**A Living Stream: 500 Years of Anabaptist Faith – Forged in Fire, Scattered by Faith, Lived in Love, Done Right the First Time, Seen in Simplicity, Embracing All, Remembering the Cost, Offering Refuge**

***Scripture Reading:*** *Matthew 5:10-12 (Blessed are those persecuted); Matthew 5:13-16 (Salt and Light); Romans 12:2 (Transformed by the Renewing of Your Mind); John 13:34-35 (Love One Another); Galatians 3:28 (No Jew nor Gentile, slave nor free, male nor female)*

"A tree is judged by its fruit." This ancient wisdom echoes as we gather to reflect on the 500-year-old Anabaptist movement. For five centuries, its roots, anchored in conviction, have weathered storms of persecution, nourishing generations of believers everywhere in the world.

Today, I contemplate the threads that connect my personal journey to a larger story. There is the "Tree" of Anabaptism, its foundations laid five centuries ago. From this historical lineage grew a specific "fruit": TUMC - the church community that welcomed me in 1989. My own experience is as one who has tasted this fruit, drawing nourishment and insight from its unique character, while remaining mindful of the enduring source that sustains it.

Before then, I was an outsider, unfamiliar with Anabaptism. Here, I embraced this way, becoming part of its story. Many in this congregation trace their heritage to its very beginnings. Yet, my recent grafting onto this branch compels me to testify to the life-giving nature of this tree and its fruit.

This testament weaves together the tree's 500-year history, the fruit - this church’s -75 years history - that I know intimately, and my journey from observer to participant. We'll explore the connection between roots, branches, and fruit.

As we look back, we also look forward, asking ourselves: What does this rich history call us to be, right here, right now, on this land we acknowledge as the traditional territory of Indigenous peoples?

Five centuries ago, in a world reeling from religious upheaval and political unrest, a small group of earnest believers in Zurich dared to ask a simple, yet revolutionary question: "What if we took Jesus' teachings literally, not just as good advice, but as a blueprint for life, for community, for the very nature of the Church?"

They looked at the prevailing religious and societal structures and saw much that was incongruent with the radical love and humble service exemplified by Christ. They saw infant baptism, a practice intended to confer membership, but perhaps obscuring the need for personal conviction. They saw a Church intertwined with state power, often leading to coercion and violence, rather than voluntary discipleship. They saw a world where "Christian" was a birthright, not a conscious choice.

And so, they made a choice. They chose to be baptized as adults, not to deny the grace of God, but to affirm a conscious, personal commitment to follow Jesus. This act, seemingly small, was a seismic shift. It declared that faith was a matter of the heart, a personal surrender, a deliberate walk with Christ – not a societal obligation. This choice, and the many convictions that flowed from it, would lead them down a path of persecution, suffering, and often, martyrdom. They were called "Anabaptists," meaning "re-baptizers," a derogatory term at the time, but one that today we embrace as a badge of honor for their conviction.

Their core beliefs were simple, yet profoundly challenging to the established order:

* **Believer's Baptism:** A faith born of personal conviction and commitment.
* **The Priesthood of All Believers:** That every follower of Christ has direct access to God and is called to ministry.
* **Voluntary Church Membership:** A community formed not by birth or geography, but by shared faith and covenant.
* **Discipleship as a Way of Life:** Following Jesus in every aspect of life, not just on Sundays.
* **Non-conformity to the World:** A refusal to be shaped by the values of society when those values contradict Christ’s teachings.
* **Non-violence and Peacemaking:** A radical commitment to love enemies and refuse participation in warfare.
* **Mutual Aid and Community:** Sharing resources and caring for one another as a practical expression of love.

And so, the persecution began. The early Anabaptist story is tragically interwoven with the brutal reality of the rack, the sword, the stake, and the drowning pool. **Thousands of men and women, young and old, faced unimaginable cruelty and martyrdom** for simply seeking to follow Christ according to their conscience. In 1569, Dirk Willems' story froze two realities into history: the literal ice that broke under his pursuer and the unbreakable command to love enemies (Matthew 5:44). While empires merged cross and sword, Anabaptists believed the Kingdom comes by suffering love. **Across Europe, countless others met similar fates, their lives extinguished through horrific torture and execution**, all because they dared to live out their faith in a way that challenged the established religious and political order. We remember their sacrifice, not just as names in history, but as a testament to the enduring power of conviction.

The suffering and courage of the Anabaptists in the face of such brutality resonate with a profound and painful echo within me. As a young boy of seven, I witnessed a horrific act of intimidation – young people, silenced forever, left hanging in a gibbet as a grim spectacle near my home. That image, and the brutality that followed into my adult years, remains a deep wound. And when I think of the Mennonite communities in Ukraine during the Bolshevik and Stalinist eras, the horror intensifies. The Holodomor, a deliberate starvation, specifically targeted their thriving farms, turning their breadbasket into a graveyard. This act of genocide, coupled with the terror of arrests and executions, decimated their communities, leaving scars that generations would carry. The sight of those lifeless bodies swinging in my childhood street seared itself into my memory, just as the terror of the Holodomor and the purges became a collective trauma for the Mennonite people, forcing them to seek refuge, forever marked by that horrific era.

