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NEH: Making Sense of the Reformation

Dirk Willems and the *Mirror of the Martyrs*: An Anabaptist Response to Persecution

I. Introduction:

This lesson will examine the person of Dirk Willems, an Anabaptist Christian, who died in 1569. Why is the story of Dirk Willems so well known in the Anabaptist tradition? How is Willems portrayed in the *Mirror of the Martyrs*? Why was “compassion for the enemy” an important theme for Anabaptists then and today?

- a. This activity will include: personal study, small group work and use of primary source material in the form of text and illustration from *Mirror of the Martyrs*.
- b. This lesson is for a World History class, grades 9-12 and will last one class session.

II. Guiding Questions:

Why did Anabaptists refuse to return evil for evil? Why were many portrayed as martyrs for their beliefs? Are there connections to Mennonite and Amish values and beliefs today?

III. Learning Objectives

Michigan State Objectives that this lesson will meet include:

5.3.5.3 - Analyze how the Renaissance, Reformation, Scientific Revolution and the Enlightenment contributed to transformation in European Society.

The student (s) will:

- a. Examine primary source material from the 1500s in light of the Anabaptist movement.
- b. Learn how and why Dirk Willems became a martyr to the Anabaptists.
- c. Consider ways in which Anabaptist thought and practice still operates in our own school district and community.

IV. Teacher Preparation for the Lesson:

1. Read Sec. 17-3, “The Reformation Continues” (especially section on “Other Protestant Reformers”) from McDougal Little’s *World History: Patterns of Interaction*.
2. Run copies of drawing “Compassion for the Enemy” from *Mirror of the Martyrs* by Oyer and Kreider.
3. Run article, “Dirk Willems, A.D. 1569” from *Mirror of the Martyrs*. This information is from online source: John S. Oyer and Robert Kreider, *Mirror of the Martyrs* (Good Books, 1990), p. 36-37. See online: “Compassion for the Enemy” at http://www.goshen.edu/mqr/Dirk_Willems.html

V. Suggested Activities:

1. Anticipatory set: How do you know if someone in our community is of the Mennonite or Amish faith? What do you associate with Mennonites or Amish? Name ways that the Mennonites or Amish have been active in our school district and community. Estimated time: 5 - 10 minutes.
2. Teacher Assistance – Vocabulary & Terms. Help define the following prior to reading the primary source document:

Pious
Papist
Elect
Thiefcatcher
Burgomaster
Rebaptized
Conventicles
Doctrines
Obstinately
3. Group work in pairs. Consider the illustration of Dirk Willems. Be able to tell how you know that this did not take place in the present day. Also, tell me what things stand out to you the most in this picture – what things do you notice?
4. Have students read “Dirk Willems, A.D. 1569” from *Mirror of the Martyrs* and “Compassion for the Enemy by Oyer and Kreider.

5. Assessment – Individually, answer the following essay question in 150-200 words:

Explain why Dirk Willems was an important role model for the Anabaptist followers and an example of Anabaptist teachings? In what ways today do either Mennonites or Amish believers show/demonstrate Anabaptist beliefs? In what ways can you tell?

VI. Source materials:

1. Willems Drawing.
2. Texts for “Dirk Willems, A.D. 1569,” “Compassion for the Enemy.”
3. Check for Understanding sheet.



Dirk Willems, A.D. 1569

In the year 1569 a pious, faithful brother and follower of Jesus Christ, named Dirk Willems, was apprehended at Asperen, in Holland, and had to endure severe tyranny from the papists. But as he had founded his faith not upon the drifting sand of human commandments, but upon the firm foundation stone, Christ Jesus, he, notwithstanding all evil winds of human doctrine, and heavy showers of tyrannical and severe persecution, remained immovable and steadfast unto the end; wherefore, when the chief Shepherd shall appear in the clouds of heaven and gather together His elect from all the ends of the earth, he shall also through grace hear the words, "Well done, good and faithful servant; thou hast been faithful over a few things, I will make thee ruler over many things; enter thou into the joy of thy Lord." I Pet. 5:4; Matt. 24:31; 25:23.

Concerning his apprehension, it is stated by trustworthy persons, that when he fled he was hotly pursued by a thief-catcher, and as there had been some frost, said Dirk Willems ran before over the ice, getting across with considerable peril. The thief-catcher following him broke through, when Dirk Willems, perceiving that the former was in danger of his life, quickly returned and aided him in getting out, and thus saved his life. The thiefcatcher wanted to let him go, but the burgomaster, very sternly called to him to consider his oath, and thus he was again seized by the thief-catcher, and, at said place, after severe imprisonment and great trials proceeding from the deceitful papists, put to death at a lingering fire by these bloodthirsty, ravening wolves, enduring it with great steadfastness, and confirming the genuine faith of the truth with his death and blood, as an instructive example to all pious Christians of this time, and to the everlasting disgrace of the tyrannous papists.

