

Meet Dirk Willems

A sermon preached at
Lendrum Mennonite Brethren Church
by Carol Penner
August 30, 2015
Texts: Luke 6:27-36, Acts 6:8-15; 7:1-3, 51-60



Today's service will be themed around this picture. It's a copy of an engraving by Jan Luiden, depicting an event from the life of an early Anabaptist, Dirk Willems. It is from the seventeenth century book The Martyr's Mirror by T. J. van Braght, which is a compilation of stories about martyred Christians.

Today's "sermon" is divided into three sections; a tableaux telling the story, a reflection on the meaning of the picture, and a story-poem by Carol Penner, "The Confession of Dirk Willems".

Tableaux

A tableaux is a story told with illustrations; the illustrations are people holding poses which illustrate the story. Volunteers were called up to take these roles: Dirk Willems, his wife, two children, a baptizer, two prison guards and a burgomeister.

1. The wife is kneeling, being baptized, while Dirk and the children watch prayerfully. The year is 1569. Here we are in the little town of Asperen in Holland at the home of Dirk Willems. For forty years, reformers in the church, called Anabaptists, have been rejecting infant baptism, calling for a believer's church filled with people who make a voluntary commitment to Christ as adults. A church where people show their commitment to following Jesus by the way they live. The reforms of these Anabaptists have been declared heretical by the Catholic Church and other streams of the Reform movement led by Martin Luther and John Calvin. These rebaptizers are being tracked down and arrested and put to death. The Anabaptists meet secretly in many parts of Switzerland, Germany and Holland.

Dirk Willems heard some Anabaptists preaching, and he felt called to commit his life to God in a new way after hearing them. He was recently rebaptized on a trip to the nearby city of Rotterdam. He came home, and he shared the good news with his friends and neighbours. Anabaptists cannot meet openly, and so here some Anabaptists are gathering secretly in his home for a worship service. Someone is getting rebaptized. This is a dangerous thing to do...if they are caught they will all be arrested.

2. Dirk Willems in prison he is looking sad in prison. Prison guards stand outside. Family outside worried about him.
Dirk was arrested for having a church service in his house, and for allowing baptisms to happen there. His family is outside, they are worried about him. Dirk knows that he will likely be tortured as the prosecutors try to make him give up his beliefs. He spends a lot of time in prayer. His family and friends don't know if he will make it out of prison alive.
3. Dirk running over the ice, guard starting to run, prison warden pointing and talking to other guard.
One afternoon, Dirk was able to take some rags and make a rope and he has escaped out of the window of the prison. It is winter, and he sees that the nearby river is covered in ice. It's treacherous on the ice, but Dirk sees it as his road to safety. Here we see him running across the frozen river. But two of the guards noticed right away that he had escaped. Only one of them has the courage to chase Dirk over the frozen river. The Burgomeister...the magistrate of the town....watches from the shore.
4. Guard falling through ice, Dirk turning and looking over his shoulder; prison warden reacting.
Dirk made it across the ice without falling in, but he turned and saw that the guard pursuing him had fallen into the icy water. He might drown in the icy water if no one helped him. Everyone else is scared to go out on the ice. What will Dirk do?

5. Dirk helping the man in the water, the Burgomeister and other guard reacting.
Dirk decides to turn around and help the man in the water. He risked his life doing this, because it might happen that they would both fall in the icy water and drown.
6. Prison warden calling and pointing, prison guard arresting Dirk whose head is bowed.
After he had saved the life of his prison guard, the prison warden yelled at the prison guard to "Do his duty", he was supposed to arrest Dirk. This he did very reluctantly.
7. Dirk back in prison, his family outside the prison.
Dirk was taken back to prison. He was kept in a more secure prison this time, and sentenced to death by burning. This sentence was carried out a few months later. The story of Dirk Willems is recorded in the book, *The Martyr's Mirror*, and remembered always by this engraving by Jan Luiken. The story in this book tells us that Dirk suffered terribly when he died because there was a strong wind that was blowing the flames. Dirk kept calling out, "O my Lord, my God". The Burgomeister ordered that Dirk be killed to reduce his suffering. This happened on May 16, 1569.

Reflection on the Picture

We look to Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of our faith as our role model. Jesus loved his enemies, he loved even those who wanted to kill him. The fact that Jesus was the Son of God might lead some of us to think, "We can't be that holy, we can't be that good!" Perhaps that is why the stories of people like the stoning of Stephen from the book of Acts have always been a powerful inspiration to the Christian church. Stephen was an ordinary person. Yet he was capable of doing extraordinary things. Like Jesus, he could forgive the people who were killing him. Some parts of the Christian church have a tradition of remembering people who have died for their faith. They call them saints; holy people whose lives inspire our own faith.

Mennonites don't officially have saints but I think that you could argue that some of the people in the Martyr's Mirror come close. The illustrator of the Martyr's Mirror, Jan Luiken, with the power of his art of engraving, catches something essential about their faith, something that still resonates all these years later. The pictures have provided inspiration to generations of Christians to be faithful under pressure and to love our enemies.

I don't remember the first time I saw this picture of Dirk Willems, probably somewhere in my Sunday school or teenage years at church. Dirk Willems turning from freedom to save the life of his pursuer, gives us an example of loving your enemy like Jesus did. In other words, loving your enemy even when the cost is high. Even when the cost is your life.

I think that the story of Dirk Willems is so powerful because he is an average person, a working person, a person with a family and a house, making an extraordinary decision in a moment of crisis to love his enemy. Following Jesus in life and in death.

