

NEW CREATION IS EVERYTHING

GALATIANS 6:7-16
LETHBRIDGE MENNONITE CHURCH
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Earlier this week a colleague wrote an article where he expressed his agreement with something that one of the members of his former congregation had told him:

Preachers really only have two different sermons. Every sermon they preach—doesn't matter the text or the title—is really just a variation of one of those two.¹

My first thought was, "Lucky guy, he has twice as many as me!"

My colleague said that his two sermons would be:

1. Trust in God
2. Love each other

Those aren't bad sermons to keep hearing over and over again, are they? You could do a lot worse than that. And, regrettably, some preachers do.

Naturally, after reading the article I began to think about which two sermons I tend to preach over and over and over again. Perhaps you would be better judges of this than me 😊.

As I reflected upon this, it occurred to me that my two sermons would be very similar to those of my colleague.

¹ <https://mordenmennonitechurch.wordpress.com/2016/06/29/trust-in-god-love-one-another/>

1. God loves you
2. God expects you to extend that love to others

This is how we and the world are dragged along to newness. By love.

The downside is that coming to the realization that you only have two sermons—especially on a Wednesday when you have to write a sermon for the coming Sunday—is that you tend to approach your task with a bit more trepidation!

I need to say something new! Perhaps add a third sermon to my meager catalogue!

Maybe a sermon on the Icelandic soccer team—this tiny nation with a population roughly three times the size of Lethbridge who this afternoon will play mighty France in the quarterfinals of the European soccer championships. Maybe I could compare them with David and Goliath and talk about how God is with the underdog!

But trying to say something new for the sake of saying something new is not a good approach to preaching.

The reason that Christians have always come together each week in worship is to be reminded that we are part of a story that, while it is constantly being made new in our context, is actually a very old one whose plotlines and parameters are very familiar.

We need to hear things again and again and again as human beings. We need to have these familiar truths drilled into us week after week to remind us of the story we are a part of, to remind us of the character of the God who has summoned us, to remind us of our blind spots and of the many ways in which we are prone to wander from what we know to be good and true and beautiful.

And, come to think of this, there's not much wrong with only having two sermons. Jesus reduced the entire law to two commandments. Love God. Love your neighbour as yourself.

If it's good enough for Jesus, well then it's probably good enough for the rest of us, right?

So, perhaps the thing to do isn't to preach "new" sermons but to arrive at these two conclusions in interesting ways.

At the risk of further spoiling the already spoiled punch line, I'm going to be telling you that God loves you and that you're supposed to love your neighbour today 😊. Hopefully the path we take to get there will be an interesting one.

This morning's passage is the final portion of Paul's letter to the Galatians.

We've been looking at Galatians over the past few Sundays, and you'll remember that this letter is dominated by themes of law vs. grace and slavery vs. freedom.

Paul has been urging this church in Galatia throughout the letter to refuse to bow to those who are seeking to convince them that faithfulness to Jesus requires adherence to the Jewish law.

This is a mistake, Paul says! It negates the work accomplished by Jesus and sends us straight back to human effort, which cannot save.

Paul repeatedly tries to bring his readers and listeners back to the finished work of Jesus, rather than all of the half-measures and misplaced identity-markers we so often cling to.

So, that's the big picture of Galatians. But as I was reading these last verses of the letter this week, what leaped out to me were the apparent contradictions!

Paradoxes abound:

1. Having strongly argued against circumcision (5:2-12), Paul concludes that neither circumcision nor uncircumcision is anything (6:15).
2. Having argued for the priority of God's gift of freedom-shaped grace (5:1), Paul writes that we will reap whatever we sow (6:7).
3. Having argued that the Spirit provides the clearest testimony to the truth of his words (1:10-12), he points to his own body as evidence to that truth (4:12-14).
4. Having suggested that his adversaries should just go and castrate themselves (5:12), he argues that those who are detected in a transgression should be restored in a spirit of gentleness (6:1).
5. Having said that we must bear one another's burdens and in so doing to fulfill the Law of Christ (6:2), he says "all must carry their own loads" (6:5).

We could be forgiven for saying—or at least *thinking*—, “ok, Paul, make up your mind!”

How do we make sense of this? How do we know if we’re getting it all right? How do we know if we’re keeping all the categories straight, if we’re living in freedom or slavery, if we’re bearing burdens well or just creating more, if we’re finding the right balance between grace and the recognition that actions have consequences?

Psalm 119 says, “Thy word is a lamp unto my feet and a light unto my path.” What about when the light seems a bit dim and our feet aren’t quite sure where they’re going or where they’re supposed to go?

One day this week I received a phone call from the head of Coaldale Soccer, where I had coached a U16 team this year.

I had forgotten to complete my year-end player rankings. Each player is supposed to be assigned a numeric value from 1-10 based on their skill level in order to help with player placement next year. They want to keep the teams balanced when they put together future teams.

I hate doing this every year. I hate reducing a kid to a number, even though I understand the rationale.

As I was filling out the form this week, I wondered if we often perform a similar kind of exercise in the life of faith? I wonder if we are tempted to constantly be evaluating ourselves and others, assigning a grade, letting ourselves and others know if we’re measuring up (or not)?

There’s all kinds of ways we can do this, but I’ve narrowed it down to three.

