

First Mennonite Church Edmonton

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Craig Janzen Neufeld

Sara Wenger Shenk in her book *Tongue-Tied* talks about the challenge that most North American Mennonites have with sharing and talking about our faith. She writes that, "While many Christians easily and eagerly talk about movies, sports, politics, jobs, and emotions. Why are we tongue-tied when it comes to talking about our faith—even with each other? Even with our kids? What renders us incapable, embarrassed, or hesitant to talk about God?"¹

Our history of being ‘the quiet in the land.’ no doubt has shaped our approach to evangelism, and living our faith. But I don’t think that plays as much a part of it today. I imagine that in part our reticence to share the Good News today is because we’ve seen how the Good News of God has been grossly misused.

I don’t need try very hard to begin to list examples of how God’s Good News has become bad news. Whether it’s using scripture to defend the oppression of indigenous peoples, misogynistic interpretations of scripture being applied by politicians, or even scripture being used to further discrimination of LGBTQ2S+ or Black Indigenous and People of Colour, scripture has, sadly, become Bad News to many people. Even our own history has used scripture to persecute, hunt down and execute the forebears of our Anabaptist faith.

In conversations, I’ve often heard the phrase, “we’re Christian, but we’re not that kind of Christian” as an attempt to try and set ourselves apart. And it’s true that we are a different, unique, expression of the Christian faith. We see Jesus and Scripture differently than, say, other mainline congregations. However, this is unique, special, and distinct expression of the Christian faith is exactly what I think our surrounding culture and society are looking for.

In conversations with folk in the last little while I’ve heard how it is our peace position, our willingness to be welcoming and inclusive to all, our sense of community that first drew them and keeps them here. I’ll reiterate myself, we have something special to offer. So how come, we’re a bit quiet about it?

I want to tell you the story of Margaret today.

Margaret’s story begins for us in the spring of 1608, when she was about 40 years old. The first entry about her, which appears in a report made by the Lutheran General Superintendent to the Synod, reveals that perviously she’d been warned numerous times to attend church and the Lord’s Supper at the parish church. But that warning was unsuccessful.

In the spring of 1608 she was summoned to appear before the Consistory, a church court, to answer for her refusal to conform to Lutheran faith and practice. Nothing was accomplished in this court because she wouldn’t yield. A year later, 1609, she was again interrogated, with the same negative result. Now the church authorities were impatient and had decided that like many Anabaptist women in the area, she was to be chained, but that the pastor and a special visitor should continue attempts to convert her.

The sentence was carried out and she was chained to the floor of her house. In fact this chaining was carried out no fewer than twenty-one times between the spring of 1610 and

¹ Shenk, Sara Wenger. *Tongue-Tied: Learning the Lost Art of Talking About Faith*. 2021.

1621. 21 times, in 11 years! She seems to have been the original escape artist, because no sooner had the chain been put on her ankle and fastened to the floor, she was free again

Once when she was supposedly chained, the church superintendent and the mayor called unannounced to check on her. Margaret did not immediately open the door, they reported later, but they could hear her put her chain back on. She disregarded the order to receive no visitor in her house. Apparently she was free most of the time, going about her work visiting others in her and neighbouring villages, and attending Anabaptist meetings.

The authorities were worried that Margaret would make more converts for Anabaptism. Sometime before spring of 1616 she won over a neighbour, a widow named Maria. Maria was also chained, however, much to the frustration of the church authorities, these two women claimed in public that they could not be defeated because they had right on their side. Margaret felt very sure of herself, because it was reported that during an interrogation in 1616 she listed, but had a mocking smile on her face. The authorities concluded that they could do nothing, and that the matter out simply to be left to God.

Margaret Hellwart appears to have been unusually gifted with self confidence. Perhaps it was part of her personality, but it was mainly her faith that enabled her to endure this long struggle to hold to and practice her confession. The church interrogators tried to correct her; she laughed at them.

