

I Am About to Do a New Thing

Isaiah 43:16-21; Philippians 3:4b-14

Lethbridge Mennonite Church

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This week, I came across an article posted on the website of the *Mennonite World Review* called, “It’s time to change the Mennonite name.”¹

It was written by Ryan Ahlgrim, a pastor at a Mennonite church in Richmond, VA. But he wasn’t talking about just changing the name of his local church. That path is a well-traveled one and not particularly noteworthy.

No, he was talking about the whole denomination—Mennonite Church USA!

That’s a pretty strong statement.

I did a bit of snooping around on his church’s website to see if I could learn a bit more about the brave soul who would put such a suggestion in print.

I half-expected to find a young, idealistic recent seminary grad, probably not even a “real” ethnic Mennonite but a transplanted Methodist or Presbyterian who didn’t appreciate the full historical and theological weight of the word “Mennonite.”

What I found, instead, was a late middle-aged pastor with adult kids and a long track record of education and service in the Mennonite world.

His resume was impressive. Raised in a Mennonite church, educated at AMBS and Goshen College, helped plant a Mennonite church, then moved on two long term pastoral roles at large,

¹ <http://mennoworld.org/2019/03/25/the-world-together/its-time-to-change-the-mennonite-name/>

prominent Mennonite churches in mid-sized American cities.

In short, his Mennonite credentials were impeccable. Far better than mine, certainly. He was even married to a nurse, for heaven's sake, which probably outweighed everything else!

And yet, here he was, a Mennonite of Mennonites, saying, "We need to get rid of this name."

Why? Well, his arguments likely won't surprise you.

People confuse Mennonites with the Amish or Mormons. The word "Mennonite" is often a barrier for postmodern folks who have little time for arcane historical and theological distinctions.

Denominational differences can seem increasingly irrelevant in an era of dwindling church attendance and religious commitment.

It can be hard to separate Mennonite theological distinctives from the historical and cultural baggage associated with the word.

This are familiar enough arguments, and I'm guessing they certainly reflect some aspects of many of our experience. It certainly rings true with conversations that I often have.

But the author goes even further:

Not only does the name "Mennonite" have several unhelpful connotations for a missional church, it's also theologically offensive. We have this name because this was the label placed on us by our opponents, referring to one of our early leaders. The name does not associate us with Jesus Christ or the content of the good news, but with a relatively unknown person; it suggests a shabby personality cult rather than a Christian faith.

Whew. The word "Mennonite" suggests a shabby personality cult rather than a Christian faith?! Those are fighting words! Except, Mennonites aren't supposed to fight, so...

At any rate, it's a provocative article.

I bring up it up not because I am priming you for some big reevaluation of our church's name or because I am preparing to lobby Doug Klassen to change things up at Mennonite Church Canada.

I am not entirely convinced by the article and I don't find Ahlgrim's proposed alternative, "Peace Churches USA," very appealing. The author says the word "Mennonite" doesn't necessarily associate us with Jesus? Well, neither does "Peace Churches USA."

You could make a case that the term "Christian" was also "a label placed on the early church by their opponents, referring to one of our early leaders." It certainly wasn't a term of admiration.

The early church was also thought of as a “shabby personality cult” by many!

Also, I don’t think it would necessarily accomplish what Ahlgrim thinks it will. Many churches have dropped words like “Mennonite” (or other historical denominational titles) from their name years ago and the results have been predictably mixed.

Some have continued to shrink. Some have stayed the course. Some have grown.

Other churches have grown *because* they have leaned into their histories in a more determined way (i.e., some of the “high church” growth that we have heard about in places like Winnipeg). Increasingly, some are seeking connection with history and tradition

So, while I certainly resonate with the article in many ways, and while I probably wouldn’t cling nearly as tenaciously as some to the name “Mennonite,” I also know that dropping a name is no magic elixir to revitalize the church.

Why bring up this article then?

Well, I bring it up because I think the article highlights the simple truth that we all have very deep and sometimes complex relationships to the past.

Articles like this stir up deep stuff for many of us, whether we’re cheering the author on or we’re doing a slow burn inside.

The past matters to us, in ways that we’re aware of and ways we’re not.

Our two texts on this fifth Sunday of Lent talk about the past.

The Apostle Paul is writing to the church in Philippi, a church that has brought him great joy and satisfaction, but also a church that needs to be warned about returning to past ways of understanding how God works and what God requires.

With Christ, there is freedom, Paul says. In Christ, the grace of God transcends the law of God— Paul is quite clear about this throughout his letters.

But there are some in this church who, apparently, are insisting that faithfully following Jesus requires adhering to old Jewish regulations, circumcision in particular.

Paul is adamant that is faith *in* and the faithfulness *of* Christ that saves not outward markers of belonging that belong to past.

He does this by reminding them that he, of all people, knows how deeply history informs identity.

Like the Mennonite author of the article I began with, Paul can check off a pretty impressive list of his credentials:

- Circumcised on the eighth day, as all good Jewish boys are
- Member of the tribe of Benjamin—Jacob’s youngest and most-cherished son
- A Hebrew of Hebrews—pure blood!
- A Pharisee—the Pharisees often get a bad rap, but the origins of this group were good; because the Jews often found themselves being occupied or ruled by foreign powers, the Pharisees advocated an emphasis upon obedience to the books of Moses and ritual purity. They were trying to preserve their identity by virtue of obedience to the law.
- Persecutor of the church (commitment to Torah)
- Righteous—Paul not only understood the law but also followed it scrupulously!

