

THE GIFT OF ONE ANOTHER

RUTH 1:6-19B; JOHN 19:25-27
LETHBRIDGE MENNONITE CHURCH
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JULY 30, 2017/8TH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST

My sermon this morning is called “The Gift of One Another.” I want to explore themes of faith across stages of life and how the church can nurture this.

But before I get to that, I want to spend a bit of time reflecting on our congregational meeting this past Monday and on the decision we made there.

On Monday evening, we had a congregational meeting to discuss an expansion of our front entrance that will include an accessibility ramp.

Those of you who were there, will recall that before we got to the business of the meeting, Marie shared a reflection from her own experience as someone with a physical disability.

She talked about Old Testament purity laws, about how “imperfections” or “blemishes” meant disqualification from worship and, by extension, community. Human beings with disabilities or diseases would often find themselves at the proverbial gate, on the outside looking in.

Later, in the gospels, we read of the blind, the crippled, the lame, the leprous always finding themselves on the outside, unable to access God, unable to participate in the community of faith.

She talked about how Jesus changed all this. She pointed out that Jesus’ ministry of healing was at least as much about restoration to community as it was about the restoration of physical wholeness. In touching the untouchable, in prioritizing human

beings over ritual cleanliness and propriety, Jesus declared in a powerful way that our blemishes are no longer obstacles to coming near to God.

She talked about how in prioritizing something like a wheelchair ramp, we as a church are saying to those with accessibility issues, “You belong here. We value you. You are welcome to come near to God and to us.”

The next day, I wrote a blog post about our congregational meeting. Naturally 😊. I know that you don’t always expect to see much inspiration or insight in the comment section of anything online, but I was delighted to receive this exception to the rule this week. It’s from a woman who lives near Seattle:

Ryan, I have lived 61 of my 65 years gradually losing function to neuromuscular disease. As a child in Spokane, we sat in the first row, so that we could easily get to Communion. As a young adult in Seattle, I walked with a cane, and led worship playing my guitar and singing from a tall stool just outside the sanctuary. Later, my church in Pasadena had a level entrance on the right side of the building that was wheelchair accessible: my children would push me to the end of the row, where I would transfer and then they would fold the wheelchair and stash it off to the side.

My current church... has a somewhat steep but doable ramp to enter the church, and wheelchair designated pews at three row-ends, where 3 wheelchairs can “park” without the church-goer needing to transfer: Communion is brought to us in the pews. I still lead music sometimes: I roll out in front of the congregation, since the [pulpit] where the lectors and other psalm leaders stand is up 2 steps, and therefore inaccessible.

May I say, from the bottom of my heart and the depth of my soul, **IT MAKES A DIFFERENCE to be able to join in worship with our limitations anticipated and therefore rendered unremarkable.**

I wanted to share all of this by way of information and, hopefully, inspiration, for those who weren’t able to attend on Monday night. It’s really important that we ground who we are and the decisions we make as a church on our theological convictions about who God is and about how God loves.

But Marie shared another story on Monday, and this one gets even more specifically about what I want to talk about this morning.

This one, appropriately, involved Dave Goertzen. It was Dave and Louise's generous bequest to our church that opened the conversation about a building project that would honour their memory and their impact on our church.

You have likely this story before, but good stories are worth hearing more than once. Marie talked about how shortly after her accident, she was leading worship one Sunday and had struggled to get up the stairs to the pulpit.

After the service, Dave came up to her and asked her, "What do we have to do to make it easier for you to get up behind this pulpit?" He didn't ask her, "How can we make it easier for you to get through the front door or into the sanctuary?" He asked, "How can we make it easier for you to get to a place at the front, where your gifts and leadership abilities can find expression in the life of our congregation?"

It was and is a significant difference. Even though Marie doesn't use the railing Dave built for her, the gesture obviously spoke volumes.

And I think this story still speaks loudly about who we are here at LMC and who we aspire to be.

The community of faith is to be a place where all are welcome to come near. Men, women, young, old, married, single, all levels of ability.

And we want to be a community where faith can be grown in all people.

We want to be a community where we recognize that different people at different stages of life with different stories and experiences and different trajectories of faith come together and mix and mingle and rub off on one another in ways that edify and strengthen and unsettle and provoke and support one another.

After Monday's meeting, I have been thinking about Dave Goertzen's faith. It was, like the faith of each of us, unique.

Dave's faith was forged over 90+ years. It was shaped by the experience of poverty, lack of educational opportunities, hard labour. It was shaped by watching people come and go, experiencing the death of loved ones.

Dave's faith was nurtured in a Mennonite context that prioritized simplicity and hard work and faith in action. It was influenced by a cultural context where religious faith was assumed, where almost everyone went to church, where Christianity was kind of part of the furniture of every day life.

This was Dave's story. But this is not the story of others in our church.

My kids, by contrast, are growing up in a context of relative material comfort and endless opportunity.

They are growing up as "digital natives" in a world where communication is instant, where various forms of media encroach on everyday life in countless ways,

They are growing up in a world where advertising is ubiquitous and oppressive. My kids probably see more messages trying to sell them something or get them to click somewhere in an hour than Dave saw in a month.

They are growing up in a world where the pressure to define your identity and project yourself out there to the world is enormous.

They are negotiating issues of faith in a context where scepticism and doubt are rampant, where faith and spirituality are endlessly confused and confusing, where religion is anything but assumed.

These are genuine and important differences.

Jesus is the same yesterday, today, and forever. But the situations in which we encounter him are not. The contexts in which the church is called to bear witness are not. The soil in which community is grown is not.

I've looked at two ends of the spectrum of a lifetime. But we know that the same is true for each one of us at every stage in between.

The faith of each person here is affected by our own unique story and context, our experiences, our joys and sorrows, our trials and temptations.

