

Your Love Has Won Us Over

Psalm 117; 1 John 1:1-4

Lethbridge Mennonite Church

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Mid-June is a time of the year when many of us are already casting an eager eye to summer. School is wrapping up for kids, holiday plans are being finalized, and many of the pursuits that occupy us from September to June are preparing to take a break.

In the Christian calendar, Easter and Pentecost have come and gone and we are settling into the season of “Ordinary Time” which will take us from now until Advent in late November.

Ordinary Time. This is an interesting term.

“Ordinary” can have a negative connotation to it. “Exceptional” or “remarkable” sound way better than “ordinary.” Nobody wants to be ordinary, particularly in our cultural context where we are encouraged in all kinds of subtle and not-so-subtle ways to be unique, to do anything we can to stand out.

And yet, “ordinary time” is the time that we are most familiar with, isn’t it? This is the time of daily life, of getting up and going to work and taking care of the kids and spreadsheets and dealing with colleagues and preparing meals and serving on committees and trying to exercise and celebrating birthdays and anniversaries and going to the doctor and negotiating the everyday challenges that come our way.

Ordinary time is *most* of the time, in life and in faith.

Well, speaking of having an eye on summer, this summer Mennonite Church Canada is coming to Alberta for our biennial nationwide gatherings. From July 29-Aug 1, Gathering 2022 will be taking place in Edmonton (the youth gathering will be at Camp Valaqua July 31-Aug 4).

The theme this year is “We Declare What We Have Seen and Heard.” It’s taken from the passage we just heard, 1 John 1:1-4.

Mennonite Church Canada has prepared a six-Sunday sermon series for congregations to use ahead of the meetings in Edmonton.

We're not going to use all six. But for the next three Sundays in June, we are going to be dipping into this sermon series, and the theme of the conference, talking specifically about what it means to declare the good news of Jesus in our specific cultural context. You'll likely notice some continuity and overlap with some of the themes I spent time on last Sunday.

Hopefully this will be a way to prepare those of us who will be attending the gathering this summer, whether virtually or in person (you can still sign up for either!). I also hope it can be a small way of reinforcing our connections with our broader Mennonite church family across Canada.

I want to begin by reading an introduction to the theme "We Declare" that has been provided by Mennonite Church Canada:

This theme is an important one for us to consider. Our congregations are in flux: many are aging and getting smaller in number, and many are seeking to reimagine themselves in new ways. New Canadian and nontraditional congregations are joining the Mennonite Church, and many congregations are becoming more culturally diverse. At the same time, the role of the church within Canadian society is continually shifting further away from a position of cultural or political importance.

What place does our distinctive Christian message, the gospel, have in a religiously plural and culturally diverse world? How can we speak of our faith in a society of many faiths and no faith, a society that has seen all too well the harm the church can inflict in the name of Jesus?

Is it possible in all this to imagine our churches proclaiming and living out a good news that is truly good news for humanity and all creation, even to imagine new believers joining us in following Jesus in his good-news way of love?

Is it possible? Well, I think we all intuitively know that the answer *has* to be "yes! Of course it's possible!"

And yet, my sense is that many of us—in the Mennonite Church and the Western church more broadly—are uneasy about this idea of declaring what we have seen and heard.

Perhaps we fear being perceived as intolerant or exclusive.

Perhaps we feel guilt for those times when the Christian message has been distorted or used for ends that we don't agree with, or shame for how the church has failed.

Perhaps we just plain old struggle with doubt! We aren't really sure what we believe!

Perhaps we look at a theme like "We declare what we have seen and heard" and think, "hmm, what *have* I seen or heard?"

Last Sunday, I quoted a term in my sermon that has gained wide traction over the last number of years to describe our unique cultural moment. That term was "disenchantment."

What does this word mean?

It's a term used mainly by philosophers and historians and theologians to describe the fact that faith *feels* different in the twenty first century west than at most other parts of Christian history and even human history, more generally.

Faith no longer *feels* as obvious as it once did. God was once more of a given, a fact of life. There was more social support for belief because everyone had it and everyone supported the institutions that formed and reinforced it.

