

Friends of the Cross

Philippians 3:17-4:1; Luke 13:31-35

Lethbridge Mennonite Church

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Over the past few months, one of our adult Sunday School classes is reading the late Eugene Peterson's *Run with the Horses*. It's an exploration of the life of Jeremiah—his message, his life, and the connections these have with the modern world.

Last week, Jeremiah found himself thrown in a cistern because people in power were getting tired of his message. He had been saying and doing the wrong things and people were getting fed up with him.

Prophets say hard things—things that are inconvenient, unsettling, provocative. They point out our hypocrisies and our failings, our idols and our injustices. They hold up a mirror before us and what we see looking back isn't always (often) very flattering or inspiring.

This was true of Jeremiah and all the other OT prophets.

It was true of Jesus, obviously. Even though Jesus was immensely popular with the crowds, he quite quickly made enemies of the religious and political elites of his day. We see this our gospel text today where King Herod is seeking to kill him.

(Herod was, as we know, quite skilled at dispatching people he found inconvenient and unsettling; he had John the Baptist executed for challenging his decision to marry his half-brother's wife. He had learned well from his father, Herod the Great, who had ordered the slaughter of the innocents at the time of Jesus' birth.)

Even though we don't tend to think of Paul as a "prophet," it was true of him, too. Paul penned some of the most beautiful passages in the New Testament (1 Corinthians 13, Colossians 1, Philippians 4, etc.), but he could also be blunt and confrontative.

If you have any doubts about this, have a look at Galatians 5 where Paul's in a heated argument with opponents who are demanding the Jewish rite of circumcision in the new Christian

communities. Paul angrily responds by saying he wishes those who were teaching this would go and castrate themselves (Gal. 5: 12).

Paul was not always popular.

We see this in our second reading. Nothing quite as alarming as Paul's friendly advice in Galatians 5, but I wonder, was I the only one squirming just now during verses 18-19 just now?

For many live as enemies of the cross of Christ; I have often told you of them, and now I tell you even with tears. Their end is destruction; their god is the belly; and their glory is in their shame; their minds are set on earthly things.

The language is harsh. "*Enemies of the cross of Christ!*" "Their god is their belly." "Their end is destruction."

Yikes! That sounds a little strong, Paul. Are you seriously saying that anyone who struggles to discipline their appetites (food and otherwise) is an enemy of the cross of Christ?!

Well, let's have a peak in the mirror Paul holds up, shall we?

I'll warn you that it won't be comfortable, but if we learn anything from the example of Scripture it's that the people of God need to be willing to face uncomfortable truths from inconvenient sources.

It's no secret that we live in a self-indulgent age. Our "gods" come in many different forms.

Food is a big one, obviously. And we should note that there's more than one way to live as though your god is your stomach.

Overeating is a big problem, of course, but so is the manic dieting and fitness craze that teaches people that food is our enemy and that our value is determined by our waistline.

And then there's the usual suspects. Alcohol, drugs, sex, entertainment, technology, video games, phones, social media.

We could think of the idol of comfort. This week, I read an article in *Christianity Today* called

“Move Over, Sex and Drugs. Ease Is the New Vice.”¹

The author argues that in an era of Skip the Dishes and instant communication *from* anywhere to anywhere and “on demand” everything, our lives are so easy that it might be doing us spiritual harm, preventing us from doing the hands-on work of loving and serving our neighbours.

Each one of these can and do become little gods.

Note that not all of these are wrong in and of themselves. Some are, but not all. We need food. Technology can and does improve our human lives, when used responsibly. Social media can help us form meaningful connections with one another.

But over time, we want more and more and more.

And each one of these things can quite easily assume a place of prominence and dominance in our lives. Our lives can come to revolve around what these things do for us.

There are at least two reasons that I think it’s easy for us to allow our god to become our “stomach.”

We pursue these things both to *enjoy* and to *avoid*.