And the point of all this is that it is a gift to bring all this together in a community.

We need examples of sturdy faith that has been seasoned by long years.

We need childlike faith and simplicity of trust.

We need the doubters, those who are angry with God, those who have gone or are going through hard things like divorce, death, the loss of a child.

We need people to ask difficult questions, to provoke us into hard arenas of combating injustice and seeking peace.

We need people to speak boldly about their encounters with God.

We need to know what faith looks like in a house full of toddlers.

We need the examples of faith of those who have never had children and have invested their time and energy in other areas of the kingdom.

We need to hear how faith looks and feels in the face of ugly words like “cancer” and “dementia.”

We need to hear how words like “infertility” and “disability” can be redeemed.

We need the curiosity and good questions of our kids.

We need to see examples of those who suffer trials well, in imitation of Christ. We need to rub shoulders with those whose prayers have not been answered as they might have hoped.

We need to wait with fathers and mothers at the gate who are longing for prodigals to come home.

We need to celebrate with those who are experiencing and demonstrating that the way of Jesus leads to fruit in us and in the world.

All of this presupposes that we actually have the courage to talk about God and faith in the context of our lived experience.

We need to let one another into our lives, to show us what following Jesus looks like from the unique vantage point of our own experiences. If we aren't honest about faith, if we don't ever bring our doubts and fears out into the light, if we don't share our victories and lessons and inspiration along the way, we are depriving one another of how God's purposes and character are refracted through our own stories.

A few years ago, Doug Wiebe said something very wise that I have saved and referred back to occasionally.

There is an unrepeatable gift and grace in the life of each person and in each circumstance regardless of race, culture and creed, or of how broken, wounded, or sin damaged the person or circumstance might be.

I love that line: *There is an unrepeatable gift and grace in the life of each person and in each circumstance.*

I think this is so true. And I think that a community where we believe and embrace this is a healthy and Christ-like one.

I have read often over the last few years that the church is one of the few remaining places in our culture where people have the opportunity to form intergenerational relationships.

In so many areas of life we are sequestered according to age. We have groups for every age demographic and interest group and stage of life under the sun. But we don't have many places where all of these come together.

The church is one of these few places. At least it *can* be. Very often the church hives off into special interest or age specific groups, too. But at our best, we preserve a space where people of all ages and stages can be together.

I am so grateful for this. I am so glad that our kids are known and loved by people older than them who aren't their parents!

I am glad that people in their eighth decade can ask them about how they're doing at camp. I'm glad that they can see and hear inspiring examples of people making their way through later stages of life with faith and hope.

I'm glad that church can be a place where we *come together* in the best sense of those two words.

I've said this before, but one of the best moments of my job is when we have communion services and I see people from the very young to the very old all coming forward, together, to the same table to be fed by Christ.

To be bound together across generations is one of the unique vocations and callings of the church.

I should probably talk about the bible. This is a sermon, after all.

Throughout this summer series I have been shamelessly breaking one of the rules that I learned in seminary about how to use the bible. We were told, "You must not just pick a topic and then go hunt around for Scriptures that help you make your point. The text comes first. Scripture leads, you follow."

Well, this summer I have been doing exactly what we were told not to do! I have been deciding upon a topic and then picking a few passages that I think support it well. It's only for a few weeks. I hope you'll forgive me.

This morning's texts come from completely different points of the biblical narrative. The story of Ruth is set at least five centuries (probably more) before Jesus.

The second text is obviously a scene from Jesus' last moments on the cross.

What drew me to these very different texts was that each, in their own way, deals with the idea that we are given to one another as human beings.

Ruth, a Moabite has married the son of a woman named Naomi. Naomi is from the tribe of Judah and had fled with her husband and sons to Moab to escape a famine.

The problem is that Naomi's husband and both sons subsequently die.

And this is where Ruth famously binds herself to Naomi, to her family, to her people, and to her God. Her words of fidelity have echoed down through the ages:

Don't urge me to leave you or to turn back from you. Where you go I will go, and where you stay I will stay. Your people will be my people and your God my God (Ruth 1:16).

Ruth didn't have to do this. Her story could have gone in a different direction. As a widow, her prospects weren't bright no matter which road she chose, but she could have returned to her people, to her country, to what was familiar. She could have found a Moabite husband and written off her experience with Naomi's family as an unfortunate detour in her life.

She didn't have to bind herself to her mother-in-law. She *chose* to.

From Ruth, I learn of the power and beauty of *voluntarily* binding ourselves to the stories of others—even those with different histories, different ethnicities, different... whatever.

This is what the church is. Every tribe and tongue.

And then we have Jesus, gasping for breath, nearing the end of his life on a Roman cross. He has been flogged, ridiculed, and cruelly crucified.

From Jesus' words near the end of his life, I learn that we not only bind ourselves to one another through our own choices, but we are bound together by Christ. We are given to one another by him.

He says to each of us, "your mother, your brother, your sister, your friend, your daughter, your son, your teacher, your student..." You belong to one another because you belong to me.

Jesus reconfigures the relationship between John and his mother on the cross. He says, *Take care of each other while I am away from you in body.*

He says the same to us.

You belong to one another because you belong to me. So take care of each other.
Nurture the faith of one another.

Create a space where moments and lessons like the one that Marie shared about Dave Goertzen can take place.

Create a space where people of all abilities and ages are given opportunities to lead and contribute. Create a space where we can anticipate and therefore render unremarkable the barriers to God and neighbour that we unwittingly create.

Create a space where the unrepeatable gift and grace of each human life can intersect with the love of Christ and his claim on all of our lives and stories.

May God help us to appreciate and nurture the gift of one another.

And may the gifts of our unique stories and faith journeys continue to mix and mingle together for the purposes of Christ and his kingdom.

Amen.

