

“Dan’s Memorial Service”

21 October 2023

Pastor Steve Ramer

Don't let the world around you squeeze you into its own mould, but let God re-mould your minds from within, so that you may prove in practice that the plan of God for you is good...

— Romans 12:12 (Phillips translation)

Mennonites trace our beginnings to the European Anabaptists of the early 16th century. Anabaptism, not to be confused with anti-baptism, was a legal term given to us by prosecutors for the grave crime of refusing to baptize infants and for the practice of “re-baptizing” that first generation of adult believers who had been baptized as children.

“So what’s the big deal you might say?”

Well, I’m glad you asked. Reformation passions had divided the church, leading to devastating wars between state sponsored Protestants and the Catholic Church of the One Holy Roman Empire, just who baptized you first defined who’s side you were on.

And since young men were needed to fight those in those “Holy Wars,” or used as ready cash for those who trafficked in mercenaries, baptismal records were quite handy in determining the number of potential soldiers available on either side of those wars ordained by God.

A translation of the Bible by Martin Luther into German also made the teachings of Jesus readily available to the masses. Not only did these early Anabaptist fail to find sufficient proof for baptizing infants but a belief that Jesus promoted non-violence. As pacifists, then, they refused to join any side that used violence.

Needless to say, that non-participation was not at all popular for any of the governing authorities of the day and so many of those folks were arrested, tortured, executed and exiled from their homes.

Ironically this persecution actually led to the spread and growth of that movement, with many taking advantage of William Penn’s great religious experiment of having Christians actually living peaceably with one other in his new colony in North America.

Obedying God’s law first when it conflicts with human laws or norms was like mother’s milk for those subsequently raised in the faith.

An unpopular stance, especially in times of war, Mennonites then found themselves more comfortable in rural farming communities seeking to be left alone to practice their often contrarian beliefs. This is likely the prime reason why we have not always been slaves to the current fashion trends of society.

In addition to the Romans passage read earlier an often repeated admonition found in 1 Peter 2:9 was also commonly recited. In the KJV that Dan would have memorized as a child, it says, "But ye are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a peculiar people..."

And though our peculiar-ness has often been limited to clothing, cars, or by not going to movies, or gambling, smoking and drinking alcohol many like Dan understood that non-conformity also meant, in his context, taking unpopular stances on causes such as civil rights and against the war in Vietnam.

Pacifism, for Dan, expanded from a primarily religious conviction to avoid personal violence into the use of nonviolent strategies for social change and a commitment to bringing about justice for those oppressed by racism, sexism, and economic exploitation.

These convictions were lived out by Dan while on faculty at Goshen College, a predominantly white Mennonite institution in the 60's, when he gave up his teaching post so that the college could hire its first African American professor. Again, as always, faithfulness to Jesus meant something, it meant taking risks especially those that could be life altering.

Dan's later commitment for equal rights for all queer people was added, but never diminished his commitment to end all forms of oppression.

Dan was certainly comfortable in his own skin, embracing his own particularity as well as the peculiar-ness of his faith. Often of course this was done with humor. For example, when we celebrated the installation of our lockers for the homeless a few years ago, a reporter sidled up to Dan for an interview. He assumed, I guess due to Dan's appearance - older clothes, a somewhat scraggy beard and long hair - that Dan was homeless.

He asked Dan if he was looking forward to taking advantage of the newly installed lockers for himself? Dan dryly replied, "No, I don't need a locker right now, but if I do, I'm glad to know where I can find one!"

Dan was always faithful without being pretentious, happy to not only take the side of the poor and the oppressed but to also to be willing to be seen as one of them.

He was one in 400 million and unwilling to be squeezed into the mould of our nation's pervasive culture. He was certainly peculiar and I and so many are lucky to have been inspired by his example!

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