

TASTE TEST

1 PETER 2:2-6; JOHN 14:1-9
LETHBRIDGE MENNONITE CHURCH
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MAY 14, 2017/5TH SUNDAY OF EASTER

I want to spend a bit of time at the outset of my sermon today talking about Mothers Day.

Most Mothers Days, I provide a bunch of reasons for why I don't preach Mothers Day sermons. I say things like, while Mothers Day is time of celebration for many and that while mothers are eminently *worth* celebrating, that it can also be a source of pain for others.

I give examples like:

- Those who have lost their mothers.
- Those mothers who have lost children.
- Those who wish they could be mothers, but are not.
- Those who *have* struggled or *are* struggling with infertility.
- Those who have strained relationships with their mothers.
- Those who maybe feel like they have failed or *are* failing as mothers.

There are all kinds of reasons for why this day might be difficult for some.

But I want to do a bit more this morning than acknowledge that there are people who might struggle to see Mothers Day as an opportunity for unqualified gladness.

The first thing I want to say is that to be a Christian is to change who we consider to be “first family.” To be a Christian is to reconfigure our relationships and the priority we place upon them.

The church is called to gather in and embrace all people, including those whose relationships with mothers and fathers and sons and daughters might be difficult or non-existent for all kinds of reasons.

And those of us who do *not* find days like Mothers Day difficult are called to embody the best characteristics of Mothers and Fathers and brothers and sisters and friends and neighbours *to one another*, particularly those for whom these days can be a source of pain.

The second thing I want to say is that the kinds of holidays that find their way into the Hallmark holidays are not the sorts of things that obviously leap off the pages of our bibles.

Most weeks we get up and read passages from letters and gospels from the New Testament. These early Christian Scriptures were almost without exception written by people who never married, who didn't have kids, who didn't fit the norm that we so often implicitly (or explicitly) hold up in churches (and which are commemorated on days like this) of moms and dads and kids and a dog and a cat.

I've never seen a Happy Poor Single Person's Day card.... have you? And yet these were the leaders of the early church—most obviously, the apostle Paul and, of course, Jesus.

Finally, I want to say that even if your story with your mother has been or is difficult, even if you would like to be a mother and are not, even if you have lost a mother, even if you have lost a *child*, as Christians we are called, invited, summoned even, to move into, through, and *beyond* the difficulties of our context and take steps, however small, toward wholeness.

At the pastors conference I attended in Vancouver this week, we talked a lot about paying attention to the local context of our churches, paying attention to neighbourhoods and local issues and geography—getting to know the “parish,” as it were.

Rather than importing high profile ministry models from big cities far from where we live, we're called to follow Jesus and build his church right where God has placed us. Whether our church is a multimillion dollar facility full of urban elites or a tiny little church on the reserve, there are opportunities to love God and love our neighbours right where we are.

Indeed, *right where we are* is precisely where we are called to focus.

What is true of churches is true of families.

Each one of us has been placed in a family and these families are, for better or worse, part of the story of our lives and the raw material with which God begins to shape our lives, like the potter and clay.

They're not perfect. No family is perfect. No mother is perfect, despite what you might read on Facebook today.

Even *my* mom isn't perfect (I can say that because she's an ocean away 😊). Even the mother of my kids isn't perfect!

Each of us is launched out into the world in a particular family context. Sometimes these contexts contain pain. Sometimes the story of the families we create as adults contains pain.

But as Christians, we are not defined by our pain. It shapes us, yes, it leaves wounds (as we discussed last week). But it does not define us.

Each one of us is called to constantly be moving forward and allowing Christ to lead us into health and maturity and wholeness.

All of this leads nicely to our texts this morning.

1 Peter 2 is a call to spiritual maturity. The whole letter is, really.

Over and over and in various ways, Peter tells the early Christians that the proper response to the *event* of Easter is to live lives in imitation of the Lord of Easter.

But it's interesting how our text today frames this call to spiritual maturity. I want to read the first line of the passage again:

Like newborn infants, long for the pure, spiritual milk, so that by it you may grow into salvation—**if indeed you have tasted that the Lord is good.**

That "if" is important.

Everything about the Christian life, all of our attempts to follow the Spirit's leading in becoming what we were made to be in Christ, is predicated on that "if."

If indeed you have tasted that the Lord is good...

I think there are many people, outside the church certainly, but also inside, who have *not* tasted that the Lord is good, who wonder if the Lord really *is* good.

Perhaps they have had an experience with the church that has left a bad taste in their mouth. This happens a lot, unfortunately.

Maybe people have tasted a rather severe picture of a remote and authoritarian God.

Maybe they've tasted a God who is interested in personal salvation and evacuating souls from earth into heaven rather than getting the kingdom of heaven into souls on earth.

Maybe they've tasted a God who is a moral slave driver, constantly demanding that we do, do, do more and more to justify ourselves before God and one another.

I could come up with a very long list of toxic impressions of God that I have encountered over the years. I'm sure you've come across them, too. Maybe you've even struggled most of your life with one or more of them.

Maybe even after coming to church for years, you struggle to "taste and see that the Lord is good," to borrow the language of Psalm 34.

Powerful, yes. Holy, sure. But, good? Maybe that's a taste we've yet to encounter.

Let's move on to our second text this morning from John's gospel.

We're in Jesus' "Farewell Discourse," the stretch of John 14-17 where Jesus gives his final words to his disciples on the night before his crucifixion.

He is trying to comfort his disciples—disciples who are still struggling to understand the way he must go, still struggling to understand what is going on in the story and how it all connects with the God they thought they understood.