To begin with, there is this whole metaphysical package that I am supposed to accept, keep straight in my head, and, presumably, accurately convey to others.

An invisible creator God, a primal fall from grace, the incarnation—Jesus Christ, fully God and fully human—miracles, a virgin birth, angels, resurrection from the dead, ascension, future return.

The kingdom of God—this invisible reality that we claim advances throughout history, and is the truest story we can tell about our world.

This entire unseen dimension that is claimed to be behind us, underneath us, all around us, ahead of us, and within us.

Do I believe this sufficiently? For today, let's say I'm at a 7 here.

But suppose I'm not terribly interested in metaphysics. Well, rather than obsessing about what to think, I can transfer my neuroses into the arena of action and focus on what I am supposed to do!

Mennonites have historically been very good at this one. Metaphysics are all fine and good for those who are interested in that kind of thing (at least it might be... sometimes we're not so sure), but the really important thing is following the commands of Jesus.

At the risk of horrendous oversimplification, Mennonites are doers not thinkers. So, we seek peace, we pursue justice, we advocate for those whose voices are not being heard, we scramble to feed the poor, to clothe the naked, to attend to the prisoner, the widow, the orphan, the sick, the vulnerable, the marginalized. We speak truth to power (or try).

How am I doing on that? I ignored a needy person earlier in the week so I'd probably have to be at a 5 or so.

But that's not all! Even if the metaphysical and ethical demands of Christianity have left me reeling, there's at least one more thing to pile on.

This is the affective/emotional component of Christianity. Not only am I supposed to think about and believe the right things about the invisible world as well as display the correct moral behaviour, I am also expected to *feel* a certain way about this whole package.

I am supposed to have spiritual experiences in worship and prayer. I am supposed to read my Bible a lot (and like it!).

I am supposed to be perpetually happy and well adjusted and sincere and eager and ready to share about this whole metaphysical/ethical package with anyone who

expresses an interest. This package is supposed to be a source of inner joy, strength and untroubled tranquility.

I've had a back ache for a few days and have been grouchier than usual, so here I'm probably struggling. How about a 3?

If you average out these three, I guess I would be at a 15/30, which would make me a very average Christian. Today. I'll have to try to do better tomorrow.

It sounds comical when I describe it like this, but I wonder how many of are often doing something like this subconsciously in the life of faith.

And then we come to Paul's words about reaping what we sow and bearing the burdens of those caught in sin and testing our actions and carrying our own load not being deceived and reaping destruction and circumcision and uncircumcision... And it's easy to feel like this life of faith is a complicated thing.

But I think that behind all of the contextual issues that Paul is speaking to, behind all of his combativeness throughout the letter of Galatians, behind the specific issues that he is writing to address, behind all of the apparent paradoxes, Paul is desperately trying to remind the church of a rather simple truth, one that this entire narrative of salvation depends upon:

Salvation is about God and what God has done, not about you and what you can (or, more often, cannot) do.

May I never boast of anything except the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world. For neither circumcision nor uncircumcision is anything; **but a new creation is everything!**

A new creation is everything.

And what is the new creation? Well, it is the reality where the accomplished work of Christ in cross and empty tomb bears its intended fruit: where love finally has its way in us and in the world.

When peace is not an ideal but a reality. When tears are no more.

We know this is what our world needs. We know this is what *we* need, even if we wouldn't call ourselves "religious," even if we don't have theological categories within which to articulate our hope.

I'm not sure how many of you recognized the song Claire and Nick played during offertory. It was a song by Eric Clapton called "Tears in Heaven." He wrote it after the death of his four-year-old son.

One of the lines goes like this:

Beyond the door there's peace I'm sure
And I know there'll be no more tears in heaven

New creation *is* everything. We know it right down in our bones.

This is why Paul goes on and on and on about things like circumcision and uncircumcision not being the point any more. Because in Christ God has shown that he has much bigger and better things in mind!

Because of this love, we can be people who bear one another's burdens.

Because of this love, we can "not grow weary in doing what is right" anticipating a harvest of peace and righteousness.

Because of this love, we can take every opportunity to "work for the good of all."

Because of this love, we are emboldened to love God, to love what God has made, to love our neighbour, to even love our enemy.

Because of this love, we can move from obsessing over some imagined religious checklist as the demands of an inscrutable God toward doing our part to provide a foretaste of the new creation that we believe God is birthing in us and in the world.

It's very important that we get the order right. All of our thinking and doing and feeling is a *response* to the prior initiative and action of God; it is not and ought never to be an attempt to earn or compel it.

We love because he first loved us, as we read in 1 John 4:19.

We are not anxious performers seeking to measure up, always trying to think enough, to act enough, to feel enough.

We are dearly loved children who are invited into a relationship with our creator.

A relationship of trust and hope. A relationship with one who wants what is good for us. A relationship with one whose faith and character are far sturdier than ours, whose love is inexhaustible, incorruptible.

A relationship that does not have as its prerequisites cognitive certainty, moral rectitude, or emotional conformity.

A relationship that does not, in fact, depend on us at all.

This is good news.

God loves you.

God invites you to love in response to this love.

A simple sermon but one that we will spend the rest of our lives learning and living into.

New creation is everything. May God help you and I, the church, to be a signpost of this new creation, pointing the way toward this gloriously good news.

Amen.