It would have been hard to find someone in medieval Europe, for example, who didn't believe in God. The idea would have been almost literally unthinkable.

Very simply put: It's easier to believe when everyone else does.

I don't have to tell you that we no longer live in a world where the belief in a transcendent God is obvious or assumed.

The Enlightenment, the Scientific Revolution, the Industrial Revolution, Globalization, the Age of the Internet... over the last few centuries, as human knowledge and technological capacities have expanded, as cultures and religions have come into much closer contact with one another, the world has grown ever less mysterious, ever less "enchanted."

Belief in God, where it remains, is much more individualistic, more selective, more of a "do it yourself" assemblage of whatever beliefs "work for me."

It is no longer a given. No longer just a fact of life. It's an optional extra, for many people. Something that might be useful in helping with mental health or dealing with stress.

This is the disenchanted world that we live in in the twenty-first century.

And yet this disenchanted world is no less in need of good news than any other “world” at any other point in history.

Sometimes the story of our cultural trajectory in the west is told as a story of liberation from the shackles of superstitions and oppressions of religion. It is told as the story of emancipation, of freedom.

There may be a sliver of truth to this. Certain forms of religion *were* oppressive and we do well to move beyond them.

But if religion and Christianity were just bad news—something that human beings believed when they didn’t know better and would inevitably grow out of—we might expect to see certain things in a world where its influence is fading.

We might expect to see a flowering of culture, of wellness and health and vitality and equality and tolerance and community and flourishing once the shackles of religion were shed.

I probably also don’t have to tell you that while there are glimpses of this goodness here and there, overall, this is not, in fact, what we see in the post-Christian west.

What we in fact see are...

- ... skyrocketing rates of depression and anxiety and addictions of all kinds
- ... an ever-widening gap between rich and poor
- ... weakening commitments to institutions of all kinds
- ... an explosion of shallow and vulgar forms of entertainment
- ... divisive and polarizing public discourse
- ... an unhealthy dependence upon technology
- ... and people hiving off into endless categories of identity and fighting for territory.

We also see despair. We see people adrift, struggling with meaninglessness and isolation and loneliness. We see people lacking a coherent vision of either the past or the future within which to anchor their lives, lacking a compelling a hope to guide their action in the present.

This is particularly true among the young.

This week, Ross Douthat wrote a column for *The New York Times* about the phenomenon of young people saying that they don’t want to have children because they fear raising them in the world they are inheriting.

The specific reason for this addressed in his article was the threat posed by climate change, but I have heard many others. It could be racial injustice or the economy and a lack of employment options or the ugliness of the world of social media or a difficulty in forming meaningful stable relationships with people that have shared values.

It's not uncommon to hear people south of thirty complain that the world is too messed up to bring children into.

This, despite the fact that in many ways there has never been a time in history where more people enjoyed more rights, where the standard of living in places like Canada is higher than ever, where until very recently life expectancy was longer than it had ever been (it's gone down in places like Canada mainly due to things like suicide and drug-related deaths), where technology has brought pretty much anything the human mind could dream up to our doorsteps and screen pretty much on demand.

Something else is going on in our despairing moment. Douthat argues that while there are many reasons for the phenomenon of young people not wanting to have children, one that doesn't receive nearly enough attention is religious in nature.

Explanations for the recent surge in teenage misery that focus on the effects of social media, the impact of the pandemic, overprotective parenting and other factors all make a lot of sense.

But religious shifts belong in that conversation, too, especially since depression and anxiety appear sharpest among the most liberal younger Americans. If some of the passions of progressivism have their origins in spiritual impulses and aspirations, the absence of ultimate religious hope may darken the shadows of despair over young-progressive souls.¹

I don't bring this article up because I want to make an argument for the ethics of procreation. This is a complicated question with many factors.

I do it to highlight something about our cultural moment, the way our defaults have changed, and the way our horizons have shrunk.

Our cultural despair is religious in nature.

