

Schol'p.Marp.Pop.Pres'n

**Pilgram Marpeck: a monologue**

**'Reluctant Radical'**

**TUMC**

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**Theme texts: Romans 8:14-17; Hebrews 2:10-18**

**Secretly** I've always wished that my life had been like that of Francis of Assisi. You know the story: he was born with a silver spoon in his mouth, destined for status and comfort. But when he heard the voice of Jesus calling him, he abandoned **everything** he had for a life of poverty. The colors of Francis' story are black and white. But **my life** has been all shades of grey.

**I am Pilgram Marpeck.** I was born in 1495 to Heinrich and Mathilda Marpeck in the mining town of Rattenberg, near Innsbruck, Austria. My parents were devout Catholics whose faith inspired me long after I left the church of my upbringing.

My father was a mine owner and a member of the town council. Not rich, but prosperous and respected. He raised me to follow in his footsteps. By the time I was 24 I was in charge of building water channels to transport ore from the mines. I was also a member of the town council. I did well at negotiating disputes between sellers and buyers. They praised me for my

patrician manner – slightly aloof, slightly condescending. I could have lived like this for the **rest** of my life.

But there was **insurrection** in the air. People were restless with the old hierarchies governing society. The miners were poorly paid, those with the power to do so had stolen the peasants' common pastures for their own use. Our priest, Stephan Castenbaur, started preaching **against** these abuses. Contrary to my own nature I found myself paying attention. One day I happened upon a cluster of miners listening to a roving preacher. I was shocked but also moved by this firebrand. I wanted more. The next day I thought I was asking an innocent question at work, 'Has any of you listened to these hedge preachers in the hills who talk about surrendering to God and suffering whatever cross you have to bear?' All I got was suspicious **stares**. Suddenly it dawned on me that my reputation, and maybe even my **job**, was in question. So I buried myself in mining projects and the town council's preoccupation with troublemakers. **To this day** I'm ashamed of what I did. But when the arrest warrant from the emperor came to my office for our **own priest** with the charge of fomenting insurrection I carried out the arrest! It was the perfect shield for my newfound faith.

**Why am I** telling you this? **Why?** Because I'm still trying to come to terms with the **unresolved struggle** of my life – summoning **the courage of my convictions**. Too often I have hid behind my status! Couldn't I have done **more** for

Christ by risking my status, by not counting the cost? That's the question that haunts me in my old age.

I **did** have the courage of my convictions once. One of the hedge preachers, a rebel monk called Leonard Schiemer, won me over with his passionate plea to take up the cross. It was I who received the order to arrest him on the capital offense of sedition. **I couldn't do it**. I knew in **that moment**, at age 33, that my life of privilege was **over**. With my wife Anna's encouragement I resigned and took our three children to stay with relatives, while the two of us fled into the unknown.

Through the network of people who had gathered around this Schiemer - wild eyed enthusiasts as far as my wife and I were concerned - we were directed to a safe haven in the far away Moravian countryside, in the present day Czech Republic. There the dissenters had formed congregations. We picked the one that was least set in its ways and were baptized there. Before we had caught our breath, they commissioned us to go to Strasbourg, hundreds of miles away on the French-German border because it had become another haven for religious refugees and they needed someone to gather them into a congregation. We went - with absolutely **no idea** of what awaited us.

Amazingly enough, the city council was advertising for a manager of municipal forests! I applied, with what I hoped would be just the right amount of patrician manners, and **got**

**the job.** My boss took me aside and enquired, 'They say you oppose infant baptism. Are you like this Anabaptist Hoffmann who's convinced that the last judgment is going to start in Strasbourg?' '**No, no!**' I insisted. 'I'm a pacifist.' I realized **on the spot** that that was the wrong thing to say because his eyes became as **big as saucers**. Before he could draw breath I pressed on. 'I'm a **loyal subject** of the city. It's just that I believe you can't be **born** a Christian; you can only **become** one.'