We like pleasure, and so we seek these things out. This one’s easy enough to understand. It’s a good thing gone too far.

We also pursue these things to avoid—to mask the pain of our lives. It’s no secret that most addictions, whether to food or alcohol or sex or Facebook or anything else have some kind of a wound at their root.

We chase after these little gods to cope with our deep loneliness or our frustration that our life isn’t going the way we hoped it would or because there is some unresolved trauma from our childhoods or to self-medicate the pain of fractured relationships, or even, at rock bottom, an existential and spiritual longing that agonizes over big questions: who am I? Does God exist? Is there meaning in the world?

Whatever the cause (or, more likely, causes) of our enslavement to our appetites, there’s a

¹ https://www.christianitytoday.com/women/2019/january/technology-move-over-sex-drugs-ease-is-new-vice.html?fbclid=IwAR2ZpB3Yttyu_mVF5Uz3uZitYiHpn19Vj7hqP00TWg7FueEnNEtV7-kY9uU

common denominator: the self.

At the root of every expression of idolatry is an unhealthy attachment to ourselves.

This has been the case ever since Eden, when the serpent whispered in the first humans' ears, "You can be like God..."

Our worship theme this Lenten season is: Blessed Hunger, Holy Feast.

Last week we encountered Jesus fasting in the wilderness, reminding us that we do not live by bread alone.

In the wilderness, Jesus modeled a deep truth about the importance of stripping away attachments and compulsions, whatever they are, and learning how to hunger and what to hunger for.

This is what we seek to do, in our own small ways, during the forty-day season of Lent when we give things up—to train and discipline our hungers.

This week, Jesus is lamenting over the city of Jerusalem, his people, whose wills are oriented away from the one who has come to save them, to show them a better way, to offer them peace instead of the tired narratives of self-protection and self-interest.

The people wanted things from Jesus that he stubbornly refused to give them: validation of their religious and national identity, and condemnation and the violent overthrowing of their oppressors.

Instead, Jesus came teaching peace, the forgiveness of enemies, the upside-down kingdom of the Beatitudes. He told them to look at the log in their own eye before taking the speck out of their neighbours. He unflinchingly revealed their hypocrisy.

It was a message and a messenger that many were unwilling to hear or follow. This was true then and it is true now, as we have been reminded yet again this week with the unspeakably awful events in Christchurch, NZ.

Even though Jesus represented the path to wholeness, to peace, to liberation and salvation, his people refused him. Even though he longed to offer them refuge and comfort from the dead ends they had been wandering down, his people would not turn to him.

Like the "enemies of the cross" in Philippians, they refused what was best for them in their frantic pursuit of gods that seemed more convenient, more satisfying, more desirable.

Later in Luke's gospel Jesus will weep over the city of Jerusalem because they refused the things that made for peace (Luke 19:41-43). He saw that violence would overtake them. And it did. In 70 AD, the city was invaded by the Roman army and the temple was destroyed.

In Philippians 3, Paul also speaks his warning to the early church "with tears." Those whose gods are themselves and the appetites that enslave will end up destroying themselves.

We know this, of course. Many of us have seen addictions of all kinds destroy the lives of people we love. We have seen this shrink people we care about into so much less than they were created for. We have seen the devastating toll this takes on marriages and families and churches and communities.

And, like Jesus and Paul, we weep—for them, for ourselves, for all those who refuse the things that make for peace and wholeness in our lives and our world.

I want to very clear—*explicitly* clear—about what I am *not* saying.

I am not saying that real Christians won't struggle with self-discipline or that if you do you are a failure.

I am not saying that real Christians will never eat too much, or drink too much, or too often find themselves binge-watching on Netflix, or spend too much time on their phones or indulge in any of the other appetites that tempt us.

Paul knew this very well. Only a few verses before the ones we heard this morning, he said this:

Not that I have already obtained this or have already reached the goal; but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own (Philippians 3:12).

Paul was a work in progress, just like us.

