

HOW TO BE BORN

1 JOHN 5:1-6; JOHN 15:9-17
LETHBRIDGE MENNONITE CHURCH
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MAY 10, 2015/6TH SUNDAY OF EASTER

Every Mothers Day, I feel like I have to offer at least a bit of an explanation as to why we don't make this the specific focus of our worship service.

First, I know that 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.

Those who have lost their mothers, for example.

Or those who wish they could be mothers, but are not.

Or those who *have* struggled or *are* struggling with infertility.

Or those who have strained relationships with their mothers.

Or any of the other ways in which our relationships tend to be more complex than a Hallmark holiday.

More importantly, though, I think it is important that in our worship as a church that we allow the Christian calendar and the story of Jesus our sermon themes.

This is not a judgment on churches who do things differently, it's just the way I approach things and, I think, the way we at Lethbridge Mennonite Church has approached this day historically.

So, this won't be a Mothers Day sermon. As you've already heard, our focus today will be on two texts, one from 1 John and one from the gospel of John.

Most of the smart people that have taught me or given me advice about preaching or written books about preaching say that a good sermon always involves reading and interpreting Scripture *as well as* allowing Scripture to read and interpret *us*, and our cultural context.

According to the famous Swiss theologian Karl Barth, preachers should always “preach with a bible in one hand and a newspaper in the other.”

And so, most weeks, I sit down on Tuesday morning and I look at the text or texts of Scripture that I will be working with for the upcoming sermon.

Then, I try to think of whether or not there is some interesting event that recently took place, or some news story or interesting occurrence that might have an impact on people’s lives that I could count on many people having on their minds when they come to worship on Sunday.

This week, I just couldn’t *for the life of me* come up with *anything*. ☺

I jest, of course.

This week, something happened in our province that has never happened before, something that many people quite literally could never even *imagine* happening.

I am speaking, of course, of the results of Tuesday’s provincial election where the New Democratic Party surprised almost everyone in Alberta and beyond by winning in a landslide majority.

It seems to me, in my observation of media and in conversations with people in our church and beyond, that reactions to the result of the election are mixed and very polarized.

Some are filled with fear and dread. Some think that an NDP government will destroy the Alberta economy, that higher taxes will bleed Albertans dry, and have deep disagreements with NDP policies when it comes to the hot-button moral issues that tend to dominate headlines (abortion, gay rights, euthanasia, etc.).

For these people, Tuesday’s result feels like the *loss* of something familiar and stable.

Others are exultant. They feel that it's about time that someone kicked out the entitled ruling elites that catered to the demands of big business, that the PCs had a deplorable environmental record, that they neglected healthcare and education, and that those on the margins can look forward to a more equitable future.

For these people, Tuesday's result feels like a *victory*—the birth of something new for Alberta.

There *didn't*, and still *doesn't* seem to be much in between these two extremes, although I suppose the extreme responses tend to get the most press and come across the strongest.

What struck me about these responses was that they didn't seem to be much different inside or outside the church. The same hand-wringing on the one hand and exultancy on the other seemed evident in many conversations and observations about how Christians in our province reacted to Tuesday's news.

And I wonder about this. I think we should *all* wonder about this.

There was a question that occurred to me throughout the election and its aftermath as I watched the reactions pour forth. The question that wouldn't leave me alone was this:

Where do we, as followers of Jesus, look for our victories?

To judge by the responses of many Christians in our province, it is in the arena of politics.

For many, "victory" comes (or *will* come) when the right people have positions of power. Or, perhaps more importantly, when the *wrong* people *don't* have power!

Our victories are tied to the victories of people like Rachel Notley or Jim Prentice or Stephen Harper or Justin Trudeau or Thomas Mulcair or Barack Obama or _____.

These are the figures who will "overcome" our enemies, those who don't share our economic principles or our social values or whatever.

We want to back a winner, right? And, perhaps even more importantly, we want to be *seen* to back a winner.

Judging from the reactions of many Christians this week, it is in the realm of politics that our most significant victories are achieved or, correspondingly, our most crushing defeats endured.

Now, I'm not suggesting that we as Christians or as Mennonites ought not be politically interested and engaged. Far from it.

I think that we have an obligation to participate, to be informed, to vote, to advocate for good and fair governance as a reflection of our convictions about the value of human life, the pursuit of *shalom*, and the necessity of justice.

And, of course, I think that politics matter a great deal.

We need only to cast a glance at some of the most desperate areas of the world right now (Syria, Iraq, Afghanistan, etc.) to see that political realities—how people are led and governed, whether or not they have a say in their leadership—has an enormous impact on ordinary human lives every day.

But even though politics matter, even though we should participate and vote and honour any and all attempts to bring about good and just leadership for all people, **I think that it is all too easy to locate our identities—our victories and losses, our hopes, our fears—in things that ought always be secondary to our primary identity as followers of Jesus Christ.**

As inheritors of the Anabaptist-Mennonite tradition, I think we ought to be hesitant to so quickly hitch our wagons to the wagons of politics for our victories. We should at least pause.

