

Love's Body

1 Corinthians 1:18-25; John 2:13:22

Lethbridge Mennonite Church

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I want to begin with a comment on how sermons take shape for me.

I offer this by way of explanation, for those who might be curious, and as an apology of sorts, to the poor worship leaders and musicians who try to prepare each week based on what themes I say my sermon will be about on Tuesday and then find something completely different on Sunday morning.

Each week, I start the week by reading the text or texts of the week, and then the worship resources that we are referring to, if we're in special season (like Lent). I send these out to everyone involved and then go on with my week.

Throughout the week, I commentaries and articles about the passage I've chosen. Normal preacher things.

I'll also just read the news of the day, novels, things that interest me. I'll watch films and listen to music with the Scriptures in mind.

I believe that God is always speaking, often through unlikely sources. I operate with this assumption. It's one of the givens in my life.

Bishop Michael Curry, primate of the Episcopal Church in America, once said that "stories are the song of the soul sung in the language of life."¹ I have found this to be true.

And so, I look for traces of God in what I see and experience throughout the week, trying to connect it back to the Scriptures I've chosen.

Everything that I read or watch or listen to or observe in my own life will kind of go into the hopper and kind of churn around throughout the week. Sometimes (usually Thursday, or Friday,

¹ Bishop Michael Curry, *Love is the Way: Holding on to Hope in Troubling Times* (New York: Avery, 2020), 219.

or Saturday...) something will just lodge in my brain and it will make me think of the texts in a new way, a way I hadn't anticipated way back on Tuesday.

And so, what comes out of my mouth on Sunday morning is sometimes quite different than what I planned earlier in the week. Sometimes it bears little resemblance to the worship resources.

I genuinely do feel bad for those involved in planning services alongside me given what I've just described. I can imagine it is frustrating. ☺

I don't think many of my preaching professors back in graduate school would be very complimentary of my method. Some would prefer a more methodical, exegetical approach of going through the passages, explaining what the Greek and Hebrew words mean, etc.

But all I can say in my defense is that part of how I understand my roles is that I am called to listen to God on behalf of our congregation.

Michael Curry also said this once: "What I've learned is that you can't open someone else's heart without being true to your own."²

This is how God seems to speak to me.

And each week, I hope and pray that my listening bears fruit and connects with you and with your experience as you walk your own journeys of faith.

On this third Sunday of Lent, we have encountered two texts that represent a kind of housecleaning—clearing the floor and getting back to basics.

We have Jesus clearing the temple of the moneychangers and livestock and calling the people back to prayer.

We have the Apostle Paul directing the first century church in Corinth to the centrality of Christ crucified, the center of his message and of the gospel, the foolishness of God that exposes all human "wisdom" as lacking.

I think that we often need housecleaning in our own lives—times where we sweep aside the clutter, get back to what truly matters. Times where we honestly reckon with the deepest

² Curry, 109.

questions about what it means to be a human being, about who God truly is, and about what our purpose on the planet really is.

This week, I was reminded of this when I read an article in *The New York Times* by Leigh Stein called “Influencers are the New Televangelists.”³

The article compares modern-day social media quasi-spiritual wellness influencers like Glennon Doyle, who amass thousands of followers online, to religious TV hucksters from yesteryear like Oral Roberts and Pat Robertson.

It’s a comparison that I think is spot on, even if the content of their message could hardly be more different. Stein describes a twenty-first century spiritual landscape that is familiar to many of us by now:

Many millennials who have turned their backs on religious tradition because it isn’t diverse, or inclusive enough, have found alternative scripture online. Our new belief system is a blend of left-wing political orthodoxy, intersectional feminism, self-optimization, therapy, wellness, astrology and Dolly Parton.

And we’ve found a different kind of clergy: personal growth influencers. Women like Ms. Doyle, who offer... us permission, validation and community on-demand...

