WHAT DO YOU WANT ME TO DO FOR YOU?

JEREMIAH 31:7-9; MARK 10:46-52
LETHBRIDGE MENNONITE CHURCH
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As we've already heard this morning, many congregations have designated this Sunday "Mennonite Heritage Sunday."

I don't know what your reaction is when you hear a phrase like "Mennonite Heritage Sunday."

Maybe you think back to the "good old days" with tight-knit mainly rural communities in a world that seemed less complex than today. Maybe you think of inspiring stories of peacemakers and radical discipleship and the *Martyrs Mirror*. Maybe you think of food (usually involving a lot of dough and innumerable calories).

For me, the word "Mennonite" often runs a close second to the word "pastor" in the "words to avoid in casual conversation with the general public" category. ☺

Finding out that I am a pastor makes people uncomfortable. Finding out that I'm a *Mennonite* just makes them confused.

I can almost write the script by now: It starts with, "You're a *what*?"

This is followed by a bit of rummaging around in their mental cabinetry for some association with the word "Mennonite."

I can almost see the gears grinding in their heads as they puzzle over whether this word is an ethnic descriptor or a theological perspective or a denomination (it is, of course, all of the above!).

Then, “Don’t Mennonites drive horses and buggies and wear only black?” “How many kinds of Mennonites are there?” “You’re a what?!”

I was recently speaking at a meeting about refugee sponsorship. Among those present, were some folks from the university, and one of the professors brought their fourteen-year-old son along.

As many of you know, I wear a hat pretty much everywhere I go except behind this pulpit. Often, it’s a black toque-ish kind of thing.

After the meeting, this professor privately told me, “You know, my son doesn’t go to many church-y kinds of things. After your talk, he asked me, ‘Do *all* Mennonites have to wear those hats? Is that a *religious* thing?”☺

There are no shortage of potential pitfalls when it comes to our present cultural moment and its understanding of the word “Mennonite.”

And then there’s the word “Heritage.” For many, this conjures up another h-word that we aren’t fond of. *History*.

I was talking to Dave Neufeldt this week. He told me the story of once offering someone a ride to a Mennonite historical society event, and getting the strong impression in return that the person would rather “stick a needle in their eye” than go to an event that talked about *history*.

Why bother with history?

Dave said that one of the reasons that he thinks some people don’t enjoy history is that they don’t see how it relates to their present lives.

We don’t see how distant, dusty stories from the past have any connection to *our* stories in the present.

So, I was thinking of our (or my) ambivalence toward terms like “Mennonite Heritage Sunday” this week as I attended a videoconference on “leadership.”

I was thinking about how and why we care (or don’t care) about the things that we care (or don’t care) about.

About how we are *moved* as human beings.

One of the speakers was Brene Brown, and she said something that has lodged itself in my head ever since.

I forget the exact topic of her talk, but at one point, she said these words:

Human beings are not thinking creatures who occasionally feel things; we are feeling creatures who occasionally think.

It's funny. But it's true, isn't it?

It's true when it comes to our attitudes toward history, and it's true about pretty much everything else.

We can be presented with a list of facts that are 100% accurate and important and even relevant to our lives. These facts can be presented to us with mechanical precision and clarity.

And we can still yawn and barely allow them to register.

What about if are told a story?

I've done this in recent weeks at various presentations about the Syrian refugee crisis. I've given lists of numbers of refugees and where they have ended up and they years the conflict began, etc., etc.

And people nod politely… and look around…

And then I tell a story. Perhaps it's the story of the families that we are bringing to our church.

Perhaps it's the story of the Syrian woman here in Lethbridge who our larger group is trying to help.

When I tell a story, I can usually hear a pin drop.

Why? *Because we are feeling creatures who occasionally think.*

Stories appeal to our emotions, they invoke our empathy and concern. They place us in the character's lives. They ask questions of us.

This is, I am convinced, why Jesus's primary mode of teaching was storytelling. He didn't haul out a scroll full of facts about the kingdom of God. He told stories.

One of these stories is about a blind man at a gate.

We've heard the story already.

We see blind Bartimaeus at the side of the road, shouting out, "Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!"

The people around tell him to be quiet but he this just makes him more determined.

He is a desperate man.

His blindness not only cuts him off from the world of visual experience. It cuts him off from his community. His affliction would almost certainly have made him "ritually unclean" in the first-century Jewish world. He would not only have had a physical disability; he would have been a social outcast.

He is hungry for mercy.

And what does Jesus do? Does he say, "Well, just a minute Bartimaeus, have you been a good boy? Have you kept the commandments? Can you check off all the right doctrinal boxes when it comes to your beliefs?

No. Jesus asks one question and only one:

> What do you want me to do for you?

I want to see.

And here we hear echoes of Jeremiah's prophecy:

> See, I will bring them from the land of the north
> and gather them from the ends of the earth.
> Among them will be the blind and the lame…

Jesus' miracles are never just attention-grabbing magic tricks, not even just isolated acts of compassion.

