

First Fruits

James 1:17-27

Lethbridge Mennonite Church

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September 2, 2018/15th Sunday After Pentecost

Well, this Sunday feels a bit strange. I haven't done this for a while.

I found myself feeling somewhat anxious this week as I prepared for this sermon. *What if I forget how to do this? What if preaching isn't like riding a bike? What if I try to turn the "sermon tap" back on and not much flows out?*

I took comfort in the fact that I knew that I would be back among friends this morning, not a critical audience who would scrutinize and evaluate my every word. I will presume upon your grace for my first sermon in a while on this last Sunday of summer.

Truth be told, this won't be much of a sermon, at least not a typical one. I'll have a few comments about our passage from James toward the end, but I hope you're ok if I offer a few more personal reflections today.

But before I do that, I need to spend a bit of time on thank-yous.

First and foremost, I want to thank you, this community of faith called "Lethbridge Mennonite Church," for giving me the gift of this sabbatical.

I want to thank you for your prayers for me and for the love and the care that allowing me to take this time symbolizes. I do not take any of this lightly. These last four months have been a gift and one that I deeply appreciate.

I want to specifically thank those in church leadership who have carried a bit more of the load than usual in my absence. I want to thank the church council for keeping us thinking about the work of the church. I want to thank the deacons for the role they continued to play in caring for the members of our congregation who were and are in need. I want to thank the worship

committee for scheduling four months' worth of services. These are no small tasks, and I am (we are) grateful for the work that you have done.

How was my sabbatical? It's a question that I have been asked often. And it's a hard question to answer in a sentence or two.

It was good. It was a good time of study, of travel, of exploration, of learning, of service, of worship of encounter with God. And of rest. I'll be talking more about some of the specifics of these things during my sermons throughout the month of September.

But overall, it was very good. I feel refreshed. It was nice to be able to attend worship services and have nothing to do, to simply receive and participate without worrying about logistics.

At the risk of repeating myself *ad nauseum*, my sabbatical was a gift. And, as our passage from James reminds us today, every good gift comes from God. I am grateful to God for my sabbatical and I am grateful to God for a church community to come back to.

As you know, *all* sermons—even first sermons back from a sabbatical—are written and delivered in a specific context. My own reflections over the past month or so on what I would preach on my first Sunday back have taken place with the news of hard times for the church and for church leaders in particular ringing around my head.

You may have noticed that these last few months have been pretty terrible PR for the church.

Earlier this year, news began to trickle out of Willow Creek Church near Chicago of sexual misconduct allegations against their pastor Bill Hybels, an extremely well-known and influential leader in the evangelical world.

Then, of course, there was the report out of Pennsylvania of over a thousand instances of sexual assault perpetrated by priests.

Unsurprisingly, in a cultural context that is skeptical about faith and cynical about power, this has provided further ammunition for those seeking to discredit the church.

This news ought to be a source of lament and righteous anger for *all* Christians, but I think it hits even more uncomfortably close to home for those of us in leadership.

Everywhere I turned this past month, it seemed like there was another story of a prominent Christian leader or institution that was failing or falling or abusing their position or generally behaving in precisely the opposite way that we ought to expect from those representing Christ and his church.

These stories reflect poorly on all of us who stand in places like this week after week, who presume to speak of God and morality and life and death and meaning. They weaken trust and heighten cynicism, both inside and outside of the church.

So, with all that going on in my head (and perhaps yours, too, I don't know), I thought I would take this first Sunday back as an opportunity to kind of focus on the big picture and make a few things clear as I settle back into the role.

First, Christian leaders are sinners. Including this one.

This doesn't excuse the actions of Bill Hybels or the Roman Catholic priests who abused children or any of the other Christian leaders who have had dramatic falls from grace over the years. Not by any stretch. When crimes are committed, and trust is abused, leaders must be held accountable.

But Christian pastors and priests are not some special category of humanity that remains untouched by sin. We have our struggles and our failures and our doubts and our fears, just like everyone else. Mercifully, the vast majority of Christian leaders do not end up in the news headlines for their misdeeds. But all Christian leaders fall short of the ideal.

You may have noticed this.

And I am sorry to say that I will probably let you down. If I haven't done so in the last seven years, I'm sure I will do so in the not-too-distant future.

I saw a post on Facebook yesterday where there was a photo of a certain Greek Orthodox priest and underneath it said, "A Protestant visited me, demanding to know whether I had said the Sinner's Prayer. I replied, 'Every prayer I pray is a sinner's prayer.'"

That's the bad news. Christian leaders are sinners, including this one.

The good news is that the vast majority of us do this job because we have been captivated by the love of God in Christ, because we believe that the kingdom of God has come, is coming, and will come in fullness, and because we want to serve his church, however imperfectly.

I think you *should* expect better from Christian leaders. It is entirely reasonable for people to *expect* admirable moral conduct from their leaders. I think it's entirely reasonable for you to expect it of me.

And when we fail, we ought to lead the way in modeling honestly, humility, and repentance.

But I take courage and comfort from the fact that far away from the headlines there are legions of faithful and decent women and men still standing up in places like this on Sunday morning, directing hearts and minds and hands and feet to Jesus.