Our screens may have shrunk, but we’re still drawn to spiritual counsel, especially when it doubles as entertainment.

It’s a popular message, obviously. Spirituality as entertainment and wellness and self-congratulatory politics and therapy? Who wouldn’t want that?

Well not everyone, apparently. Stein was down with this whole program for a while, but eventually grew weary of it due in no small part to this pandemic. Here’s what she says:

I have hardly prayed to God since I was a teenager, but the pandemic has cracked open inside me a profound yearning for reverence, humility and awe. **I have an overdraft on my outrage account. I want moral authority from someone who isn’t shilling a memoir or calling out her enemies on social media for clout.**

³ <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/03/05/opinion/influencers-glennon-doyle-instagram.html?action=click&module=Opinion&pgtype=Homepage>

Well. I wonder how many of us would resonate with her words, whether we are part of the church or not. I wonder how many of us are weary of the outrage and relentless marketing and self-promotion that seem to be part and parcel of life in the digital age.

Stein eloquently points to profound human needs that go beyond what today's Instavangelists are serving up:

Left-wing secular millennials may follow politics devoutly. But the women we've chosen as our moral leaders aren't challenging us to ask the fundamental questions that leaders of faith have been wrestling with for thousands of years: Why are we here? Why do we suffer? What should we believe in beyond the limits of our puny selfhood?

Stein concludes her article thus:

There is a chasm between the vast scope of our needs and what influencers can possibly provide. We're looking for guidance in the wrong places. Instead of helping us to engage with our most important questions, our screens might be distracting us from them. Maybe we actually need to go to something like church?

My first thought after reading that paragraph, and last sentence in particular, was a kind of smug, "Wouldn't that be something?"

My second thought was, "If that were to actually happen—if the burnt out and the worn out and the used up, and the distracted and the bewildered... if all those exhausted by or unsatisfied with the sources of spirituality and wisdom on offer in the broader culture were to actually do what Stein says and 'go to something like church,' what would they find?"

Are churches asking these 'fundamental questions' on a regular basis? Are churches regularly drilling down into the existential needs that Stein finds lacking in Influencer culture: 'Why are we here? Why do we suffer? What should we believe in beyond the limits of our puny selfhood?'"

Or are churches often not so very different than the temple in Jesus' day, more concerned about maintaining the "business of religion," more concerned about the bottom line, the attendance stats, the programs, the committees, our reputation in the community, our denominational brand, etc., etc., etc.

What if people like Leigh Stein made their way back to real brick and mortar churches after this pandemic and found little more than either updated versions of what Oral Roberts and Pat Robertson were selling back in the 80s or versions of this cocktail of individual wellness,

politics, and therapy that some, at least, are discovering to be unsatisfactory online, only this time with a kind thin veneer of Jesus on them?

What a great tragedy that would be, if people came to church looking for God and found only what was exhausting them out there in the world.

What a great tragedy it would be if people came to church hungry for good news, for truth, for forgiveness and found only another long list of things they had to do or to be or to portray themselves as online.

What a great tragedy it would be if people came to church looking for peace, for rest, for awe, for wonder, for a place to pray... and found only clutter.

I spoke earlier about housecleaning as a metaphor for our scriptures this morning.

Jesus, getting rid of all the clutter in the temple and calling people back to what it was made for.

Paul, cutting through all “human wisdom” with the simple, life-giving message of the foolishness of the cross.

I think we all have these moments in our lives where, if we are paying attention, we can be called back to basics, back to what matters, back to the meaning of our lives.

For Leigh Stein, it was the pandemic that opened this kind of a space for reflection.

For some it's a personal crisis. A death, a diagnosis, the breakdown of a relationship, the loss of a job, the betrayal of a friend, the struggles of a child.

For others, it can be a stage of life. You spend x number of years going through the motions and then one day you wake up and say, “Hang on, what I am actually doing? What is this gift of a life that I've been given actually for?”