Jesus tells them that he is going ahead of them to prepare a place. He is speaking about the kingdom of heaven, about how he will one day bring them to where God is. He urges them to trust God.

But still, they struggle.

Thomas says, "Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?" Jesus responds with his famous words: "I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. **If you know me, you will know my Father also. From now on you do know him and have seen him.**"

Pretty clear, right? *You know the Father because you have seen me.* Throughout his ministry, Jesus often spoke in somewhat opaque ways in describing the kingdom of God and the nature of his identity and mission.

Not here.

Here he lays it out as clearly as he can. He tells his disciples that they have seen God and know God because they have seen him.

But the disciples still aren't sure what's going on. Their categories are stretching and bending and threatening to break.

Philip says to him, "Lord, show us the Father, and we will be satisfied."

Jesus' response has a note of sadness to it: "Have I been with you all this time, Philip, and you still do not know me? Whoever has seen me has seen the Father. How can you say, 'Show us the Father'?"

I wonder if Jesus might ask the same question of us, all these years later.

Have I been with you all this time and you still do not know me? If you have seen me, you know who God is. You know how God works and how God loves. You know what God prioritizes. You know what God seeks. You know the way you are to walk. You know what a truly human life looks like.

You know all of these things because I have shown you. I have taught and modeled them for you. I have given myself for you and called you to new life.

If you have seen me, you have seen the truest image of God you will ever get. How can you say, "Show us the Father?"

How can you try to squeeze me into your existing conceptions of God that you have accumulated along the way rather than allowing me to define everything about what you believe about who God is?

I've said this before, but it's worth saying again. I have encountered many people over the years who have "issues with God." I have encountered few, if any, who have issues with Jesus.

This is a gap that should not exist. If indeed we have tasted Christ and seen that the Lord is good.

The test of what we have tasted of God is the character of our lives and of our communities.

If we have tasted a severe, authoritarian and remote God, our lives and our churches will tend to reflect this. If we have tasted a God who looks like Jesus, our lives and churches will come to reflect this, too.

Our theology influences our practice. What we believe about God inevitably makes its way into how we live.

And when Peter urges the first century church to "grow up" in to spiritual maturity, he is reminding them that the point of being human is to become like Jesus.

Being back in Vancouver this week, riding the buses, sitting in the classrooms that I sat

in a decade ago provided a kind of natural opportunity to “take stock” of my life, to reflect back upon where I have come from and where I am going, to think about how I’m doing on this journey of life and discipleship.

One day as I was riding the bus to the conference, I was thinking about how we measure a human life, about how I measure my life.

How do I measure success? How do I know if I am making progress as a human being as a follower of Jesus?

Maybe this is a common exercise for people roughly my age, I don’t know 😊. I think it’s an exercise that can (and should) be done by people at every stage of life’s journey, whether we’re young kids or seniors or anything in between.

At any rate, I did a quick inventory of some approaches to this question.

What if I wrote a book? I love to write and it’s a gift that has been affirmed in me over the years. If I wrote a book, would that represent success?

What if the pews were filled to the brim and people came pouring into the church? This is another common way to measure success, right? Certainly in my line of work! Would that do it?

What if I achieved “financial security,” whatever that means? This is a common enough one—maybe even the *most* common one.

Or what if I was able to travel to all the places in the world that I want to see?

What if I raised kids that became independent and strong and admirable in all kinds of ways? What if I passed on a faith that was durable and strong that I could seem embodied in their lives?

In each of these cases, I found myself saying something like, “yeah, but...” None of them were enough.

Increasingly, I find myself thinking about the word “success”—about how a life is measured—not in terms of what I *do* but about who I *am*. Or who I am *becoming*.

It won't make much difference if I write a best-selling book or pastor a mega-church or if I make all kinds of money and pile up all kinds of experiences if at the end of it all I have remained a small and selfish person.

If I have failed to "grow up" and become the kind of spiritually mature human being that is the logical result of tasting and seeing, in Christ, that the Lord is good, I will have missed the point of the whole show!

David Brooks, a columnist at the *New York Times* describes this as a distinction between "resume virtues" and "eulogy virtues."

He observes that we tend to spend a good deal of our time focused on padding our resumes—developing the skills that will sell, acquiring and accumulating and boosting—and comparatively few on becoming the kinds of people who will be eulogized well at our funerals.¹

Jesus described it in even simpler terms: "What good is it for someone to gain the whole world, and yet lose or forfeit their very self (or soul) (Luke 9:25)?"

It's all about growing up in Christ. That's the point of being a Christian!

It's not about "going to church," important as regular worship is in Christian formation.

As the famous pastor and author Eugene Peterson once said, "Standing in a church singing a hymn doesn't make us holy any more than standing in a barn and neighing makes us a horse."²

It's not about checking off a list of do's and don't's to prove our virtues to ourselves and others.

It's about determinedly, consistently, stubbornly, shamelessly looking at Jesus and locating everything that we think about when we hear the word "God" through the lens of the one who suffered and died for us.

¹ http://www.nytimes.com/2015/04/12/opinion/sunday/david-brooks-the-moral-bucket-list.html?_r=0

² Eugene Peterson, *Run with the Horses: The Quest for Life at its Best* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2009), 66.

It's about craving spiritual maturity and growing up into the image this God that we have seen in Jesus.

This is the point of it all—living lives that exhibit the fruit of the Spirit (love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, gentleness, self-control). Loving God and our neighbour (even our enemies) as ourselves. Imitating the God we have seen in Christ Jesus.

So may we taste and see that the Lord is good.

May Christ Jesus never say of us, “Have I been with you all this time and you still do not know me?”

May our lives show forth the goodness of God.

Amen.

