

The Truth Shall Make You Odd

Joel 2:28-29; Luke 4:18-19; 1 Corinthians 2:1-5

Lethbridge Mennonite Church

By: Ryan Dueck

June 5, 2022/Pentecost Sunday

I'm going to ask for your patience at the outset of my sermon this morning. For the first chunk of it, you are probably going to be wondering, "What on earth does any of this have to do with Pentecost, with the coming of the Holy Spirit and the birth of the church?"

I will get there. I promise. But perhaps by a bit of a more circuitous route than normal.

"The Truth Shall Make You Odd." This is the title of my sermon this morning. It comes from the twentieth century American Catholic novelist Flannery O'Connor who once said, "You shall know the truth and the truth shall make you odd."

It's a riff on Jesus' own words from John 8:32: "You shall know the truth and the truth shall set you free."

O'Connor's quote came to mind when I saw one of the scriptures chosen for this Sunday, the words from 1 Corinthians 2 that were just read: "I resolved to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified."

This is an odd thing to decide to know.

Paul knows a lot of things about Jesus. He has encountered Jesus personally and powerfully on the road to Damascus. He has spoken eloquent words about the self-emptying nature of God, about the demolition of religious and ethnic walls, about how without the resurrection our faith is useless and we're still in our sins.

Paul could resolve to know any of these things.

But no. Paul decides that it is the crucified Christ that is the focal point of his knowledge of God and God's ways. He speaks often of the foolishness of the cross being wiser than human wisdom; he calls it a "stumbling block."

This is odd.

But maybe the oddness of Christian truth is just what we need right now, whether inside or outside the church.

Perhaps “odd” is what many people long for even if they don’t have the language for it.

The first few lines in the “Sermon thoughts” portion of our Pentecost worship resources went like this:

Too many... churches have a feeling of being paralyzed by a preoccupation with survival. So many congregations are focusing inward and trying to minister to their weakening congregations. Sadly, however, it is not working...

Pentecost is a time to be reminded that... it is the coming of the Holy Spirit that constitutes the church, and Pentecost serves as a reminder that the church was intended to be not a static institution, but a movement initiated by the Messiah.

Well yes and amen. Even though I happen to think highly of institutions, there is no doubt that the movement initiated and instituted by Jesus was never intended to be static.

And yet, that first part hits close to home, doesn’t it? The church has fallen on hard times in the twenty-first century Western world.

There are good stories here and there, but overall, the narrative is of a shrinking church, of weakening conviction, of an exodus of young people, of churches closing their doors.

This is true of virtually all denominations across the Western world.

And yet.

Something about our modern post-Christian world is profoundly unsatisfactory to many, *many* people. Mental health crises seem to be everywhere, addiction, anxiety, and depression are exploding through the roof.

All does not seem well in this world where we many are leaving the church and Christianity behind.

People are *desperate* for meaning and mystery and an encounter beyond the material world, but increasingly have no idea where they might find it.

Some are looking in strange places. A few weeks ago, I came across an article in *Harper's* magazine with the following title: "Sorcerer's Apprentice: Looking for Demons in a Disenchanted World."¹

The headline stopped me in my tracks. Who on earth would *look* for demons?

Well, a guy named Kent Russell would, it turns out. He talked to witches and mediums and wizards and everything in between. All in search of a dark spiritual underworld.

He acknowledges that his pursuit likely seems a strange one to most people. But my interest was less in his strange pursuit than how he described what motivated him:

[M]y interest... **stems from a keenly felt, soul-sucking disillusionment. By accident of birth, I am a modern, which means I will never know a charmed world.** A world of consecrated hosts and faerie-haunted forests, where the line between individual agency and impersonal force is blurred at best... Significance has retreated from the outer world into our respective skulls, where, over time, it has stiffened, bloated, and finally decomposed into nothing, into dust.

This decay of faith—in institutions, in other people—is practically audible to me. I exist within a purely immanent culture in which the value of human life has been reduced to the parameters of the marketplace, where little is sacred and even less is profane. And I cannot take [it] much longer.

Despite all the advances we have made in reason and science and technology, so many people still feel the "soul-sucking disillusionment" that the author speaks of.

We do indeed live in a disenchanted world. A world that was birthed and shaped by Christianity, yet which seems determined to forget or ignore or reject the very beliefs that made it possible.

I recently listened to a question-and-answer period after a lecture by the British historian Tom Holland.

In his most recent book *Dominion*, Holland powerfully diagnoses the strange moment that we inhabit in the West where we are deeply Christian in our ethics and assumptions (loathe as we are to acknowledge this) and yet decidedly post-Christian in our belief.