Still others require no pressing crisis. God just has a way of speaking through the cracks and the seams of everyday life.

Last weekend I took a trip out to BC to see my kids. Thirteen hours alone in a van is a lot of time to think. No emails pinging, no phone calls to answer. Long road trips on my own have always felt like decluttering times for me.

I listened to a lot of podcasts. I listened to sermons, to theological discussions, the kinds of things you'd probably expect a pastor to listen to.

I also listened to music. It regularly amazes me how one song, even a few lines from a song, can connect me to the truth of God in a way that hours of sermons cannot (this is a sobering thing to realize as a preacher!).

At any rate, there's a British songwriter named David Gray that I've been listening to since I first heard him while listening to CKUA radio in a tractor on my dad's farm way back in my twenties.

I don't know much about David Gray's personal faith but putting the pieces together from his lyrics it seems like he's moved from a rather principled unbelief in earlier part of his career to a posture that seems more open to God and to the life of the spirit in his more recent work.

I was listening to his most recent album on my drive out to BC and a song called "No false gods" came on. It is a simple song with a simple refrain, repeated over and over again:

No false gods now
We are love's body, or we are undone.

Those two lines spoke to me more deeply than three hours of sermons and podcasts.

And as a Christian, it reminded me that the church is the body of Christ. We are the "body" that is to love one another and the world as God in Christ has loved us.

No more of the false gods that cannot save, no more of the distractions and dead ends. No more of politics and self-help psychology masquerading as religion. No more wagging self-righteous fingers at each other or the world.

No more of the clutter.

We must be about the love of Christ or we will be undone. This is the task of the body of Christ on earth.

This is the meaning of the lives that we have been given. This is the point of the church. This is what is left when everything else is stripped away and we see what really matters in our lives and in our world.

And of course, the simple phrase, “Love’s body” drew my thoughts to the cross, where Jesus showed us what this love looks like.

We preach Christ crucified, Paul says. It sounded foolish at the time. Paul knew this very well. He knew that for most people, the cross of Christ looked like a failed Messiah, another idealistic revolutionary who met his predictable end.

It looks like a shameful spectacle, not the moment of love’s triumph over all that is unlovely in us and in our world.

It is the kind of thing that sends people in search of other, more impressive gods. Then and now.

We may like the idea of Jesus flexing his muscles in the temple, but not suffering and dying on Calvary’s cross.

And yet this was always Jesus’ purpose. He said so during his decluttering of the temple when people demanded a sign to prove he had the authority to act in this way.

You want a sign, he says. *Fine, how’s this for a sign. Destroy this temple and in three days I will raise it again.*

The Jewish leaders laugh at this prospect. A temple that took long decades to build, rebuilt in three days. Ludicrous. The man is clearly as crazy as he looks, running around the temple with a whip in his hands.

But of course, Jesus wasn’t referring to the physical structure of the temple. John makes it clear that Jesus was foreshadowing, talking about his own life.

He was pointing ahead to a destruction that would take place on a Roman cross and a rebuilding that would look like an empty tomb.

When the Jewish leaders demanded to see a sign, the sign that Jesus gave him was himself. He described his own body as the temple, his own fate as more significant than the fate of the Jerusalem temple.

This is the love of God made manifest in a human body—a love that goes to the very end to demonstrate the depths of God’s faithfulness to his creation, to reveal the weight of human sin, to offer unmerited forgiveness and salvation, and to show us what our love is to look like.

It is “love’s body” that undoes us and remakes us into vessels that will carry this love into the world.

My prayer for us on this third Sunday of Lent is that we would have the courage to allow Jesus to ask us some searching questions, to clean house, to sweep away all in our lives that that does not align with his priorities for us and for the world.

I pray this for us as a church. And I pray this for each one of us as individual followers of Jesus.

It is not always pleasant when Jesus cleans house.

But it is always what we need. And it is always done out of love.

Thanks be to God.

Amen.