When once more she was summoned to appear before the church court in 1618, she said that she was now over fifty years old and past learning anything new. In any case, she said, she knew the trust way that God had taught her and she desired to obey God rather than human authorities. She wanted to do good and avoid evil. There was no point in trying to convert her because she intended to remain an Anabaptist until the end of her life. Three years later she finally asked them just to leave her alone. She would not, she said, live long in any case, so what was the problem?

After January 1621 the records of Margaret fall silent. She was then 53 years of age, and by the standards of that time, old. There seems no doubt that she got her wish to die as an Anabaptist.²

Now I dearly hope that you found a little humour in this story from our heritage. This is one of the few stories that ends without a horrible grisly death. This is one of my favourite stories from our heritage. So what does Margaret teach us? What I take away from this story is not just Margaret's stubbornness, but that she was subtly going about and sharing her faith with her neighbours in unassuming ways. And not only that when called to account, she courageously and matter of factly, claimed who she was, what she believed, and declared that she was going to continue to follow Christ. I find that particularly inspiring.

And I'd like to see a show of hands, who's heard this story before? I'm guessing that had I told the story of say, Dirk Willems, you might have checked out because of how familiar it is. For those who don't know, in a nutshell, Dirk had escaped from jail and had run across an ice covered river, the jailor who was in pursuit of him chased after Dirk but fell through the ice. Rather than running away, Dirk turned back and rescued his jailor. Many have been inspired by these stories.

² Snyder, C. Arnold. Profiles of anabaptist women sixteenth-century reforming pioneers. Waterloo: Laurier Univ. Press, 1998.

So what about us? What is it that we're teaching, to one another, but also to the world? How is it that we're witnessing to God's Good News to the world?

It occurs to me that this is a good question not just for us as a congregation to ponder today, but also us as families. Today, promises were made by new parents among us, and we have made promises to them as well, to help support them in raising their children. But that was not all, if we look closer at what we promised, we also promised to share the Good News of Jesus with them. That God and Jesus love them, that God and Jesus desire to be apart of their lives, that all are beloved and welcomed into the household of God. How are we doing with that? In our homes, in the church?

If I was to say what was the most influential on my faith development, I'm sorry to say that it wasn't the church, rather, it was my family what shaped and crafted my faith the most. When I think back of growing up there were simple things we did that had a big influence. We attended church and Sunday School weekly. We prayed together before each meal and before going to bed each night. We read scripture together, mostly around Christmas and Easter, but we read the scriptures as a family. All these things, and I'm sure more that I can't name right now, impacted and shaped my faith. But what wasn't talked about for me, was how do I talk about my faith.

We are called, or maybe it's better to say, given our talk today, challenged, to declare what we have seen and heard. It's not something we're necessarily comfortable with. Putting ourselves out there and sharing God's Good News with the world. We've seen in go bad in so many ways, not just in the past but even today. And yet, God still calls us to talk about our faith in a life giving way. A way that inspires, and enlivens, and frees those who hear it. The question then becomes to me, how might we, with integrity and authenticity talk about our faith with others? With our children?

For our families among us, You have been given a Shine story bible, read it with your children, tell the stories. Pray together, even if they're simple prayers, by doing this you teach them that we can talk to God at any time. And for us grown-ups. How do we share God's Good News? A friend of mine when faced with this question simply answered 'Watch me.' Not in an arrogant way, rather what they were saying was, 'Watch me for the next couple of months and then let's talk.' Let's talk about what you saw, let's talk about what you noticed, let's talk about what it meant for you. Let's talk on your terms, not mine.

The Good News doesn't have to be Bad News. Unfortunately it can so easily become that. However, in spite of all the Bad News that is preached, God Good News endures, it's not changed. God loves us, Jesus's teachings matter, and demonstrate that love, both in what he said and how he lived, and the message remains, we are beloved and welcomed into Gods' household. This is God's Good News.

May we declare what we have seen and heard.

Amen.