¹ <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/06/08/opinion/children-god-climate-change.html>

Given all this, I think that the theme for the Mennonite Church Canada Gathering this summer could be a timely one.

The scenario that I have just described is not a reality “out there” in the world beyond the four safe walls of the church. Despair and doubt exist in the church, too.

And even if we feel that our hope and faith is strong personally, many of us look around and see friends, kids, colleagues, grandkids, neighbours struggling in all kinds of ways.

These are the cultural waters in which we swim.

And this is the context in which we are called to bear witness to the goodness of God, to the hope offered by Jesus Christ, to the meaning and dignity of human life and the call to rise to the challenge of our vocation.

We’ve heard two passages of Scripture this morning, one a short Psalm of praise and the opening words to the letter of 1 John.

There is one who existed from the beginning... These words echo the first words of Genesis and the first words of the Gospel of John.

In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.

In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God...

And now, 1 John 1: *We declare to you what was **from the beginning**, what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we have looked at and touched with our hands, concerning the word of life.*

The God who brought something out of nothing in Genesis 1, the eternal Word of John 1... this God has come near in Jesus Christ. We saw him, John says. We heard his voice. We touched the word of life!

Two thousand years later, we are the inheritors of this testimony. We have been caught up in this story. We have not seen or heard in the same way as John, but we, too, are participants in this life, this vision of what our world can (and will) be.

And that word—“participants”—is important. We are participants, not engineers. We join in with what God has done, is doing, and will do.

We amplify the goodness, justice, righteousness, mercy and compassion of God in the world. We pursue the *shalom* of God in a world of disharmony and confusion and chaos.

We speak of what we have seen and heard, of the forgiveness of God, of the love that created and sustains the world and gives shape and dignity and purpose to our lives.

And then Psalm 117, which points to the faithfulness of this God's love for us and for the world.

We've heard it in the NIV. I want to read it again in a translation by a Jewish scholar named Pamela Greenberg. Here's how she translates it in *The Complete Psalms*:

Shine praises upon God, all nations;
Let all the world approach you with worship.

For your love has won us over;
your loyalty exists for all time—praise God.²

I love that line. *Your love has won us over.*

This, ultimately, is what a despairing world is looking for in all kinds of ways, some good, many not so good.

Love.

People want to be loved, to know that they have value that they don't have to earn, to believe that they *matter*. This is such a deep and profound human need.

And the gospel of Jesus Christ meets it in the deepest and most profound way. It says that God *so loved* the world (which includes us!), that in Christ, he went the way of the cross for our salvation.

This is what I hope that we will boldly declare in Edmonton this summer. That the love of God, in Christ, has won us over. I hope everything that we say and do will be anchored in this.

I hope we will not be afraid to be odd. I hope we will follow Tom Holland's advice (the secular historian that I quoted last week), that we won't try to be a pale imitation of the culture around us, taking its talking points as our starting points.

² Pamela Greenberg, *The Complete Psalms: The Book of Prayer Songs in a New Translation* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2010), 256.

I hope we will emphasize the strange beauty and love and forgiveness and hope of Christ that has animated our world for the last two millennia.

I hope we will celebrate that it is the love of God that gives shape and meaning to the deepest and truest parts of our experience, and which anchors our hope in a future kingdom that is coming.

The world needs to hear this. The world needs to hear of good news that transcends our fear and despair and lack of vision, a hope and a promise that extends beyond our best and our worst, that can heal and restore and judge and forgive more than we can imagine.

I want to close with a quote by C.S. Lewis. This comes from an essay called “Is Theology Poetry.” He’s responding to those who say of Christianity that it’s not *true*, it’s just a metaphorical way of speaking about some of the highest ideals of humanism.

The whole essay is worth reading, but the last line is the best one:

I believe in Christianity as I believe that the sun has risen: not only because I see it, but because by it I see everything else.³

Amen. May it be so for us, too.



³ C.S. Lewis, “Is Theology Poetry,” in *Essay Collection: Faith, Christianity, and the Church* (London: HarperCollins, 2000), 21.