NOTE.-In this connection, it is related as true from the trustworthy memoirs of those who were present at the death of this pious witness of Jesus Christ, that the place where this offering occurred was without Asperen, on the side of Leerdam, and that, a strong east wind blowing that day, the kindled fire was much driven away from the upper part of his body, as he stood at the stake; in consequence of which this good man suffered a lingering death, insomuch that in the town of Leerdam, towards which the wind was blowing, he was heard to exclaim over seventy times, "O my Lord; my God," etc., for which cause the judge or bailiff, who was present on horseback, filled with sorrow and regret at the man's sufferings, wheeled about his horse, turning his back toward the place of execution, and said to the executioner, "Dispatch the man with a quick death." But how or in what manner the executioner then dealt with this pious witness of Jesus, I have not been able to learn, except only, that his life was consumed by the fire, and that he passed through the conflict with great steadfastness, having commended his soul into the hands of God.

As we have come into possession~of the sentence which these rulers of darkness passed upon this friend of God, we have deemed it well, to add it here for the benefit of the readers, in order that reading the same, they may be able to perceive the truth of this matter.

COPY.-Whereas, Dirk Willems, born at Asperen, at present a prisoner, has, without torture and iron bonds (or otherwise) before the bailiff and us judges, confessed,

that at, the age of fifteen, eighteen or twenty years, he was rebaptized in Rotterdam, at the house of one Pieter Willems, and that he, further, in Asperen, at his house, at divers hours, harbored and admitted secret conventicles and prohibited doctrines, and that he also has permitted several persons to be rebaptized in his aforesaid house; all of which is contrary to our holy Christian faith, and to the decrees of his royal majesty, and ought not to be tolerated, but severely punished, for an example to others; therefore, we the aforesaid judges, having, with mature deliberation of council, examined and considered all that was to be considered in this matter, have condemned and do condemn by these presents in the name; and in the behalf, of his royal majesty, as Count of Holland, the aforesaid Dirk Willems, prisoner, persisting obstinately in his opinion, that he shall be executed with fire, until death ensues; and declare all his property confiscated, for the benefit of his royal majesty. So done this 16th of May, in presence of the judges, - Cornelis Goverts, Jan van Stege Jans, Adriaen Gerrits, Adriaen Jans, Lucas Rutgers, Jan Jans, and Jan Roefelofs, A. D., 1569.

This information is from online source: John S. Oyer and Robert Kreider, *Mirror of the Martyrs* (Good Books, 1990), p. 36-37. See online: "Compassion for the Enemy" at http://www.goshen.edu/mqr/Dirk_Willems.html

No story of an Anabaptist martyr has captured the imagination more than the tale of Dirk Willems.

Dirk was caught, tried and convicted as an Anabaptist in those later years of harsh Spanish rule under the Duke of Alva in The Netherlands. He escaped from a residential palace turned into a prison by letting himself out of a window with a rope made of knotted rags, dropping onto the ice that covered the castle moat.

Seeing him escape, a palace guard pursued him as he fled. Dirk crossed the thin ice of a pond, the "Hondegat," safely. His own weight had been reduced by short prison rations, but the heavier pursuer broke through.

Hearing the guard's cries for help, Dirk turned back and rescued him. The less-than-grateful guard then seized Dirk and led him back to captivity. This time the authorities threw him into a more secure prison, a small, heavily barred room at the top of a very tall church tower, above the bell, where he was probably locked into the wooden leg stocks that remain in place today. Soon he was led out to be burned to death.

Some inhabitants of present-day Asperen, none of them Mennonite, regard Dirk as a folk hero. A Christian, so compassionate that he risked recapture in order to save the life of his drowning pursuer, stimulates respect and memory. Recently Asperen named a street in Dirk's honor.

Check for Understanding Questions:

From "Dirk Willems, A.D. 1569"

1. Who arrested Dirk Willems?
2. Describe how Willems was caught?
3. How did Willems die?
4. What was his crime?

From "Compassion for the Enemy"

5. What type of a martyr is Willems (what Reformation group claims him)?
6. How did Willems escape from prison?
7. What was the "Hondegat" and how does it play a role in this story?
8. Explain how Willems' actions qualify him as a martyr.