

GROWING Together

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LOVE IS A CHOICE



From *Martyrs Mirror* by Thieleman J. van Braght. Published by Herald Press, Scottsdale PA 15683. Used by permission.

A foundational story in the Anabaptist tradition - the Christian communion that includes Baptists, Mennonites, Amish and Hutterites - is that of Dirk Willems pictured above.

In 1569 in Asperen, Holland, Anabaptists were being martyred for their faith. Willems was accused of being re-baptized and permitting others to be re-baptized in his home. As such he stood accused of harbouring beliefs

contrary to the doctrines of the faith as well as the decrees of the government. As a result he was condemned to death. The authorities ordered his capture.

Pursued by a bounty hunter Willems fled across a small, partially frozen lake where his pursuer fell through the thin ice. Upon seeing the man at risk of drowning, he stopped, turned back and helping him out of the water, saved his life. Under orders from his superior the bounty hunter was obligated to take his rescuer into custody. Willems was imprisoned, tried and later burned at the stake as a heretic.

Jesus' command, "love your enemies and do good to those who hate you" literally meant to Willems that he act with compassion to save the life of the very person who was threatening his own. Such action was also consistent with the Anabaptist understanding of non-violent resistance to aggression: one must be prepared to die but not to kill.

Willems' saving act might make more sense to us if it had guaranteed his survival. However this act of mercy cost his life. We recoil from such an outcome yet regard his compassion as a testimony to faith.

As violence escalates in our world many risk their lives in war. We might consider what it means to risk our lives for peace. Hearing the stories of those who have given their lives in nonviolent opposition to coercive power may offer other and more imaginative ways of finding paths to peace.

Just as Jesus meets violence with the capacity to love his executioners, we take note that self-sacrifice may be the only way to end some conflicts. However, loving an enemy does not assume that one is necessarily "passive" in a violent situation. There are times when we have the grace and the courage to think on our feet and respond with actions that diffuse a difficult situation.

Taking a stand against violence is a choice. Sometimes it involves self-sacrifice. There is no simple formula for speaking truth to power or loving an enemy in a life and death encounter. With hope for making peace we look to others around us for inspiration and new ways to respond in troubled times.

GROWING TOGETHER is a series of five Sunday bulletin inserts for the ecumenical education of Christ's faithful.

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