

God's Delightful Decision

Isaiah 1:10-20; Luke 12:32-40

Lethbridge Mennonite Church

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Over the course of around four decades of being a Christian and nearly fifteen years of being a pastor, I have observed two broad trends when it comes to how people conceptualize Christian faith.

This observation is entirely unoriginal. You've probably seen it, too, perhaps even in your circles of friends and family. But it occurred to me again as I read this week's scripture passages.

In very general terms, Christians seem to drift into two camps. Those who think faith is about what you *do* and those who think that faith is what you *believe*. Those who see the gospel primarily about social and political and moral concerns and those who see it the gospel as set of beliefs or doctrines that is to be proclaimed.

In even more general terms (there are always exceptions to every generalization), liberal or progressive people of faith tend to prefer the first option and more conservative folks the second.

It will likely not surprise you to hear me say that I think both approaches express vital truths.

Let's start with the first camp, those who think that Christianity is about what we do. The vital truth here is that faith actually *does* ask things of us.

It matters how we live our lives. It matters whether we give ourselves over to love and to the pursuit of justice and peace and mercy or to their ugly opposites.

God cares about *this* world, not just the next one, right? Do we not pray "thy will be done, *on earth* as in heaven?"

The good news of Jesus is not just some kind of abstract sin management system whose benefits are realized primarily in our hearts or the afterlife. It's about pursuing the kingdom of God—God's preferred arrangement of human relationships and systems and states of affairs here and now.

This approach to faith finds strong resonance in our passage from Isaiah today which is a blistering assault on worship that is detached from the pursuit of justice and care and concern for the oppressed.

God is wearied and angered by elaborate rituals and sacrifices while the plight of the poor is ignored, while violence goes unchecked, while the vulnerable are disregarded.

It's not a particularly comforting passage. God evidently cares very little for "proper" worship that ignores righteousness, justice, and mercy.

When I read this passage on Tuesday, I couldn't help but think back to the previous morning at the Mennonite Church Canada Gathering in Edmonton.

I had been asked to tell the story of our church's connections with L'Arche in the morning worship service and so was sitting in a hotel board room with others who were involved in the service to touch base and pray.

It took us nearly ten minutes to talk through *every* detail of the service. It was planned almost down to the second. There was beautiful music and stories and prayers and a sermon, of course. There were transitions to the stage to manage. I was instructed to be off to the side of the stage *while* I was being introduced to not take too much time in getting to the mic.

It was a meticulously planned production. And I get it. There were a lot of moving parts to keep straight. People like to know what's coming (myself included). I've been on the other end of this scenario trying to plan services and to communicate clearly.

But reading Isaiah the next morning felt like a blast of cold water to the face. God evidently cares far less about getting the details right in worship than he does in weightier matters of justice and righteousness and mercy.

And what about those weightier matters? How are we doing on those?

Well, Mennonites have long believed that what we do matters in faith, and so in Edmonton there were also displays and workshops and discussions and resources about our relationship with our indigenous neighbours, about Israel and Palestine, about creation care, about the church's history with sexual minorities.

We may not all agree on the specifics of what justice and righteousness look like on each of these matters, or what should be prioritized and how, but it was clear over the course of our four

days together that Mennonites believe that our faith must touch down in the real world and make a difference for those who find themselves on the wrong end of the score.

I have always appreciated the Mennonite conviction, expressed famously by Menno Simons himself, that true evangelical faith cannot lie dormant. It clothes the naked, feeds the hungry, comforts the sorrowful, shelters the destitute, etc.

Our church has tried to take this conviction seriously in our commitment to MCC, the Canadian Foodgrains Bank, the Soup Kitchen, Streets Alive. And I know there is plenty that goes on behind the scenes that in our individual lives, too!

Our passage from Isaiah today doesn't make for pleasant reading or hearing, but at our best Mennonites have sought to embrace the vital truth that it tells.

Let's move on to the second camp. Here, what makes you a Christian is what you believe. Christianity is primarily about believing the right things about what God, in Christ has done in and for the world, most notably on the cross and in the empty tomb.

It's not that ethics aren't important; it's not that righteousness isn't worth striving toward; it's not that the poor and the vulnerable aren't dear to the heart of God and therefore worthy of care.

It's just that ultimately, the good news of the gospel is in the finished work of God in Christ.

This approach, too, expresses a vital truth about Christian faith.

And that vital truth is that we cannot save ourselves. We can never do enough, be good enough, righteous enough, just enough, merciful enough.

The gospel is more than a social and ethical agenda. If that were all that were necessary, Jesus would not have had to come. Isaiah (and Moses) would have pretty much covered the bases.

The law, on its own, cannot save us. Jesus did not come just to give the law a bit of a boost and talk a bit more about peace.

John 1:16-17:

From his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace. The law indeed was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ.

And this is why alongside Isaiah's bracing words we need to hear our gospel text from Luke.

Do not be afraid, little flock, for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom.

The kingdom is not an agenda for us to complete. It is a gift. And it is God's pleasure to give it to us.

All that needs to be done has been done. The Greek verb that expresses the word "pleasure" in this passage is in what is called the "aorist tense" which signifies a completed action.

One commentator put it this way:

God's delightful decision has already taken place. Thus, disciples seek God's kingdom precisely because God already decided to give them the kingdom... [And] "kingdom" does not simple mean eternal life in the sweet by-and-by... [I]t involves God's lordship over human hearts, minds, values, and actions. God has delightedly decided to include us in this royal rule so that our identity and our activity are totally transformed.¹

So, what can we say here? How are we doing?