I am not saying that there aren't deep connections between our addictions and mental health issues that need to be treated with good therapy and medication where necessary.

I am not saying that God loves us less if we struggle to lift our gaze from "earthly things" toward our citizenship in heaven.

Perhaps most importantly I am *not* saying that if you do any of these things you are Jesus' enemy. As I said last week, one of the deepest Christian truths is that Jesus came to do for us what we cannot do for ourselves.

But when our lives become fundamentally oriented around the self and its appetites, we do show ourselves to be enemies of *cross* of Christ.

We show ourselves to be opposed to the self-denying, sacrificial, suffering pattern Jesus laid down for us simply because we do not trust it and we refuse to follow it.

So, the question our texts on this second Sunday of Lent put before us is not, Are we successful (are we good enough masters of our appetites)? but, Are we willing?

Are we willing to hear Jesus' invitation away from the path that leads to destruction? Are we willing to be gathered into God's embrace and to seek to order our lives differently?

Are we willing to spend our lives learning from Jesus to turn, again and again, away from self and toward others?

Are we willing to learn how to live as citizens of the kingdom of heaven instead of as slaves to our various appetites?

We will fail along the way. I promise you this.

But will we press on? Will we forget what is behind and strain toward what is ahead? Toward God and neighbour instead of ourselves?

This, I think, is how we demonstrate that we are friends of the cross.

Enemies of the cross (remember, "the cross," not "Jesus") have wills oriented toward the self; friends of the cross are always seeking to retrain our wills toward God and neighbour in love.

This is how we "enact our citizenship" in the kingdom of heaven and how we train our expectation for our Saviour who is coming.

I have focused for most of this sermon on the question of the human will—of the ways it tends to go wrong and how we might consider reorienting it toward the self-sacrificial way of Jesus.

I want to end by focusing on another part of our gospel text.

One of the things that I am convinced of when it comes to the task of preaching is that I am never allowed to step away from this pulpit without offering a word of good news.

The good news today is that Jesus longs for his people, for *us*.

It's easy to focus on the "but you were not willing" part of Jesus' lament over Jerusalem. But that

is preceded by this maternal image of a mother's love, of Jesus expressing the depth of his love and desire for the welfare of people:

How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings...

Jesus loves us and wants what is best for us.

Jesus loves us too much to leave us to our appetites, whether it's Netflix or national/religious identity or anything in between.

Jesus loves us and he longs to lead us to wholeness.

I spent the last two days at our Mennonite Church Alberta annual meetings in Didsbury. We talked about many things related to the future of the church over the weekend, about what we hope for and how we might get there, about where God might be leading us as individual congregations and as a provincial body.

But during one of the sessions on Saturday, our speaker Betty Pries, ended a session by asking us two simple questions:

Do the people in your congregations know, really know, that they are beloved of God. Do you know, really know, that you are beloved of God?

We sat with this question in silence for a few moments. This is in many ways the question of all questions, isn't it?

Do we believe that we are loved by God? Do we believe that God loves us too much to abandon us to ourselves?

I want to end with a quote that I saw on Facebook a while back (I don't know the original source, but if it's on Facebook it must be true, right?!):

Eugene Peterson's son Leif said at the funeral that his dad had only one sermon—that he had everyone fooled for twenty-nine years of pastoral ministry, that for all his books he only had one message.

It was a secret Leif said his dad had let him in on early in life. It was a message that Leif said his dad had whispered in his heart for fifty years, words he had snuck into his room to say over him as he slept as a child:

“God loves you. God is on your side. He is coming after you. He is relentless.”

Perhaps we can hear these words spoken to us this morning, too.

God loves you. God is on your side. He is coming after you. He is relentless.”

He loves us too much to leave us to ourselves, and for this we should be thankful.

May God help us to be willing to be loved away from the appetites that so easily enslave us, and into the wholeness, love, peace, and joy for which he has created us.

May God help us to be friends of the cross.

Amen.

