

Seek and You Will Find

Colossians 2:5-16; Luke 11:1-13

Lethbridge Mennonite Church

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Way back in June, I did a three-sermon series based loosely on study and worship resources provided by Mennonite Church Canada in anticipation of our nationwide gathering this summer.

I used those three sermons as an opportunity to reflect on what it means to bear witness to Jesus Christ at this particular time and place, in what many have called our “disenchanted” post-Christian age.

As you see in your bulletin the Gathering begins this week in Edmonton. I’ll be leaving on Thursday and returning home Monday night.

On Tuesday morning, as I was shaking out the cobwebs after a week away and getting my bearings for the Gathering in Edmonton and trying to decide what to preach on this Sunday, I looked at the assigned texts for this week.

I was drawn to the one from Colossians in particular. Living lives rooted and established in Christ is *always* an appropriate theme for the church, but perhaps especially when you’re coming together as a nationwide body of faith.

Well, I did what I often do when I decide to preach on a passage. I start by looking at what I said last time I preached on it!

Usually, I do this to avoid repeating myself. But this time I decided on the opposite approach, as you’ll see.

The last time I preached on this passage from Colossians was almost exactly eight years ago, July 13, 2014. And I preached on it immediately *after* a Mennonite Church Canada Gathering in Winnipeg.

Well, that seemed a connection too interesting to ignore. And the more I read about what I said eight years ago the more it seemed to reflect exactly what I want to say today.

It expressed my deepest hopes for the Mennonite Church in Canada, for our church, for the church in the West, and for the church around the world.

So, for the first part of my sermon, I'm going to say a lot of the same things I said eight years ago (with a few modifications). I'll make some connections with our gospel text from Luke after and wrap it all up in a nice tidy bow after that.

So, the context is a letter that Paul wrote to the Colossian church. Like all of Paul's letters to the churches that he founded (which take up a big part of our New Testaments), this letter was written within the half century or so after Jesus' death and resurrection.

It was written to a small church without much power or influence, that found itself, in many ways, on the margins of the broader culture, a church that was having to wrestle with all kinds of ethical issues that came about as the (at first, primarily Jewish) church began to welcome Gentiles.

Like our twenty-first century Mennonite church (and the Christian church, in general), the churches Paul founded faced temptations and diversions and distractions that sought to pull them away from their central commitment to Jesus Christ.

For the Colossians, the challenges came from what Paul calls "philosophy and empty deceit according to human tradition and not to Christ." (v. 8).

Like our culture, there were many beliefs floating around. There were beliefs in "elemental spirits" or demigods from the Greek/Roman pantheon in some quarters. There was also a reemphasis on aspects of the Jewish law from the other side, which members of the church found attractive for various reasons.

In our day, the challenges are different. There is the bland secularism that floats about in the air in Canada and which many default to. There is a more aggressive form of "progressive" politics that many have labeled "wokeness" that attracts others.

There is what Eastern Orthodox theologian David Bentley Hart has referred to as "religion as interior decorating." Faith becomes something like an accessory that we can tailor to meet the needs of the individual self (the "spiritual but not religious" crowd).

There are probably others. But whatever the rival philosophies are, whether in Colossae or Canada, the response, for Paul, is the same.

Cling to Christ. Cling to the one who was nailed to a cross to free us from guilt and shame, who triumphed over those who sought to make a public spectacle of him by defeating death and the forces of evil.

This is a word that we must never grow tired of hearing.

Whatever the future might look like for Mennonite Church Canada or for us here at Lethbridge Mennonite Church, we must never cease to speak about Jesus as the centre of who we are and what we do.

It is easy to become issue focused rather than Jesus focused. This is true across the Christian church, not just the Mennonite corner of it.

It is easy to allow issues to determine how and when we will listen to Jesus rather than allowing Jesus to determine how we will become engaged in issues.

There are many examples.

If we speak about peace but are hesitant to speak of the Prince of Peace, the one who came to proclaim peace, the one who died to bring peace between God and human beings and between human beings, then we cut ourselves off from the ultimate source of deep and lasting peace (not just the absence of conflict, but the presence of healing and transformation).

If we speak about and work toward social justice, but don't speak the one who promises to one day beat swords into plowshares and usher in God's final kingdom of *shalom*, we are no different than any other secular political advocacy group, and we often risk descending into conflict over competing visions of justice.

If we speak about evangelism but mainly a "church growth strategy" or a way to increase the budget, or with a narrow and individualistic conception of "saving souls" as the totality of the good news—then we risk treating people like objects, means to ends, instead of image bearers and we're not much different than a slick marketing agency.

If we speak about human sexuality in a way that uncritically accepts cultural assumptions about human desire and subjective experience as primary aspects of our identity and adopts extremely individualistic notions of freedom and choice, if we are drawn in by dehumanizing lies about human personhood in a culture of hypersexualized advertising and entertainment, rather than looking to Jesus' understanding and approach to these things, then we will be sinking our roots into soil that cannot support the way we are intended to grow and flourish.

If we speak about racism in ways that treat the category of race as ultimate rather than our identity in Christ then we will be ignoring the liberating truth of the One who brings all tribes and tongues together as one, and who alone can heal the divisions and wounds that our sin has caused.

If we speak about creation care divorced from God's redemptive purposes for a groaning creation made known in Jesus Christ, then our horizons begin to shrink and we begin to think that everything depends upon us and our fragile and inconsistent efforts, rather than the promise of God who works in and among us, and who will one day do for us and for the planet what we cannot do for ourselves.

If we treat any of these important things as ends in and of themselves and we separate them from the life, death, resurrection, ascension, and future return of Jesus, then we have ceased to be the church of Jesus and have become indistinguishable from a political organization or a social club. We have nothing unique to say.

