia Publishing House, 2015), 40.
- ^{xi} Fox, *A Way to God*, 135.
- ^{xii} Fox, *A Way to God*, 135.
- ^{xiii} Fox, *A Way to God*, 25.
- ^{xiv} C. Arnold Snyder, *Anabaptist History and Theology: An Introduction* (Kitchener, Ontario: Pandora Press, 1995), 89.
- ^{xv} Merton, *Passion for Peace*, 44.
- ^{xvi} Merton, *Passion for Peace*, 162.
- ^{xvii} Merton, *Passion for Peace*, 160-161.
- ^{xviii} Merton, *Passion for Peace*, 162.
- ^{xix} Merton, *Passion for Peace*, 78.
- ^{xx} Fox, *A Way to God*, 135.
- ^{xxi} Merton, *Passion for Peace*, 165.

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