So I am returning from my sabbatical with a renewed conviction to keep Jesus at the center.

And when you're trying to keep first things first, to go back to the basics, to remind yourself of what your task as a pastor and human being is and what the task of the church is, there are few better places to go than James.

Well, Jesus might be better. But, James is ok, too.

James is famous for his uncompromising insistence that *all* Christians—leaders or otherwise—ought to be those for whom words and deeds line up. Faith *must* lead to action or else we are like those who look at our faces in a mirror and then immediately forget what we look like.

Our text this morning covers a pretty wide range of topics, everything from anger to guarding our speech to caring for widows and orphans as the truest expression of religion. But the composite picture is that of a life of integrity and humility, free from hypocrisy and pretension.

James would have very little patience for those Christian leaders at the center of these most recent scandals, but I suspect he would also tell us to examine our own lives, and all the less flamboyant inconsistencies that they contain.

James wasn't naïve about human nature. He knew very well that all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God. But he kept the task of Christ-likeness every before his hearers and he keeps this task in front of us.

We will stumble, and we will fall, inevitably. With God's help, not in the catastrophic ways that have been making headlines this summer, but to be human this side of eternity is to fall short of what we were created to be.

I was having coffee the other day with a university student who found this enormously frustrating. He was discouraged by how unsaintly he could sometimes be. He figured he should be doing better by now, given his convictions about the teachings of Jesus and of his commitment to follow them.

"Welcome to the club," I said.

I don't think he found my response terribly inspiring, but it is, regrettably, true. We will never cease being sinners in need of the grace of God.

But that doesn't mean that we stop trying, allowing the Spirit of the risen Christ to enliven our words and deeds. That doesn't mean that genuine progress towards Christlikeness isn't possible. It doesn't mean that we can't get better at things like mercy and grace and forgiveness and holiness. It doesn't mean that these aren't worthy goals to aspire to.

It doesn't mean that following after Jesus isn't the best and truest way to spend a human life.

James puts it like this:

But those who look into the perfect law, the law of liberty, **and persevere**, being not hearers who forget but doers who act--they will be blessed in their doing (v. 25).

And James reminds us, at the outset of this morning's passage, that even though our consistency ebbs and flows like shifting shadows, God does not change.

God is and has always been and will always be the giver of good gifts. Gifts like freedom, forgiveness, and birth into a living hope.

I was driving on Friday when I pulled up at a light behind a car with a bumper sticker that proudly and loudly proclaimed: “Jesus is the way, the truth, and the life.”

My first instinct was to cringe. I am not a fan of bumper stickers in general, and particularly not of bumper sticker theology.

But as I sat at the light and as I thought about starting up again this Sunday, a rather simple thought occurred to me: “Yeah, but I still think it’s true.”

Perhaps not in the way that the bumper sticker owner understands it, but I *do* think that the way of Jesus is true and that it is the path to fullness of life.

And I do think that the church that proclaims this, imperfectly, yes, but faithfully and hopefully, is good news for the world.

No matter which church I attended during my sabbatical, from Vancouver to Bethlehem to Missouri to Lethbridge, I left grateful to be part of this global community of faith, for being birthed into this living hope.

So, that is what I am taking back into my work as a pastor.

1. A deep conviction that Jesus is worth pursuing with everything I have. Where else would I go? He has the words of eternal life.
2. An even deeper conviction the God who gives good gifts is faithful when I am not—that the One who said, “ I desire mercy and not sacrifice” is merciful with me, with his church, and with his world.

What about you?

I’ve talked a lot about myself this morning (sorry about that). I know that God has been at work in your lives and in this church over these past four months.

Perhaps it has been a great time. Maybe life is good, faith is strong, and you’re full of optimism as summer draws to a close. If so, thank God.

Or, perhaps these last few months have been hard. Maybe you’re struggling to get used to a new reality that you didn’t anticipate. Maybe your health has gotten poorer. Maybe you’re anxious about someone you love who is in a bad place. Maybe you’ve stumbled and fallen in predictable ways and your faith feels weak. Maybe you’re nervous about what lies ahead. Maybe you’re lonely and apprehensive.

Can we decide again, today, that we will follow Jesus together? Can we resolve that no matter how many ways we fall short of what Christ calls us to, that we will look into the perfect law that gives life and persevere?

The title of my sermon this morning is “First Fruits.” It’s taken, obviously, from verse 18 where James describes the church as “a kind of firstfruits of all he created.”

The first fruits of a harvest are a celebration of what has come before, a celebration of the labour and love that has gone into producing a harvest. They are also a celebration of what is anticipated. They hopefully are symbolic of much more than they themselves represent.

Can we live lives of gratitude for the past and hope for what is yet to come?

In ancient times, the firstfruits were also given to God as an offering—they were the part of the community’s labour that belonged to God.

And this is my prayer for each one of us who is gathered here this morning, each person who has been drawn by and to the story of Jesus, each person seeking to live into this hope.

We are the portion of creation that belongs to God. We are not our own. We have been bought with a price as a kind of down payment on what is promised for all of creation.

May we continue to experience God as the giver of good gifts—gifts that conform us to the image of his Son, and gifts that build up the church to reflect his love for the world.

Amen.