This is not to say that organizations that pursue these ends apart from faith in Jesus Christ are illegitimate or are doing bad work. They are not, even if they are often barely aware of how Christian their foundational moral assumptions actually are.

It is simply to say that *for us*, as the people of the way, as the church, whether Mennonite Church Canada or Lethbridge Mennonite Church, we must speak about these things with our roots firmly in place.

Yes, we live in uncertain times. Yes, the church does look and feel different for many of us than it has at many points in the past. Yes, discernment of difficult issues and the future of the church is demanding and fraught with many perils.

But some things never change, whether in first century Colossae or twenty-first century Canada.

As the church of Jesus Christ, we are to live our lives in and through and because of the power of the crucified Jesus, rooted, established, and built up in him.

Whatever else we might do, we must never lose sight of the fact that the church exists for and because of Jesus Christ and no one else.

That's what I said in the immediate aftermath of a Mennonite Church Canada Gathering in 2014. And that's what I still feel deep in my bones the week before a Mennonite Church Canada Gathering in 2022.

Next week in Edmonton, I hope that we will allow Jesus to determine how we will become engaged in issues, rather than allowing issues to determine how and when we will listen to Jesus.

But perhaps that's enough about Mennonite Church Canada for now. I know that not everyone is as interested or engaged in our upcoming Gathering as I might be, and you might think that three and a half sermons on it is more enough!

I think there is a word from God to us this morning that goes beyond the specific opportunities and challenges of the moment in our denomination.

Let's move on to our gospel text from Luke and see if we can make some connections.

It's a text about prayer, on the surface. It begins with the disciples asking Jesus to teach them to pray. It contains an abbreviated form of the Lord's prayer.

But most fundamentally, it is a passage about *seeking God*. And this is what I think we need to hear. We are to be seekers after God.

Last Sunday in his excellent sermon on why we suffer and how to fit human suffering into our understanding of how God works in the world, Henry Janzen said that the why question "steers us toward a "desperate, dogged yearning."

I like that phrase. "Desperate, dogged yearning." And I think this is true not just when it comes to questions of suffering, even if it is often felt most acutely here.

Suffering can and does drive us toward God, but our yearning should also be a response to the goodness and beauty and love that we experience in the world. As Henry reminded us, these, too are undeserved. We do not earn them. We have no right to them. They are sheer gifts.

Our yearning and seeking and pleading ought to stretch out in response to the bad, the good the beautiful, and the mysterious in our world.

All of the things that matter most to us as human beings—the things that threaten to crush us, the things that lift our gaze in reverence, the things that take our breath away—all of these things ought to direct us Godward.

This is the image that we get in the story Jesus tells about the friend who persistently asks for three loaves of bread.

The lesson Jesus draws from the story is pretty clear: “So I say to you, Ask, and it will be given you; seek, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you.”

Ask, seek, knock.

I wonder how many of us still do this. It’s very easy to settle into a life of complacency when it comes to faith. It’s easy to go through the motions, expecting little, investing little.

We believe God is there but perhaps not particularly interested in what’s going on here. And so, we return the favour. We busy ourselves with our own agendas and leave God on the shelf.

Prayer becomes lifeless. Worship half-hearted. Service grudging. Maybe we’ve knocked and encountered too much silence over the years. Maybe the world seems too confusing these days and seeking God seems like too much work.

If this is how you feel, I want to say that you are not alone. I get this. I know the feeling.

It has felt like a uniquely exhausting few years out there in the world. And as we discussed in the sermons in June, faith *feels* harder when there is so little in our broader disenchanting culture that supports it.

Whenever I feel this way, my default is to go back to basics. And in Luke 11 Jesus gives us the basics.

Teach us to pray, the disciples say. And in response, Jesus gives them five things to pray in a kind of “Lord’s Prayer lite” (Matthew’s version is longer and contains the Lord’s Prayer that most of us memorized):

Father, hallowed be your name. To hallow is to acknowledge and to honour the holiness of God. We begin by remembering that there is a holiness and “enchantment” all around us, even when we don’t or can’t perceive it. The poet W.B. Yeats once said that “The world is full of magic things, patiently waiting for our senses to grow sharper.”

Your kingdom come. Not *our* kingdom, but God’s kingdom. Our kingdoms inevitably devolve into conflict and self-interest. Even when our intentions are good, the kingdoms we build are less than God intends. We pray for God’s kingdom of peace and justice and wholeness to come. We rehearse the truth that God is God and we are not.

Give us each day our daily bread. We are small and dependent creatures, as much as modern life tends to shield us from this truth. We need God for our daily sustenance, even if it's easy to forget or ignore this.

And forgive us our sins, for we also forgive everyone who sins against us. Forgiveness is one of the deepest needs we have. We are people who do wrong and to whom wrong is done. We need freedom from the shame and guilt of the former and healing from the wounds of the latter. We need God's forgiveness, and we need to forgive one another.

And do not bring us to the time of trial. Or, deliver us from evil, as some other translations put it. Rescue us. Protect us. Steer us down better roads.

This is the shape that our asking, seeking, and knocking is to take, whether as individual followers of Jesus, as local churches, or as nationwide denominations.

This is how to pray. This is how to live. This is how to orient ourselves before God and before one another.

This is how to sink our roots deep down into the soil of Christ and to live lives of faith, hope, and love in response.

And of course, we must always remember what Jesus said right at the end of this passage. I'm paraphrasing here, but he essentially says, "If you, as human parents know how to give good gifts to your children, *how much more* will God—who *is* love—give you what you need for faith and for life?"

May God help us to sink our roots down deep in Christ, and to never be embarrassed to place him at the centre of all that we do and all that we are.

Amen.