Theologizing was clearly not my boss's favorite pastime. He cleared his throat and looked me in the eye. 'Are you willing to take the oath of loyalty to the city?' I gulped and blurted out, '**Of course!**' knowing that I had just skated out onto **very thin ice**. But that was enough for him. So I worked hard at being a conscientious manager of forests by day and a minister by night. On Sundays my sermons were absorbed with nurturing a community of passionate Anabaptists without turning that passion into denunciations of everyone else - inside and outside of the radical movement - who didn't believe exactly as we did. Holding these two values **together** became one of the consuming challenges of my ministry.

I spent the next four years doing what I was good at – **negotiating**. Convincing my colleagues that I was not a four headed monster, gaining audiences with state church ministers, and hardest of all, trying to keep the peace among fellow Anabaptists who thought that trying to fit in was the kiss of

death. What made all this peacekeeping worthwhile? It created a space for people who were serious about following the Bible, but who **lacked the personality or courage of a rebel**. I wanted to find a way to live out the Gospel in everyday life as housewives and shopkeepers and engineers. It's not only prophets and protesters who please God.

Other radicals had other agendas. The spiritualists called for an end to baptism and Communion. Jesus had given his followers outward rituals, they argued, as lessons for those at the beginning of the Christian life. Once they had found their way from outward signs to the inward reality the signs were unnecessary. In fact, they were a distraction from the spiritual quest. Christ becoming human had been God's short term concession to people who couldn't grasp the message.

In my gut I considered these spiritualists to be elitists – religious athletes who were too proud **to look for God in the elements** of his creation. In the presence of the Holy Spirit these elements were witnesses to God's nearness. God had humbled himself to come to us on our terms. Christ's flesh and blood were our door to the sacred, his physical being the medium of the Spirit. How could anyone despise the humanity of Christ? That was the substance of my first two published essays.

Meanwhile Strasbourg was changing – and I would soon have an unwanted opportunity to put my claims to the test. All of the dissenting groups found out that being law abiding citizens was no longer enough to satisfy the civic and religious

leaders. They took a hard line. This was the argument: all citizens owe our Christian society their loyalty. Bringing their babies to be baptized is the mark of a trustworthy citizen. Those who persist in disloyalty will be banished.

All my letters to the head of the official Protestant church, appealing for freedom of conscience on the vexing question of baptism, were suddenly for naught. People in our congregation reacted in all directions. Some insisted that we openly **defy** the authorities. A few argued that we should **submit** and let our infants be baptized to escape persecution. It was the kind of thought to which my personality naturally gravitates. But my wife and I **couldn't do it**. The NT is so clear that baptism **follows** conversion. I concluded that if I fudged on that one, I would **lose** my spiritual compass.

So in 1532 Anna and I became refugees again. People in eastern Switzerland, took us in. On the one hand, these Swiss Brethren impressed us. They had survived as a movement only by leaving behind home and status and **eking** out an existence above the tree line in the mountains. Their view was that God's remnant can survive only with a binding, rigorous **discipline**. It seemed to me they had no patience with each other. 'You're either a Christian or you're not', they'd proclaim. If you take up the sword **you're not**. If you come to the Lord's Supper with an unworthy life **you're not**.' These Swiss were made of martyr material. They chose freedom of conscience on the **mountains** over a pragmatism that would let them live in the **towns**. When

your life is threatened because of your most cherished conviction you have two choices – **compromise** or **fanaticism**. The compromisers find it hard to live with **themselves**; the fanatics find it hard to live with anybody **else**.

We stood in **awe** of the Swiss. But we saw what creating 'a church without spot or wrinkle' was doing to them. There was less and **less grace** in their lives. It was clear to me that the Swiss leaders were the 'bad cops' and I was the 'good cop'. When I saw them making more rules I'd retort, 'Isn't love the end of the law?' When I saw how burdened the saints were becoming I'd quote from my favorite chapter of the Bible, Romans 8. 'God's Spirit witnesses with our spirit that we are children of God and if children then heirs, with Christ.' But they always had the same comeback: 'Have you forgotten how that verse ends?' they would ask. It says, '**If, in fact, we suffer with him**'.