Our faith tradition has its origins in a determined separation between church and state, between the kingdom of God and the kingdoms of men.

And going even farther back, what about Jesus himself?

While the first century world did not have our clean divisions between “religion” and “politics” or “church” and “state,” and while Jesus’ actions were most certainly political

in nature (the Romans didn't execute people who weren't in *some* sense a threat to political order!), Jesus most certainly did *not* look to the levers of political power and influence to bring about change in the world, to attain his victory.

He didn't try to sidle up to the Romans to implement the policies and forces that would advance his kingdom, nor did he ingratiate himself to the Jewish religious authorities as a means of securing power and influence among his own people.

What did he do?

He gathered a rag-tag bunch of fisherman and tax collectors and prostitutes and people of rather poor renown, and he told them to...

... love each other

... to love their enemies

... to forgive

... to refuse violence

... to abide in him like branches in a vine

... to lay down their lives for one another in imitation of him

On the evening of his execution when Pilate was doing his very best to determine just how much of a threat this "king" was to political order, he said to Pilate "My kingdom is not of this world" (John 18:36).

I don't think Jesus meant that my kingdom is "other-worldly" as opposed to "this-worldly." Not at all.

I think that what Jesus meant is that in his kingdom, victories come differently than in the ways that the world is familiar with.

They aren't backed by military force; they aren't built on the backs of the powerless and "disposable."

They don't come with adoring crowds waving placards, with endless promises, many of which won't be kept, with sloganeering and advertising, or with the endless machinations of gaining and maintaining power.

Jesus knew and Jesus *knows* that the world—anything and everything that thwarts God and his purposes for creation—is not overcome this way.

I posted a quote on my blog this week. It's attributed to the eighteenth century English writer Samuel Johnson:

Of all the things that human hearts endure, how few are those that kings can cause or cure.

I think Jesus would agree.

Jesus had and *has* bigger and better victories in mind.

Victories over sin, over death, over the powers and principalities that hold human beings in their thrall, over all that threatens the coming of his kingdom, on earth as in heaven.

The title of this sermon might seem strange to you. "How to Be Born." Being born is, after all, among the things in life that we have the least direct control over. 😊

I am, of course, speaking metaphorically. And I am referring to the opening verse from 1 John 5.

Everyone who believes that Jesus is the Christ is born of God.

I am also referring to 1 John 5:4:

.... for whatever is born of God conquers the world.

Putting the two together, we get this summary:

Whoever believes in Jesus Christ is born of God and conquers the world.

If you're anything like me, this birth, this faith doesn't always feel very triumphant or victorious.

It sometimes feels like something that we are trying to produce, rather than something that has been birthed by the living God himself.

And if we look at the community of faith around the world, it doesn't always seem that "our faith" is overcoming much of anything. Sometimes people of faith seem to be *contributing* to the problems that plague us rather than offering a solution or an alternative.

But John insists that it is simple faith that overcomes the world.

And it does. And it will.

The church that was birthed through Jesus has been around a long time. It has outlasted countless empires and rulers, it has lived through revolutions and wars and conquests and dynasties.

In every time and every age, under brutal oppression and peaceful democracy, under good governments and bad governments, there have been faithful followers of Jesus who love and give and serve and forgive and bear witness to the victory that has already been won, and the kingdom that has come and will come in fullness.

These are the victorious ones, the ones who are born of God.

John is quite clear, both in his letter to the early church and in his gospel about the sign of our birth, the sign of our overcoming the world.

It is love.

1 John 5:3

This is love for God: to keep his commands.

So what are his commands? Well, let's rewind to the gospel of John.

My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you. **13** Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one's life for one's friends. **14** You are my friends if you do what I command.

So, this, in the end, is what overcomes the world. A community of people who demonstrate that they are the friends of God by loving as God loves.

It doesn't matter who has political power, doesn't matter who is calling the shots. These will come and go. Some will be better and some will be worse.

My own personal opinion is that an NDP government in Alberta probably won't be as bad as those on the right imagine it will be, and it probably won't be as glorious as those on the left envision either.

But even if it *does* turn out to be just as good or just as bad as people think, as followers of Jesus our approach to those in political power must always be measured by the conviction that we understand victories and losses according to a different standard.

And we understand that victories come in unlikely ways.

Through love, through laying down our lives.

Because we follow one whose method of overcoming of the world has always seemed very unlikely.

We follow the one who laid down his life in love for his friends, and one who has chosen and appointed us to do the same, bearing fruit that will outlast the "world" and all its empires.

Our faith, not our political affiliation, not our optimism or pessimism about the future of our province, is our primary identity as followers of Jesus.

And our faith *will* overcome the world. Not because of the quality of our faith, but because of the one in whom it has placed, and the victory that this One has already achieved.

Thanks be to God.

Amen.