Consider Eritrea today. A place where religious liberty is not a right, but a privilege granted to only four faiths: Coptic Orthodox, Catholic, Evangelical Lutheran, and Sunni Islam. Dare to believe differently, especially if that belief leads to rebaptism, a sign of deeper faith, or if it compels you to reject violence and weaponry, and you could face the ultimate price. Hunted, killed, or locked away for life in the hottest place on earth called Era Ero. So many have been driven from their homes, desperate for safety. Those who remain, unyielding in their faith, vanish into prison for years, for decades. When I read the stories of the Anabaptist visionaries, those brave hearts who were butchered for their faith, for living according to their conscience and choosing the way of peace, it’s not just a story from the past – it’s a mirror reflecting the pain of our present. I feel a profound and sorrowful connection.

As the grip of persecution tightened around those early believers, a brutal choice was forced upon them: deny their deepest convictions or be torn from everything they knew. Homes, lands, communities – all were lost as they were scattered, becoming refugees in a desperate search for a place to simply live out their faith in peace. This forced uprooting, born of bitter intolerance, flung the seeds of the Anabaptist movement across Europe – to the Netherlands, Moravia, Russia, and eventually across vast oceans to the Americas. What began as a small flame in Switzerland was tragically scattered, yet in that scattering, a global tapestry began to weave itself, thread by thread of displacement and incredible resilience. Though born of immense hardship, this very dispersal became an unexpected way their message spread, deepening their resolve to live as a distinct people, pilgrims on this earth, their true home elsewhere. And now, the fruits of that painful scattering are a vibrant reality in places like Ethiopia, India, Congo, Indonesia, Tanzania, Bolivia, Zimbabwe, Kenya, Uganda, Angola, Nigeria, Zambia, Colombia, Brazil, Korea, Canada, the USA, Mexico, the Netherlands, Paraguay, Brazil, Germany, and so many other corners of our world.

Their lives were a testament to their belief that the Kingdom of God was a present reality to be lived out, here and now, even if it meant paying the ultimate price and leaving everything behind. And it's remarkable to note that even their detractors recognized the integrity of their lives. A Roman Catholic theologian of the time, Franz Agricola, in his book of 1582, *Against the Terrible Errors of the Anabaptists* wrote: **“Among the existing heretical sects there is none which in appearance leads a more modest or pious life than the Anabaptists. As concerns their outward public life they are irreproachable. No lying, deception, swearing, strife, harsh language, no intemperate eating and drinking, no outward personal display, is found among them, but humility, patience uprightness, neatness, honesty, temperance, straightforwardness in such a measure that one would suppose that they had the Holy Spirit Of God.”**

**And this brings me to my own story, and my own encounter with this living stream of faith.**

I was born and grew up in Eritrea, a nominal Coptic Christian, following the traditions of my family and culture. To be honest, I never knew what an "Anabaptist" was. It wasn't until I came here, and began attending this church in 1989, that I truly encountered what this 500-year legacy looks like in practice.

From the very beginning, even in the **land acknowledgment** that opens our services - recognition of the history and the Indigenous peoples on whose territory we gather – I sensed a deep awareness of place and a commitment to truth and reconciliation. My own religious upbringing, while familiar, carried distinctions based on gender that I later came to see differently. As a boy, I was received at birth with seven ululations, circumcised on the eighth day, and baptized on my fortieth day. My beloved wife, Ghenet, on the other hand, was received at birth with three ululations and baptized much later, on her eightieth day – these differences in ritual and timing were simply because she was a girl.

When I first encountered this church, it wasn't the grandeur of a building that drew me in. No towering steeple, no booming bells – just a simple, unassuming house. But stepping inside, I found something far more profound. The people I met radiated a beautiful simplicity – in their words, their humble attire, their honest presence. And within these walls, there were no distractions, no ornate displays vying for attention. Like the early Anabaptists understood, true faith isn't about the noise; it's about the nourishment. It reminds me of that old Jewish parable that goes like this: **T**he fruit trees, bearing their gifts, don't need to clamor for attention like the forest trees by constantly rustling their leaves. Their fruit speaks for itself. And that's what I found here – not grand pronouncements, but the quiet fruit of shared meals called potluck, reconciled relationships, and lives being mended. What struck me too was the genuine equality. Anyone could approach the front (Altar), young or old, woman or child. There were no hierarchies, no special seats and everyone is called by their first name including the pastor– just a simple gathering of equals before God. And it was clear from the start this was a circle wide enough for everyone thus all-inclusive, reflecting the boundless love of Christ. What was wonderfully absent was the clamor of ego, the need to be heard above others. Judgment seemed to melt away, replaced by a deep humility and mutual respect. And the singing! Oh, the hymns were a sermon in themselves, so full of heart and unity, drawing you closer to God with every note. Though I came with an untrained voice, stumbling through the melodies, I was met only with grace and patience. Slowly, I began to join in, embraced by their acceptance. Then there was the quiet wonder of children's story time, where all ages became children again. And the coffee communion at the end – a strange practice at first, but one that beautifully wove together the fellowship of this family. What I thought would be a fleeting visit has become 36 years of blessed life here at TUMC. Even if I am the only one this church has saved, my life transformed by its grace, it stands as a testament to the precious sacrifices of those early Anabaptists. Their original fire, their commitment to living out Christ's love in real, tangible ways, still burns brightly here, even in a lost soul like me who found a home. And this refuge extends its arms to so many others. This is a living monument to the sacrifice of those early Anabaptist refugees.