¹ <https://harpers.org/archive/2022/06/sorcerers-apprentice-looking-for-demons/>

The most interesting part of Holland's response was what he had to say about the role the church might play going forward:

Churches cannot afford to be a kind of pale simulacrum [*imitation*] of secular liberal society. They have to actually emphasize everything that may make them feel embarrassed in a liberal secular society. They have to emphasize the strangeness, the weirdness, the bizarre quality of what they believe in. Because ultimately [Christianity] is weird, bizarre and strange. **But it's that strangeness that has animated it for two thousand years...** My advice, for what it's worth, would be that churches should be prepared to emphasize the strangeness because that is what I think people will be looking for.²

Tom Holland is, as far as I know, an agnostic (for now ☺).

But how fascinating for a secular historian to point out both the fundamentally Christian nature of much of what passes for secular ethics and this idea that the church should unapologetically proclaim the glorious strangeness of the Christian hope.

It's time to make some connections here.

Pentecost is weird. Strange. Odd.

Tongues of fire, rushing wind people speaking in different tongues. It's not the sort of thing that respectable, rational people are drawn to.

But even beyond this, it is an odd hope to which we are called. This is true throughout the biblical story and is evident in our three readings.

The prophet Joel looked forward to a time of visions and dreams, when the Spirit of God would be poured out on all.

Jesus announces in the synagogue that the Spirit of God is on him, linking Joel's prophecy with "the year of the Lord's favour," a time when those used to bad news would get a taste of good news, when the power structures that everyone was familiar with would be upended.

² <https://podcasts.apple.com/ca/podcast/talkingbird/id1381533696?i=1000560084281>

And Paul reminds us that the human response to the coming of God among us with good news, was to nail him to a cross.

And that—incredibly—what we intended for evil, God intended for God.

The forgiveness of sins, the embodiment of sacrificial love, the conquering of death and sin and evil through resurrection—Paul affirms that it is this unexpected plan of salvation that is the source of all hope.

Not earthly wisdom, Paul says. Not eloquence or “rational” hope. No, it is the Spirit of the risen Christ and the power of God that gave birth to the church, and which has fired its hope for over two millennia.

We shouldn’t forget the odd hope that we have inherited. We should not be ashamed of it. It has changed the world and continues to do so today, even if this isn’t as obvious in the West as elsewhere.

We shouldn’t desperately try to ensure our survival by attempting to be “relevant.” We should not try to pattern ourselves after a world where nothing is sacred and even less is profane.

We should not lower ourselves to the language of marketing to attract precious human souls who are already used to being reduced to economic units.

We should not try to prove that Christianity is really quite reasonable and that we’re pretty much on board with all of the smart-sounding socially approved causes and politics.

We should not, as Tom Holland says, labour toward becoming a pale imitation of secular liberal society.

Over the course of my life, I’ve spent some time dabbling in all these things and I have to say that not only do they not work very well, but they represent so much less than what people need.

Like Paul, we should proclaim Jesus Christ crucified, raised from the dead for forgiveness of sins and for the hope of life eternal.

We should point not to our own wisdom but on the power of God to bring life out of death.

[Aside: There have been three times in the past few months when our church (or a funeral home) was packed, when people spectrum from secular to religious came together. Funerals.

Yes, there is a measure of social obligation involved in funerals. But I think that death still reminds us of our need for a hope beyond this world.

Richard Beck recently wrote an article about “thoughts and prayers” and how angry many people are at this familiar response to mass shootings like the recent ones in Buffalo, NY and Uvalde, TX.

After noting that it is of course true that empty words without action are useless, he goes on to say that “prayer” is a category that people still intuitively know they might need, and that this becomes especially evident around suffering and death:

[L]ife demands hallowing, and we feel this perhaps most acutely during times of shared suffering... And like it or not, prayer is how we hallow. When we suffer, we turn to prayer. Always have, always will. Sorry post-Christians, but nihilism [nothing ultimately matters] in the face of suffering just isn't a good look. And I think a lot of post-Christians feel stymied and frustrated by this, when they look at their [worldview] and recognize they have no non-religious response to suffering as profound, human and hallowing as prayer.³

I think what Beck says about “thoughts and prayers” also applies to funerals. Even in a post-Christian society where many people seem to want little to do with the church, we still retain this idea that some things—death, for example—demand a “hallowing.”]

We should proclaim the Holy Spirit, sent to indwell and energize and advocate for God’s people, sent to move us out from our static institutions to become good news to the very people that Jesus was drawn to. The poor, the broken-hearted, the captives, the blind, the oppressed.

We should point to this table, where we take bread and wine and say, “this is our God.”

It is an odd story. But it is the hope of the world.

The truth shall indeed make us odd. But it will also, as Jesus said, set us free.

Amen.



³ <http://experimentaltheology.blogspot.com/2022/05/thoughts-on-thoughts-and-prayers.html>