

Extending the Welcome

Matthew 3:1-12; Romans 15:4-13

Lethbridge Mennonite Church

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I've been thinking about fruit lately. Not about how I should really incorporate more fruit into my diet (although I should). I'm thinking of fruit in the sense that Jesus talks about in Matthew 7:18-20:

A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor can a bad tree bear good fruit. Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. Thus you will know them by their fruits.

Fruit, for Jesus, is the outcome of how we live and what we believe and how the two interact. It is what grows out of the soil of our lives and our hearts.

I think it's a metaphor both on the individual level and on the level of our collective life together as a church or as a broader culture.

What do the things we believe and the things we do lead to?

It might surprise you to learn that sometimes—occasionally, *very rarely!*—people tell me that I really should pronounce more definitively on the issues of the day, whatever the issues of the day are.

I'll give you a hint, it's almost always about race, sex, gender, or politics (which these days very often reduces to race, sex, and gender).

Some people think I should condemn certain things more. Some people think I should promote certain things more.

This is a very common demand in our time. No matter what the issue, we are endlessly exhorted, whether explicitly or implicitly, to take a stand. To stake out your position and make your voice known.

There are indeed times when stands must be taken. We could point to big historical examples, like the Confessing Church led by figures like Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Karl Barth in Nazi Germany, or the 20th century civil rights movement led by Martin Luther King in the USA.

There have been many times throughout history where clear and bold stances by the church were required to protect human life and to resist injustice.

But I wonder if the times when we must make definitive statements about our “positions” on “issues” are less frequent than we might imagine.

In our context, and in my observation, doubling down on where we stand on issue x or y that is dominating public discourse often leads to a lot of people being entrenched in their position and their rightness and refusing to listen (or at least listen well) to others.

It leads to a lot of judgment, and precious little mercy. It leads to polarization and suspicion and the deterioration of our shared social fabric.

It closes off conversations into silos of self-righteousness rather than remaining open to learn from the experiences of those who have different views.

And even if we have the best intentions and hold our views with deep and sincere conviction, it's not always easy to tell when staking out your position is a wise or a loving move.

So, in these polarized and polarizing times, I've increasingly been trying to adopt the posture of, “Well, let's see what the fruit is.”

If the fruit of ideology x or behaviour y leads to health and wholeness and flourishing and love and peace between people, then great!

If the fruit is hostility between people and dysfunction and social chaos and a lack of flourishing between people and in individuals, then not so great.

Sometimes the good that a given idea or practice leads to is its own proof. Sometimes the unhealthy consequences of an idea or a practice is its own disproof.

I want to reiterate that there is indeed a time and a place to boldly take a stand. When lives are at stake, we don't just sit back and say, "Well, let's just see where this all goes."

But in the muddier grey areas of life, where people of reasonably good will seem to hold different views, I am increasingly wondering if there is a place for saying, "Well let's be patient. Let's keep the conversation going. Let's see what the fruit is."

Well, speaking of fruit, on the Second Sunday of Advent, we encounter John the Baptist talking about bearing "fruit worthy of repentance."

It comes in the context of all kinds of scary language about the axe being at the root of the tree, about winnowing forks and, and unquenchable fires burning with chaff.

John could perhaps have benefited from reading Dale Carnegie's book *How to Win Friends and Influence People!* I haven't read it, but I'm guessing there probably isn't a chapter on calling people a "brood of vipers!"

John's message was severe and uncompromising. And it was particularly directed to the religious experts. Bear fruit worthy of repentance!

Repentance is a word that I know many people have a complicated relationship with.

But the word means simply to turn around. To go in a different direction.

And it is not a one-time thing, something we just check off the list and then move on. Repentance is in many ways a disposition, a lifestyle, a recognition that we don't always see 100% accurately, that we are always in need of a course-correction in the direction of Jesus.

One commentator put it like this:

[R]epentance includes feeling sorry for one's personal sins, but it is much more. To repent is to take a clear-minded look at the ways **in which one's life colludes with the assumptions and behaviors of the old age**, to turn away

from such complicity, and to turn towards God and the attitudes and actions of the realm of heaven.¹

I like that way of putting it.

And it seems to me that there are all kinds of ways in which our lives—as individuals, as communities, as a culture—can “collude with the assumptions and behaviours of the old age.”

I want to focus on just one this morning. And for this, we turn to our second reading from Romans. Verse 7, in particular:

Welcome one another, therefore, just as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God.

Paul is writing these words to a community comprised of both Jews and Gentiles. But he seems to have a particular eye on his Jewish hearers here.

He raids the OT for passages that prove that welcoming in the Gentiles was always part of God’s plan. The end goal was never about the prioritization of one ethnic group alone above all others.

Even angry John the Baptist pointed to this:

Do not presume to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our ancestor'; for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham.

The point is not ethnic or religious purity free from outside “contamination.” The point is fruit.

God is glorified when Jew and Gentile *together* experience and extend the mercy of God, where each welcomes the other, trading harmony and mutuality for suspicion and hostility.

When we fail to welcome one another, when we double down on what divides rather than what unites, we “collude with the assumptions and behaviours of the old age.”

¹ https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=3090

There was a really cool story about welcoming across distance in the news this week. Perhaps you saw it, too.