My time in auto manufacturing taught me a crucial lesson: prioritizing production over quality leads to significant waste and ultimately frustrated customers. There was even money, labor, space and time allotted to rework new cars aka, the purgatory. The Anabaptists saw a similar issue in the church, where tradition and power sometimes overshadowed genuine faith – a spiritual "defect." While the Reformation was an improvement, the Anabaptists felt it didn't go far enough, still tolerating a level of spiritual compromise. The Anabaptist radical vision was to "do it right the first time," like Pascal's indivisible simplicity, demanding a complete and uncompromising adherence to Jesus' teachings from the outset. This commitment to zero spiritual error challenges us even now.

Unable to tolerate consumers' frustration, the auto industry once prioritized quantity over quality, created a new standard called three sigma that accepted 2.5 defective parts per 100 and this is translated into 20,000 defects per million parts. Similarly, the pre-Reformation church often elevated tradition over true faith, marginalizing Jesus. While the Reformation corrected errors, it still permitted compromise, akin to the industrial "Three Sigma" standard. The Anabaptists rejected this. They demanded **zero** spiritual defects—no half-measures, no concessions. Their mission? **"Follow Christ fully—the first time, every time."** No shortcuts, no deviations. Just radical obedience.

That’s their challenge to us: **Will we settle for manageable flaws, or insist on faithfulness—without exception?**

Five hundred years later, the world has changed dramatically. Yet, the core challenges remain.

So, on this momentous anniversary, what does this 500-year legacy of Anabaptist faith, mean for us, today?

**First**, the Anabaptist story highlights that faith is a conscious choice demanding courage and sacrifice. We must ask if we are true disciples, following Christ daily even when difficult, or merely cultural Christians. Their suffering, echoed in my own, shows true discipleship has a cost but brings deep peace and belonging in welcoming communities.

**Second**, it challenges us to actively embrace radical peace and non-violence in a fractured world, even when facing aggression or displacement. Their peacemaking witness, even to death, is vital. We must embody reconciliation in our lives, remembering peace is a courageous commitment, creating havens for all.

**Third**, it urges us to live our faith communally with loyalty to Christ and mutual support. The early Anabaptists shared their journey in loving, accountable communities, especially during hardship. We must practice mutual aid, care for the marginalized, and build genuine belonging, reflecting their commitment to an inclusive church.

**Finally**, the Anabaptist story testifies to the enduring power of conviction amidst adversity and displacement. Their willingness to stand apart, suffer, and leave everything for their beliefs should inspire us to examine our own convictions. Are we willing to be salt and light, even when it's difficult, challenging, or costly? Their aim was to build a faith and community truly reflecting Christ, a vision alive in our gatherings, offering refuge to all.

The Anabaptists weren’t perfect—no movement is. But their radical devotion to the Gospel wasn’t merely about belief; it was about **living faith**, a discipleship forged in suffering, love, and community. They sought a faith without compromise—no "anomaly," no pretense—just Christ-centered lives, even in the humblest places.

Five centuries later, their legacy isn’t just history—it’s a **challenge**. Will we embrace their courage? Their love? Their refusal to settle for a comfortable, half-lived faith? May we, like those who welcomed me into this sacred fellowship—this refuge for the weary—become true salt and light: bold, compassionate, and unwavering, for God’s glory and His Kingdom’s rise.

And to the women in this blessed congregation, I want to say this with heartfelt gratitude: you are the very glue that holds us together. Without your selfless service and countless sacrifices, what might have been a house built on sand is instead a house built on rock. With few words, I will say to you: you are **Marthas and Marys** combined in one.

**May we, like those who came before us, and like those who welcomed me into this simple yet profound and inclusive fellowship – a true refuge for my soul – truly be the salt of the earth and the light of the world, for the glory of God and the flourishing of His Kingdom.**

Amen.

**Closing benediction”**

**As we leave today, let’s remember: Our calling isn’t to make the most noise, but to bear the most fruit.The forest trees once asked the fruit trees: “why is the rustling of your leaves not heard in the distance?” The fruit trees replied: “we can dispense with the rustling to manifest our presence; our fruits testify for us.” The fruit trees then inquired of the forest trees: “why do your leaves rustle almost continually?” We are forced to call the attention of man to our existence.”The martyrs didn’t rustle—they rooted. They didn’t demand attention—they offered apples of gold. So go. Live so quietly faithful that when people taste your love, they don’t say, ‘What a good Mennonite,’ but ‘What a good God.’"**