While I think that Mennonites have always been among those determined to heed Isaiah's call, however imperfectly, we're not always as good at receiving the kingdom as a gift or imagining that it could be God's pleasure to give it to us.

At times we can fall into the same trap as our culture more broadly, which is to slide into a kind of grim moralism that portrays faith as more about us and our performance than about God.

I noticed hints of this in Edmonton. There was a heavy emphasis upon Jesus' teachings and how we ought to pursue these in our context. There were laments at the church's failings. Both of which are appropriate.

But I didn't hear as much talk about the finished work of Jesus. I didn't hear as much talk of a cross or an empty tomb that stand over all of our best efforts.

For example, the theme of one session was "What is the gospel?" A huge and important question! One that many Christians, even those who have been Christians for a long time

¹ Richard P. Carlson, "Exegetical Perspective on Luke 12:32-40" in *Feasting on the Word, Year C, Vol. 3* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010), 337.

struggle to understand or articulate. One that we are in desperate need of clarity on if we are to effectively bear witness in our pluralistic, increasingly secular, disenchanted age.

The talk was good in many ways. But there was no talk of the cross. No talk of the grace of God. No talk of the forgiveness of sin. It seemed to reduce the gospel to our efforts to transform the world by moving to people on the margins. There is some truth in this, but it's not enough.

The gospel is not something that we accomplish. That's not good news.

Good news is God's delightful decision to forgive, to heal, to liberate, and to save his groaning creation.

Good news is a kingdom that comes as a gift, a kingdom whose reality we are to remain ever watchful and attentive toward, a kingdom whose reality we are invited to participate in and respond to but not to achieve.

At times, I think we have a bit of a naïve understanding of human nature. We seem to think that if we can just educate people and get them on board with our understanding of social justice (which we must acknowledge is often a moving target), then all shall be well.

But we are all sinners who see imperfectly and partially. Even our best efforts go wrong. Sometimes our best intentions inadvertently make things worse. These aren't enough. We need rescue from the outside.

And it's not just that we lack the capacity to bring about the kingdom due to our conflicted natures. We are also finite creatures who sometimes have very limited capacity.

I spent part of Friday at a senior's home. On my way out, I saw a woman, possibly in her sixties, struggling to get her wheelchair up a mild incline. She was quite obviously in very poor health.

She smiled at me, and I asked if she needed some help. She nodded and I pushed her back into the home where she would likely spend the rest of the day sitting in her wheelchair, maybe watching TV, playing a game, eating a quiet meal.

I thought about this woman after I left. She probably can't rescue many oppressed people or defend many orphans or fix many social injustices. She's one of many, many people in our community and our world who due to age or illness or poverty or multiple other struggles have very limited options when it comes to making this world a better place.

She doesn't need to hear, "Do better" She needs to hear, "Don't be afraid. It is the Father's pleasure to give you the kingdom."

The gospel of Jesus Christ speaks loudly of a grace that is available for all. A grace that comes as a gift for the failures and the screw ups, the ones who keep on making the same dumb mistakes over and over again, the reckless and wasteful prodigals, those in crisis and those leaving a path of destruction in their wake.

The sinners who sin in ways that we can understand and those who sin in ways we'd prefer to distance ourselves from.

We believe that God shows up in all the ugly, un-sanitized corners of our world and our lives and speaks of a mercy that goes far beyond our scorekeeping.

Perhaps the most staggering truth of the gospel—the hope proclaimed by Easter—is that the ultimate reality with which we all have to deal is not a test that we succeed or fail at, but a Love that bursts out of an empty tomb, overwhelming all of our striving, redeeming all of our failures, reconfiguring the landscape of reality entirely.

Nadia Bolz-Weber put it like this in a recent sermon:

God has the uncanny ability to reach... into the stark reality of our actual hearts. Into every hidden motive, into every xenophobic thought, into all our secret self-loathing and fear, into every dark thing that we hide so well. None of it is safe from the terrible mercy of God. Because God is determined to redeem us – so determined that God will not allow us to maintain the delusion that we can redeem ourselves.²

I want to end with joy. At times we Mennonites can be a bit of a grim bunch. We're very good at exhorting one another to pursue social justice more and better. We're very morally serious. We often feel the pain of the world quite keenly.

This is mostly appropriate. But we must also leave room for joy.

This week I reread the introduction to a book that I bought a few years ago by Australian theologian Benjamin Myers. It's a book on the Apostle's Creed and what it means for us today.

² <https://thecorners.substack.com/p/our-drug-of-choice-right-now-is-knowing>

I love his explanation for why he wrote the book. I think it could be applied to all of Christian faith.

Christ's followers have everything they need already... We are not beggars hoping for scraps. We are like people who have inherited a vast estate... The inheritance remains the same whether we grasp its magnitude or not. But the better we grasp it, the happier we are.

So this small book is an invitation to happiness. I have written it with a glad heart, and I hope it will be helpful for others.³

I love those last words. Can we imagine Christian faith itself as an “invitation to happiness?”

Not exclusively an exhortation to do enough good things. Not a requirement to believe enough right things. But an invitation to happiness.

I long for such a thing to be true in the church and for each one of us. That we might live and love and trust with glad hearts, even amidst all of the bad news out there in the world or the church, even amidst the conflicted nature of our own hearts.

To be happy because of what we have received in Christ. Because God has made the delightful decision to give us the kingdom as a gift.

Thanks be to God.

Amen.



³ Ben Myers, *The Apostles' Creed: A Guide to the Ancient Catechism* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2018), xvi.