At the beginning of November, a Palestinian refugee named Abu Sirdana had come to the end of her rope. She had been stuck living in a refugee hotel near Toronto for seven months and had no prospect of finding somewhere to live based on her limited means.

The hotel was a dangerous and unstable place. Strangers would prowl around the hotel and prey on her and others trying to lure them into the sex trade.

She felt like she was out of options. So, she did something radical, something most of us couldn't imagine. She stabbed herself in the stomach while in a meeting with government officials.

It was a last-ditch dangerous and desperate plea to draw attention to the lack of safe and affordable housing for newcomers in the Toronto area.

But it was more than just a social protest for a "cause". It was intensely and painful personal for her. She summed it up in four heartbreaking words:

"Nobody seemed to care."

And then, someone did care. A welcome came from a perhaps unexpected source.

A Jewish woman (who insisted on remaining anonymous) thought, "what would happen if this was my daughter?"

And so, she extended a welcome. She took Abu Sirdana in. She moved her into a condo with the family's daughter.

At this point, I'll quote the CTV article where I read this story:

[Abu Sirdana] can't help but smile when talking about her new surrogate mother. "She gave me a chance at life. She said I'm here for you, if you need anything call me, if you're sick, I'll be here the next day. Can you imagine anyone being so kind?..."

Abu Sirdana is quick to share that she's Muslim, and the family who've welcomed her as one of her own is Jewish. An unthinkable act of kindness amid the conflict back home is now a reality here on this side of the world...

"I feel reborn," she said, adding that previously, "I didn't know what love is, I didn't know what life is." Thanks to the generosity of one Canadian family, she can now look forward to experiencing it.²

I love stories like this. Stories that show people reaching across boundaries of potential (even expected) hostility and suspicion and extending welcome.

Our world needs more stories like this. Our churches need more stories like this. These are the kinds of stories that show us what is possible in a world where it can sometimes seem like all we know how to do anymore is divide.

But even beyond stories like this, there is a uniquely Christ-like shape to the welcome Paul tells us to extend.

Welcome one another, therefore, **just as** Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God (Rom 15:7).

Just as. In the same way. In imitation of.

So, how *has* Christ welcomed us? There are so many things that we could say, but here are a few.

He has showed us the love of God. He has showed us a love that lays down its life for friend and for enemy.

In his life and in his teaching, he has declared emphatically that God desires mercy and not sacrifice, that people must always be prioritized over the law.

He has shown us that God is where the lost things are. That God seeks us with far more determination than we could ever seek God.

² <https://www.ctvnews.ca/canada/palestinian-refugee-s-desperate-plea-for-housing-in-canada-prompts-jewish-family-to-open-their-door-1.6172864>

He has not counted our sins against us. He has prayed, “Father, forgive them, they don’t know what they are doing.

This is how God, in Christ, has welcomed us, regardless of our tribe or tongue. And this is how we are to welcome one another. This is the fruit that our lives are to bear.

I want to end with forgiveness because I think that the fruit of welcome that God seeks will never come about unless we can forgive.

Timothy Keller is the founder of the Redeemer Presbyterian church in New York City (known by many as the pastor to skeptics). He’s a popular author (his book on the parable of the prodigal son is one of the best interpretations of the parable I’ve come across). Since 2020, he’s also been negotiating life with stage IV pancreatic cancer.

This week, Keller wrote an article in the *New York Times* this week called “What Too Little Forgiveness Does to Us.” In it, he writes these words:

If forgiveness in small things and large were deeply embedded in our culture, it would transform us politically, ending the demagoguery that never admits wrongdoing and that mocks and belittles one’s opponents. It would transform us socially, ending racial stereotyping, discrimination and unwillingness to listen to one another. It would make every movement for justice less likely to burn out, overreach or alienate. It would remake us personally, enabling us to confront frustrations and hurts and work through them rather than turn to drugs or guns or other destructive ways of dealing with our pain.

Few have the ability to honestly confront their own failings, flaws, self-centeredness — in short, their sin — unless they are assured that grace is ready to meet them. C.S. Lewis put it well: “To be a Christian means to forgive the inexcusable, because God has forgiven the inexcusable in you.”³

This is how Christ has welcomed us.

It may seem strange on the Second Sunday of Advent to tell you to be assured that grace is ready to meet you. Grace isn’t the first word that comes to mind when we listen to the uncompromising message of John the Baptist in the wilderness.

³ <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/12/03/opinion/tim-keller-forgiveness.html>

But I'm going to end here anyway. Because I believe that the gospel always contains two deep truths.

First truth: We are summoned to the life God has created us for and called us to. We are called to bear fruit.

Advent is not about a complacent hope. It is not about passively folding our hands and contemplating the beautiful mystery that light comes out of dark places.

Advent is about repentance and realigning our lives with the God who comes to us. Advent is about opening our door to the stranger and reaching across ugly walls of division.

Second truth: This summons always takes place in the context of the broader and more hopeful reality of a God who in Christ has done for us what we can't do for ourselves.

Secure in this hope, let us extend the welcome. Let us welcome one another and those around us as God in Christ has welcomed us.

Let us love generously, cross boundaries determinedly, seek God wholeheartedly and forgive resolutely. Let us be eager to extend mercy and not judgment.

Let this be the fruit of what we believe. Let this be what grows out of the soil of our lives.

Amen.

