

COME TO THE LIGHT

JOHN 3:14-21; EPHESIANS 2:1-10
LETHBRIDGE MENNONITE CHURCH
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As many of you are no doubt aware, a little town half an hour east of here has been making news across Canada this week.

Taber's town council recently implemented a "Community Standards Bylaw" which has outlawed swearing in public, instituted a nightly curfew on kids and teenagers, and granted local law enforcement the power to break up any assemblies of three or more people.

This bylaw has made national, even *international* headlines. Many are calling it "draconian," "egregious," "embarrassing," "unconstitutional," and plenty of other less-flattering adjectives.

Adjectives that might get you fined in Taber. ☺

On Friday morning I listened to CBC Radio's *The Current*. They talked about Taber, about how silly the bylaw was, about how it wouldn't work, about how it violated people's rights, etc.

Immediately after the discussion about Taber, there was an interview with Ontario premier Kathleen Wynne about initiative undertaken by her government to combat sexual violence. The three year, \$41 million program included an aggressive advertising campaign alongside numerous changes in workplace legislation, speedier trials of sexual assault cases, and mandatory sexual assault policies for colleges and universities.¹

The initiative in Taber was ridiculed; the one in Ontario was championed.

¹ <http://www.thestar.com/news/queenspark/2015/03/06/kathleen-wynne-unveils-3-year-plan-to-curb-sexual-assault.html>

But both stories were about the same thing, weren't they?

Both stories were about governments trying to use legislation force (fines, criminal prosecution) to achieve the desired end of producing human beings who behaved according to specific conceptions of right and wrong.

At one point the host of the program asked the question that is at the heart of both issues:

Can government change society's values?

Good question.

Is it possible to legislate good behaviour? Can laws produce the kinds of human beings that we desire?

I think that a good case could be made that, over long periods of time, policies and programs and laws and advertising campaigns *can* have incremental effects in changing the values of a given society.

There has been genuine progress made in our culture and many others when it comes to things like sexism and racism and other nasty "isms."

But there is a limit to what a government can do.

Unless people are governed by a vision for human life, individually and corporately, that goes beyond grudgingly following rules that are conceived as constraints against individual autonomy, things will never change on the deepest levels.

Behaviour *might* change. Slowly. Intermittently. Inconsistently.

But *values* won't.

Unless human hearts are captured by a vision of what a human life is for and how it ought to be lived then any attempt to force them into a certain way of living will ever only be partially effective.

Anyone who is a parent knows this.

I can harp on my wonderful kids to clean up their rooms for days on end. 😊 And eventually, grudgingly, they will do it.

But if they, *on their own*, get fed up with the disaster zone and decide that they *want* a clean room because it's nicer to be in?

Well, they invariably do a *far* better job than they would have if I had been standing over them threatening and badgering them.

Unless we are personally convinced *of* and committed *to* a certain vision of human life, we will ever only follow rules grudgingly.

Perhaps this is enough. The government would certainly settle for grudging compliance, I suspect.

But I think that as followers of Jesus our sights ought always to be far higher than this.

Our texts this morning use some strong language when talking about human nature and the general state of affairs without the light and life of Christ. Ephesians 2 begins:

You were **dead** through the trespasses and sins in which you once lived, following the course of this world, following the ruler of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work among those who are disobedient.

All of us once lived among them in the passions of our flesh, following the desires of flesh and senses, and we were by nature children of wrath, like everyone else.

You were *dead*. Not “a little rough around the edges.” Not “basically good.” Not “in need of a bit of moral instruction.”

Dead. Children of wrath.

The gospel of John sings a similar tune:

And this is the judgment, that the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil.

This is stark, bracing language. We don't really like this, do we? It doesn't fit with how we understand ourselves in the twenty-first century.

We know better, as educated postmodern folks. We know that life isn't nearly so black and white, that *we* aren't nearly so black and white!

We know that our behaviour is affected by environment and upbringing and cultural forces beyond our control. We know that there are spiritual forces at work in the world that seek to lead us astray.

We can produce long lists of reasons for why we don't act in the way that we should.

And why focus on all the negatives? Doesn't everyone know that human beings are basically good?

We are often pleased to think better of ourselves than we ought to.

(Or worse, it must be said. In a sermon next month, Ruth Bergen Braun is going to be focusing on the "as yourself" part of the great commandment to Love our neighbour as ourselves.)

But there is no getting around this language of stark contrasts in the Bible. We might think it is antiquated or harsh, we might wish that Jesus and Paul would be a little bit more nuanced with how they describe things, but this is not the Bible we have.

It's not the world we have either.

We don't have to look very far in our newspapers, our televisions, even our own communities to see what Paul talks about in Ephesians in living colour—"gratifying the cravings of our sinful nature, following its desires and thoughts, deserving of wrath."

How else to explain the lust for power and tribalistic violence that still defines geopolitical realities around the world?

How else to explain the degrading and dehumanizing treatment of women in so many parts of our world? (And I'm not just talking about places like India here. It looks different in Canada, but the attitudes are the same!)