Have you shown great love to an enemy, to someone who is trying to hurt you? I don't know if everyone is given that opportunity. I can't say that I have. I'm not sure that I could. Some of you know that I donated a kidney anonymously three years ago. That's a long story, but one of the things that I thought about was that I knew nothing about the person who was getting my kidney. What if I found that the person who was going to get my kidney was a very mean person, who no one liked? What if they were a murderer? Would I still give them my kidney?

I've heard the stories of a lot of people who donate kidneys, and I have yet to come across anyone donating a kidney to someone they don't like. Usually it's to someone they love, they don't want them to suffer or die, so they give them a kidney.

I have never found out who got my kidney; maybe it's best that way, because I don't know how I would have felt if I found out something terrible about the person with my kidney.

We like to help people, we like to help people who want help, and who appreciate when we help them.

And even then it's hard. When the sacrifice that is needed is difficult and painful, even when we love someone, it's hard to give.

As Christians we model our lives on Jesus. That means it's part of our identity to be loving and giving. We achieve this identity inch by inch by practicing. We will ourselves to be kind, practicing again and again to be kind, in every small way we can. Like practicing scales on the piano, it might seem unrelated to playing a concerto, but it's all about nimbleness in our bodies, a practically unconscious way of living that we hardly have to think about. Being with people, being in a community, a church, where sacrificial kindness is modelled and expected, is an important part of working on that identity. We practice scales together. Some of us are in the key of C...some of us are practicing very complicated scales. But we're all practicing to be kind.

Identity takes work and practice, we are called to practice. But ultimately, I think this identity is beyond achievement and is more about a gift. We are gifted by God with love; we receive love and it spills out over us onto others.

Not all of us face a challenge where we are called to love our enemy. I invite you today over lunch to reflect on whether you have faced an experience where you were tested in this way. What did you do, or what did you not do? It's OK to talk about times where we have failed to live up by the standards we live towards. Have you seen an example of someone you know loving their enemy? We hope and pray that when a test comes, we will be true followers of Christ, like Dirk Willems, loving freely and sacrificially.

Let's pray together
God of infinite kindness,
your love reaches out across every divide,
it fills every need,
it heals every wound,
it satisfies every hunger.
Help us to live in your love,
offering your kindness to all we meet!

Amen.

The Confession of Dirk Willems

What I remember most
is the joy of God's words on our lips,
in our hearts.

That good news bubbling out,
freely shared with any person we met,
old categories of friend and foe forgotten.
I remember the power of God changing us,
from empty Christians
to disciples full of fire.

I confessed my faith
and chose baptism, freely, consciously,
my prayer as the water trickled over me,
"O my Lord, my God!"
My family and friends,
my neighbours near and far,
they flocked to my house to hear that story.
We read from the Bible,
we prayed together.
And always every meeting,
their words echoing in my ears,
"Can I too be baptized?"

Yes, there was danger.
It was a crime for us to baptize
since we weren't priests,
and the authorities were out to find us.
But we Brethren were quick,
our feet given godspeed.
So often we escaped
even when escape seemed impossible:
ducking out windows,
fleeing to the fields in the dark,
our pursuers' lanterns bobbing behind us.
So often God protected us from evil.

The persecution became more severe.
First one brother, and then a sister,
another and another,
arrested, tortured, brought to trial,
made an example.
They were an example to us,
so many, so faithful,
freely bearing their cross, like Jesus.
A witness to God's glory even in death.

And then it was my turn to be arrested.
They were there waiting for us
hidden in the darkness as we gathered,
no time to run, just a quick whispered prayer,
“O my Lord, my God!”

Into the prison, and there I had time
to sit and think and pray,
to prepare myself for the ordeal to come.
I was more surprised than anyone
when the opportunity arose
for me to escape.
God works in mysterious ways,
and like Paul before me,
the way was open and I took it.
I ran like the wind;
I could hear shouts behind me
and I knew I was being pursued.
Over that wintry river I fled,
the ice creaking ominously below me.
Even as I ran I prayed,
“O my Lord, my God,
let me run on water this day,”
Cracks formed with every step I took,
and like Peter I doubted.
I pictured them fishing
my frozen body with a hook out of the cold river.

But God be praised,
my feet reached solid land
and running still, I spared a glance behind me.
I saw my pursuer stepping on the ice,
one of the guards sent to catch me.
I doubled my pace along the river
but my eyes were drawn to him
lumbering, lumbering along.
Suddenly there was no figure at all.
My legs kept running
but my whole attention shifted.
I saw the arms and head appear in the watery pit
bobbing and grasping, ice breaking, splashing.
I could hear his frantic call for help.
I stopped, and looked to his friends.
They all hugged the shore,
afraid to venture to him on the ice.
They were not going to help him.

Having just crossed that wide white river,
having feared that icy grave,
my heart went to him.
I turned around.
It was I who would be a fisher of men this day.
Running back toward my pursuer this time,
I reached that treacherous surface,
and when the cracks seemed louder than my heartbeats,
I dropped gently down on my stomach, sliding sideways,
arms spread wide, reaching for him.
Him reaching for me with freezing fingers,
and then our hands locked,
and the slow, slow, pull to safety.
We did it. I saved him.

We both lay on the ice for a long moment.
Me totally spent from the chase and the rescue,
he totally spent from being immersed in fear,
dazed at returning to the land of the living.

The voice of the burgomeister shattered the silence,
calling from the safety of the shore:
“Arrest that man.
Arrest that man right now!
Do your duty.”
I looked at him,
my companion on the ice.
Our eyes held each other,
frozen there on that hard river.
We both watched transfixed
as his hand slowly reached out
and grasped my elbow.
I closed my eyes,
“Oh my Lord, my God.”

And so I am here in the prison again.
They have convicted me,
and today I am to be burned.
In the icy river or in flames of fire,
I am not alone.
Jesus is with me as I take up my cross.
Be with me now,
Oh my Lord, my God.