During our twelve years among the Swiss I preached regularly but my loyalty remained elsewhere, with the first clusters of Anabaptists we had known in Moravia and around Strasbourg. I wrote them pastoral letters and visited them as I was able to do so. Anna and I considered settling in Moravia, where there were 8 congregations that shared our spirit. But we **couldn't do it**. I realized that what gave me the necessary security to hold illegal convictions **was a job that gave me legal status**. Once I had stability and status I could turn my talents to working with our congregations in negotiating a way

of life we could live over the long haul. I **simply couldn't do that** if I had to dread **every knock** on the door.

The position of forestry engineer opened up in Augsburg, a city in southern Germany. Much more ruthlessly than Strasbourg, Augsburg had crushed dissent. One of my fellow-leaders in Switzerland, Joerg Maler, was an Augsburger. He reported that gatherings of more than ten people were **forbidden**. We were troubled but in the end Anna and I reasoned to ourselves that we could be of much more service to our fellow-believers from a place **within** the civic order than **in exile** from it. So I applied. I **got the job** in and in 1544 we moved to Augsburg!

The work of designing water sluices to float logs from the hinterland to the city fascinated me. I had become good at knowing when to speak and when to be silent. I saw my position as a golden opportunity to love my neighbor – and even my enemy – as myself. And wasn't it much better for the leader of the Anabaptist congregation to be someone **known** and valued by the city council? Yet my logic was soon **shaken** by conditions in the city. The ban on more than 10 people in a public place was ruthlessly enforced. In order not to provoke the authorities a few of us would gather in one house on the Lord's Day while others met in different locations.

I found myself **questioning the very convictions** for which I had once been willing to become a refugee. I couldn't



resist wondering if our adamant conviction about believer's baptism had become more of a hindrance than a help. Others shared my doubt. **Why be** deliberately provocative? Why insist on baptizing believers when it's against the law? Isn't the heart of the matter the **inner** life with Christ? But when I thought of the implications of tailoring my faith to what popular prejudice and the law allow I **shuddered** and suddenly found myself back on the side of the Swiss - 'You're either a Christian or you aren't'.

Then I'd remember the suffering other members of the congregation had recently endured. A washer woman with three small children had been fired the moment someone had stung her with the label 'heretic'. Our deaconess had been jailed when she pressed the story of her conversion onto her children's school teacher, in my view, indiscreetly.

At the same time that all these confusing thoughts troubled me I was caught up in a **furious correspondence** with my spiritualistic nemesis, Caspar Schwenckfeld. We were carrying forward an argument I had entered more than a decade earlier. It was a defense of the Incarnation as the heart of the good news: God comes down to our level; he makes use of outward forms to lead us to inward realities. At first I felt like a **split** personality – and on bad days like a walking **contradiction**. On the one hand, I was spilling vast amounts of ink arguing that spiritualized religion misses the whole point that God is in solidarity with his creatures. On the other hand, I was advising

our deaconess to keep her **mouth shut** the next time she met the school teacher. It was easier to pray about these matters when I remembered that Christ shared our flesh and blood and sympathized with our struggles.q

Slowly my attempts to make sense out my divided self yielded insight. Wasn't part of the good news for our little flock in Augsburg that God was to be found in the mismatched pieces of our ordinary lives? The starting point for discipleship was not some purified spiritual state but the utterly practical question of **growing in selflessness without** despising the limits that determine where we start on that quest. For me, that limit was my absolute need for **job security**. This insight became a great source of strength to me as our fragile Augsburg congregation and those covenanted with us struggled to be signs of God's nearness to us and to the world around them. **God didn't hold it against us** that we were creatures of flesh and blood. Becoming a Christian wasn't the miraculous transcendence of everything that makes us who we are but a lifetime's growth in grace. With these realizations I had finally found my place between the severity of the Swiss and the individualism of the Spiritualists.

**That's my life, friends.** A pretty **modest** tale, if I may say so. My work for the city continued to give me the security I craved. One of my younger colleagues, Joerg Maler, an even more restless spirit than myself, started making copies of pastoral letters I had written. The congregations in our covenant

began sending him letters from other elders. It was a Marpeck circle library in the making.

As I look back on my life I know that I was no Francis of Assisi, not someone with the **raw courage** to throw away his **security**, to confront bishops and popes. I've been an **ordinary** Christian consoling other creatures of flesh and blood with the news that Christ is in our midst. It's **not only** prophets and protesters who please God.