How else to explain the shocking racism that are still prevalent on many university campuses that was in the news this week?²

How else to explain a culture addicted to brutal violence as one of the chief forms of entertainment that we demand?

How else to explain the selfishness and greed that keep people isolated and entertained in their own little private castles while people around the world go hungry?

How else to explain the culture of bullying that still prevails in countless schools and workplaces, despite all the policies, all the well-intentioned advertising campaigns that have been going on for decades?

How else to explain the many ways in which sex is cheapened, commodified, and commercialized in a culture that claims to be “sexually liberated?”

When we stop to think for a minute, maybe “light/darkness” and “life/death” aren’t such inappropriate ways to refer to the natural state of human beings after all!

And, if we’re *really* honest with ourselves, such descriptions don’t just apply *out there* in the big, bad secular world.

If we honestly analyze our own motives, our inclinations, our tendencies, the lives we are drawn to apart from God, we see that they apply *in here*, as well.

We know that there is anger within us, that there is lust, malice, envy, covetousness, pride—the very things that Jesus described as the root of more serious behaviours in the Sermon on the Mount.

The famous Russian dissident and novelist Alexander Solzhenitsyn suffered incredibly in Stalinist Russia, spending over a decade in the prison camps of the Gulag. If ever there was someone who would seem to have justification for pointing to the darkness “out there” it would be him.

² <http://www.cbc.ca/news/world/fraternity-sorority-membership-up-amid-bad-publicity-1.2994712>

Yet among his more famous sayings is this: “The line separating good and evil passes not through states, nor between classes, nor between political parties either, but **right through every human heart.**”

Later, in *The Gulag Archipelago*, he writes this:

Confronted by the pit into which we are about to toss those who have done us harm, we halt, stricken dumb: it is after all only because of the way things worked out that they were the executioners and we weren't.³

This is remarkable insight into human nature borne out of long years of suffering.

Even as one who had experienced great hardship and brutal oppression over long years, Solzhenitsyn knew very well that often what we are pleased to think of as virtue and vice has more to do with the circumstances in which we are located.

He knew that there is darkness and death within each one of us.

Perhaps you are beginning to wish you had stayed home from church today 😊.

The picture I have painted is fairly bleak, but the season of Lent is about looking honestly at our world—the world that has always been in desperate need of salvation and new life.

Lent is about being honest with ourselves, about confessing that we are people who cannot save ourselves, and of repenting and turning back to God.

And despite the unpleasant picture I have painted of our world and ourselves, there are two very important words that make all the difference in the world.

Two words, found at the beginning of Ephesians 2:4:

BUT GOD...

³ Alexander Solzhenitsyn, *The Gulag Archipelago*.

But God... who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which he loved us... **made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved.**

But God.

In the midst of the death and the darkness of the human condition...

Mercy. Love. Grace.

But God... Even when we had gone astray, expressed his kindness to us in Christ Jesus.

By ***grace*** we have been saved.

We do not dispel the darkness, we do not create the light.

We come to the light, as it says in John 3:21. We come to the one who *is* light and life.

We lay our burdens down at his feet. All of our darkness all of the things that lead to death, we lay them at the feet of Christ, and we allow God to raise us up, to make us alive.

We “believe in the Son of God,” as John says, the one who was not sent into the world to condemn but to save.

We trust that God has done for us what we could never do for ourselves.

We respond to the love with which God *so loved* the world, and resolve to become people whose lives are shaped by this love, this mercy, this grace.

We come to the light and we invite God’s spirit to begin to work in us, to dispel the darkness, and to help us to live into the reality that we have been made alive in Christ!

Because, as the NIV translates Ephesians 2:10,

We are God’s “handiwork”... — the Greek word is *poiema*, which is the root word for our word “poem.” We are God’s creative work!

... created in Christ Jesus **to do good works**, which God prepared in advance for

us to do (or, in the NRSV, “prepared beforehand to be our way of life”).

And so, finally, we see that good works—being the kind of people that we ought to be—is not the product of a set of laws to shape human behaviour. Paul is adamant throughout the NT that the law on its own was never adequate to secure salvation!

It is, first and foremost, a response to the love of God.

On the deepest level possible, societal values only change when human beings are changed, and human beings only change when they have given themselves to something bigger and more beautiful and true than themselves.

For us, as followers of Jesus, this something is the love of God made known in Jesus Christ.

We love because he first loved us. Because we are loved, we can give ourselves *to* love—we are set free to love God and our neighbours in deep ways, in costly ways, in counterintuitive ways.

We are even given the strength to love our enemies because we know that they, too, are loved by God.

The reason that we pursue good works—the behaviours that were prepared in advance to be our way of life—is because of two words that draw us into a vision of human life and love and flourishing.

But. God.

By nature, objects of wrath. But God said, “mercy.”

Lovers of darkness. But God said, “Light, and grace.”

Dead. But God said, “Life and love.”

We are just over halfway through the season of Lent.

As we make our way toward Easter, my prayer is that we would be people “who do what is true,” who “come to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that their deeds have been done in God.”

Amen.

