

Jesus is the Center of our Faith
1 Corinthians 3:11 and Hebrews 12:1-2
Sermon by Dan Schrock
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For no one can lay any foundation other than the one that has been laid; that foundation is Jesus Christ. (1 Cor. 3:11, NRSV)

Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who for the sake of the joy that was set before him endured the cross, disregarding its shame, and has taken his seat at the right hand of the throne of God. (Heb. 12:1-2, NRSV)

Today Marilyn and I begin a series of sermons on the three central characteristics of Anabaptist Mennonites. About seven years ago Palmer Becker wrote a booklet published by Mennonite Mission Network that tries to describe what an Anabaptist Mennonite is. His description isn't the only way to characterize our tradition of faith, but for our purposes it's a durable way. Palmer says our tradition has three core beliefs:

1. Jesus is the center of our faith.
2. Community is the center of our lives.
3. Reconciliation is the center of our work.

Another way of saying these is that we *believe* in Jesus; we *belong* to a community; and we *behave* in a reconciling way. Each Sunday, we'll take one of these, with today's focus being "Jesus is the center of our faith."

We live in an era when many congregations are leaving the Mennonite Church USA. In a new wrinkle, two conferences—the North Central Conference, a tiny conference of only ten churches, and the Lancaster Conference, the largest conference—just recently announced their wish to leave the Mennonite Church USA. I'm guessing that our congregation has zero interest in leaving our

denomination, and I know that your pastors have zero interest in doing so. Therefore it seems like a really good time to ask what core convictions hold our congregation and our denomination together.

When we Anabaptist-Mennonites say that Jesus is the center of our lives, we articulate a hope, a dream. We don't claim we are fully living this dream. We know only too well that sometimes things other than Jesus occupy the center of our lives. For some of us, the need to be right could be at the center of our life. For some it might be making lots of money. For others the real center of living might be food—shopping for it, cooking it, eating it, and dreaming about it. Even redeemed human beings like us have endless ways of usurping Jesus and putting something else at the center. Lord, forgive us and help us.

To help us see places where we can put Jesus at the center of our lives, I'd like to introduce you to a chart which I've put on PowerPoint. So let's dim the lights and get it on the screens.¹

Chart Overview

This chart offers a schematic way of thinking about some of the key aspects of our lives. You'll notice the lines are dotted to signify that we are whole persons and that we can't make rigid, hard and fast distinctions among the various aspects of our lives. We'll go through this step by step.

Jesus

We want to have Jesus in the heart of everything about us. To say it another way, Jesus offers a central point around which everything else pivots.

¹ I've adapted this chart from from Elizabeth Liebert, "Supervision as Widening the Horizons," in *Supervision of Spiritual Directors: Engaging in Holy Mystery*, edited by Mary Rose Bumpus and Rebecca Bradburn Langer (Harrisburg: Morehouse, 2005), 131.

Sometimes your awareness of Jesus at the center might be conscious and overt in the sense that Jesus is clearly fixed in your mind, as Hebrews 12:1-2 suggests. At other times you might be semi-conscious of him at your core; perhaps you are only partially aware of him. And at still other times you could be totally unconscious of Jesus at the core. But just because you're not aware of him doesn't have to mean he's not there. If you're a person who has lived with Jesus for many years, he could be so integrated into your personhood that he influences you even when you don't feel it or see it.

Feelings and Images

The concentric rings around Jesus represent our dimensions or levels of awareness. The first ring has feelings and images. Feelings and images come from deep within us. In this part of us are intuitions, metaphors, fantasies, and dreams. The creative arts often operate at this level of our awareness, such as music, visual arts, dance, mime, poetry, and so forth.

How is Jesus at the heart of your emotions?

How is he the center of the images that pass through your mind?

Intentions and Ideas

The next ring represents our intentions and ideas. This is the part of us that describes, reflects, and evaluates. Here we work with concepts, ideas, logic, definitions, and analysis. College and graduate students are trained to operate proficiently at this layer of awareness. In the life of the church, this is largely the home of biblical studies and theology.

Some people suppose this part of us is more important than any other part, but I want you to notice that this chart suggests otherwise. Thinking is only one piece of our makeup, and therefore only one place of many places in our lives

where Jesus can be central. To put it bluntly, even if you believe only in your thoughts that Jesus is central, that's not good enough. If Jesus is going to be truly central in your life, then he needs to be central in every part of you, not just your intentions and ideas.

Still, we want to ask: how is Jesus at the foundation of your ideas and intentions?

Actions

The third level of awareness lies in our actions. As we move in the world throughout the day, we want our actions to flow from Jesus.

When and where does Jesus express himself through your actions?

1st Quadrant: Inside Us

So much for the rings of awareness. We shift now to look at the four quadrants around the circle. These quadrants represent arenas of human experience. The first one is what goes on inside each of us—our inner life. This is the intrapersonal arena. It's how we experience our own self in distinction from other people.

In the private part of yourself, how does Jesus hold and shape your center?

2nd Quadrant: Our Relationships with Others

The second quadrant has to do with our relationships to other people, especially in face-to-face relationships.

In what ways do you let Jesus guide the way you are with other people?

3rd Quadrant: Our Relationships with Systems and Structures

This third quadrant focuses on your role in larger entities such as your workplace or school; your neighborhood association; your local, state, or federal governments; your congregation; and so on.

As you move in these larger systems and structures, how are you allowing Jesus to be at the heart of it?

4th Quadrant: Our Relationships with Creation

This final quadrant addresses your experiences with God's creation. Our lives depend on the health of our planet's soil, air, and water, as well as the health of plants and animals. The nature of our relationships with creation profoundly affects our own quality of life, plus the quality of life that future generations will have.

So in what ways does Jesus drive your own relationship with nature?

Some decades ago, David Augsburger said that we Anabaptist Mennonites have a dream. Even though this dream is not yet a reality, we nevertheless pursue it with vigor and persistence.² We dream that it is:

- Reasonable to follow Jesus Christ daily, radically, totally in life.
- Practical to obey the Sermon on the Mount, and the whole New Testament, literally, honestly, sacrificially.
- Thinkable to practice the way of reconciling love in human conflicts and warfare, non-defensively and non-resistantly.
- Possible to confess Jesus as Lord above all nationalism, racism, or materialism.

² Augsburger first articulated this dream in a radio broadcast on *The Mennonite Hour* in 1970.

- Feasible to build a church which is voluntary, disciplined, and mutually committed to each other in Christ.
- Conceivable to live simply, following the Jesus-way in lifestyle, in possessions, and in service.

Let this continue to be our dream.