In short, Paul came from the right stock, was super smart, and super religious. Paul had an airtight case for belonging to the people and purposes of God.

Yet in verse 7, he says that he has come to regard all of this as loss. Why? “Because of the surpassing value of knowing Jesus Christ my Lord.”

He goes so far as to say that everything to which he previously attached value, everything that defined and gave meaning to his life, everything in which his identity was located he now regarded as rubbish, in order that he may gain Christ!

These are strong words.

Paul is saying that his identity—past, present, and future—is now located with Jesus Christ and his purposes.

Not with his ethnicity. Not with his religious knowledge. Not with his moral performance.

Not with anything but the basic reality that he is a creation of the living God, chosen, loved, and redeemed by the work of Jesus Christ.

In light of all this, Paul has a different relationship to the past.

[B]ut this one thing I do: **forgetting what lies behind** and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus.

Paul’s identity in Christ pushes him ever onward.

Don’t keep looking back to the past, he says. Don’t base your identity on anything but the new

thing that God has done in Christ. Keep stretching, straining, keep living into the future that God is preparing for those who love him.

Centuries earlier, Isaiah sounds a similar tune to Israelite exiles in Babylon. To a people who have lost their homes, their identity, their confidence, possibly even their faith, Isaiah points them to their God who says, "I am doing a new thing. I am making a way in the wilderness, streams in the wasteland."

What you are going through now will not last forever. I have not forgotten you.

He reminds them of their deliverance from the chains of Egypt. The God who parted the waters of the Red Sea for you to walk through will bring water to the parched places of your present experience.

And then, no sooner does he remind them of their history, then he says what Paul said to the Philippians. *Forget the former things. Do not dwell on the past.*

Remember it, yes. Acknowledge the ways in which it formed you as a people. Call to mind the mighty acts of God that your people experienced. Let it re-anchor you in the character and love of God.

But don't stay there. God is about to a new thing.

The temptation to dwell in the past is not unique to the Israelites in exile or to the early church struggling to understand how they related to their Jewish past.

This is a profoundly human tendency.

We so easily look back to the good old days as societies, as churches, and as individuals.

Remember when there were only three channels on the TV... when people sat down for meals together... when we weren't all glued to our laptops and smartphones... when kids played outside...

Remember when churches were full and Sunday School classes were overflowing... when people knew how to sing properly in four-part harmony... when "community" wasn't something we had to engineer, but it just happened naturally...

Remember when I was younger and stronger before everything started to ache and creak and groan. Remember what it felt like when we were in our prime. Remember those years before the kids left the house, before the diagnosis, before the death... Remember how much simpler things

were...

It's the most natural thing in the world to dwell in the past. The past is known; the future isn't.

We go to the past when we are threatened by the pace and uncertainty of change in our culture and in our lives, when things seem like they've been turned upside down and we long for something stable and predictable. This was true of the church in Philippi.

We do this when we are suffering, when our lives are not going as they anticipated, when things are hard, and we don't know the way forward. This was true of the people Israel in exile in Babylon.

I think we sometimes do this even when the old days weren't so good. We live in the past, needing somewhere to place the blame for the present.

It's not my fault, I had a hard upbringing, my parents were terrible, my church was legalistic and judgmental... I wasn't treated fairly. I never had a chance!

There are all kinds of ways that we can and do dwell *on* and *in* the past.

Whether you are tempted to live in the past or not, I think the word of the Lord to each one of us as we approach the end of Lent is a simple one.

Don't dwell there. Don't romanticize the past or locate your identity there. Remember it, honour it, learn from it, but remember that God specializes in doing new things.

God can make a way where there seems like no way. He can make something as unlikely as a stream in the desert.

God can breathe life and vitality into his church, even when it seems like the church has fallen on hard times. He has done it before; he can do it again. God has not left his church.

God can resurrect struggling marriages. God can inspire flagging faith plagued by doubt. God can bring healing to groaning bodies and troubled minds.

God can give the strength to suffer well in imitation of Christ.

Ultimately, of course, God can even bring life out of death.

We are children of a God who is always saying, *See, I am doing a new thing? Now it springs up, do you not perceive it?*

And as followers of Jesus, we are always to be those who, as Paul says, are pressing on into this

hope. Straining. Stretching toward the call of God in our lives and in our world.

To be found in him, to claim his righteousness as our own.

And lest we should think that Paul is just giving us a to-do list, as if we have to work and work and work for the prize, we should remember that Paul says, “**I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me.**”

Paul knew that all of our efforts in the life of faith grow out of the foundational truth that it is Christ Jesus who, in his death and resurrection, has claimed us.

Our salvation and our hope is a gift of God.

Isaiah reminds us the people of Israel that it is *God* who is about to do a new thing

The Israelites did not liberate themselves from Egypt, nor did they engineer their return from exile.

And Paul would be the first person to say that the work of salvation in his life was God’s act and God’s initiative from the beginning. God literally knocked him to his knees and turned him around from being the foremost persecutor of the church to its first great missionary.

This doesn’t mean that we sit idly by, waiting for God to do his thing. We have a role to play, always.

But the newness we long for in the deepest part of ourselves is ultimately a gift of God.

God was faithful in the past.

God is faithful in the present.

And God will be faithful in the future, whatever it holds.

God is always about to do a new thing.

Amen.

