What I Learned at the Milvian Bridge

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On the bus ride to school, I took in the sights of small-town Wilmore in rural Kentucky: my neighbor's Volkswagen truck, limestone fences, the post office, the bike trail, and a tall white water tower topped by a large illuminated cross. I never gave the cross on the water tower a second thought. Not until I visited the Milvian Bridge in Rome on a family trip. My father planned this trip tracing our family's Anabaptist heritage. Arcing the Tiber River, the Milvian Bridge is a Karamagara-style bridge with a militaristic tower bearing Italian flags on each side. Walking on the stone blocks of the old bridge, my dad, a history teacher, described its significance.

This is where Constantine, inspired by a vision of the cross with the phrase "In this sign you will conquer," defeated the larger army of Maxentius. Constantine's victory at the Milvian Bridge gave him full control of Western Rome, which had long-term effects. It combined the Christian church and the all-powerful state, making Christianity the state religion. Constantine then used military force to expand the Church. As I stood on the Milvian Bridge, I reacted negatively to the story. Constantine's approach seemed to go against my Anabaptist beliefs that Christians should be inviting, humble, and peace seeking.

It also made me think about the cross on the water tower in my hometown. While it doesn't actively persecute non-Christians, the cross in that public place makes it hard for people who hold different religious views to thrive in Wilmore. This seems to take away from the idea that being Christian is an intentional choice. Because the government appears to be endorsing a particular religion, it feels more like coercion than invitation.

Unlike the Christians under Constantine, the early Anabaptists appeared to practice their religion humbly. I saw this on our next stop, the Anabaptist Cave in rural Switzerland, where my ancestors hid from their Roman Catholic and Protestant persecutors. I walked down the uneven path toward the cave, noticing how small and inconspicuous it looked. I imagined my ancestors

sitting on makeshift benches singing hymns. The ceiling hung low and rough, and I felt connected to the earth, as well as to the people in the cave with me. These early Anabaptists made the hard choice to give up everything to follow God in the way they felt called. I could tell how this distinct value has shaped Anabaptism.

Our family also visited Trachselwald Castle in Switzerland, where Anabaptists were tortured. I saw balls and chains, thumbscrews, and stretching devices. What impressed me is that while Anabaptists were hunted like animals in the hills of Switzerland, they sought to maintain peaceful ways towards their persecutors. For example, Dirk Willems, who is on the cover of *Martyrs Mirror*, ran back over the ice to rescue his persecutor from drowning and was later burned at the stake. These ways of peace contrast with Constantine's violent methods to spread Christianity.

My vision is that the Anabaptist values of invitation, humility, and peace will shape the future church in new ways and consequently influence broader society. One problem with the early Anabaptists was that, while they were humble in their trust in God, they were often not humble toward people who disagreed with them. Even Martin Luther often referred to them as spiritual know-it-alls. Many things have changed from the times of both Constantine and early Anabaptists to now. Now, society is highly polarized and political. There's lots of conflict, and not many people are willing to listen. This leads to avoidable wars that leave countless people dead and hurting. If leaders were humble and willing to listen to the opposing side more often, they could stop a lot of pain and death. This polarization has seeped into our churches, and many, especially young people, no longer identify with Christianity due to this toxic culture.

We need to be humble enough to work with and for people that we disagree with. Even though we believe that soldiers are wrong to kill other people in war, we can't let that stop us from helping veterans through trauma and providing them with the best life possible. This humility would attract people from both sides to the faith and in turn grow the church.

Anabaptists have also been invitational in a religious sense, but not in a cultural sense. For example, in my Anabaptist tradition, which is Mennonite, if someone wants to become part of the Mennonite Church they would be welcome to the church, but it would be hard for them to fit into the dominant Mennonite culture. This is because they would be unfamiliar with the unique traditions like quilting and baking that have been part of the Swiss-German American Mennonite culture for a long time. As we look to the future, we should seek ways to celebrate people of different cultures--and be willing to change our own if it means more people can thrive in the Anabaptist community.

My ancestors were driven from Switzerland to Germany to the Netherlands, and finally migrated to North America. They did a good job of being peaceful to their oppressors. Now the roles are flipped, and we find ourselves in the opposite position. We are now an established church, not a persecuted one. Instead of seeking shelter in a new land, we must provide shelter to immigrants. Peace is more than not hitting someone. It includes extending a hand and smoothing the way for others.

Following these Anabaptist values is hard. For example, it took time for me to become humble enough to recognize that the people who put the cross on the water tower had good intentions. And it’s hard for me to be invitational and peaceful to people who disagree with me. Even so, I want to do what my Anabaptist ancestors did--try to stick with these values and do it in a gracious way.