They are *signs*. They point *back* to the Hebrew prophets and the restoration they longed for and received glimpses of. And they look *ahead* in anticipation of the new heaven and the new earth.

In healing Bartimaeus, Jesus was responding to a personal plea for mercy. He was also saying, "The kingdom of God has come near!

Mark 10 tells another story. If we rewind just a few verses in Mark 10, we a story in which Jesus asks the same question he asked Bartimaeus to James and John. *What do you want me to do for you?*

James and John's response stands in stark contrast to that of Bartimaeus. They already "see" quite well, or so they think. They respond, "Let one of us sit at your right and the other at your left in your glory."

They are looking for something very different from Jesus. And Jesus responds very differently to them. He tells them that they don't know what they are asking for. That such things are not for him to grant.

And then he calls his disciples together and says these famous words:

> Whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, **44** and whoever wants to be first must be slave of all.

Two very different responses from Jesus. Why?

One was a plea for mercy. It was a plea for restoration, wholeness, and inclusion into community.

The other was a request for exaltation and honour. To be elevated *above* others in the

community. To fortify boundaries and guard distinctions.

Same question. Two very different motives.

Here, too, Jesus' response is a kind of sign.

The coming near of the kingdom of God doesn't just mean that the blind and the lame are gathered in and restored; it also means that assumptions are turned upside down.

It means that power and privilege and status are shown to be fragile and unworthy goals.

It means that in the kingdom of God, the first are last and the last are first.

This brings us back to Mennonite Heritage Sunday.

I want to spend my remaining time this morning looking at one element of our history as Mennonites through the lens of the question that Jesus was asked (twice) in Mark 10 (and the motivations behind them.)

Our story as Mennonites is rich and varied and complex.

We have high points and low points; we have moments of breathtaking beauty where the beauty of the gospel of Christ shines through and we have our moments of madness and error.

But one crucial part of our story *is* and has *always* been that of a *wandering* people. A people looking for refuge. A people looking for freedom and the safety to live out their religious convictions about peace and discipleship.

A people in need of mercy and welcome.

This is our story. We, like Bartimaeus, have cried out, "Have mercy on us!" to God. And God has answered by bringing us to places of safety and refuge.

What is our response to this heritage? To this history?

What does our story ask of *us* in the present?

Does our Mennonite Heritage lead us to celebrate and congratulate ourselves on our good fortune as those God has smiled upon (like James and John)?

Or does it make us a people who are hungry for mercy on behalf of others? A people eager to demonstrate our "greatness" by being "servants of all?"

Does it make us a people who are willing to extend mercy in response to the mercy we have received and to show a welcome as those who have received a welcome?

A few weeks ago, our church hosted the AGM of MCC Alberta and, not surprisingly, much of the conversation throughout the day centered around the work that MCC is presently doing with the Syrian refugee crisis.

But we also heard stories of what MCC has done for other groups of people in other parts of the world. Saulo Padilla, an immigration educator with MCC USA shared of his own refugee journey from Guatemala to Canada.

Saulo made one comment that has stuck with me since. He talked about being welcomed into a Hispanic church community in Calgary after a difficult few months spent trying to adjust from Guatemala to Canada.

Here's what he said:

> They knew how to embrace the stranger because they had the heart of a stranger themselves.

They had the heart of a stranger…

They knew firsthand the experience of being outsiders. They knew the desperation and loneliness that come along with being separated from all that is familiar and all that gives one meaning, security, and stability. They knew what it felt like to be unable speak the language. They knew what it meant to hunger for embrace.

And they had hearts that are willing to make room.

If we go far enough back into our personal histories, our family histories, our church histories, and certainly Mennonite history in general, there are no shortage of such

stories.

These stories can do one of two things. They can make us closed-handed, eager to protect the hard-won freedoms of the present. Or they can open our hands, and our hearts to the strangers that are still looking for these things.

As I've said many times and in many contexts, I am so proud of our church for the leading role we are playing in bringing Syrian refugees to Lethbridge.

Part of our role, I a convinced—one of the ways that we, as Mennonites, can honour our heritage—is to consistently and persistently remind *ourselves* and those in our community who are perhaps less enthusiastic towards and more fearful of the stranger, that all of us, on *some* level at least (unless we are indigenous people) have come from somewhere else.

All of us have the stories of being strangers in our rearview mirrors. And because we have been welcomed (even if this welcome was halfhearted or grudging), we have a duty to welcome others.

In the Hebrew Scriptures, the divine command to care for the stranger is tied directly to the fact that the people of Israel were also strangers once (e.g., Deuteronomy 10:19).

In the gospel of Matthew, Jesus sums up all of the Law and the Prophets—and "all" is a pretty comprehensive word!—in the simple exhortation to do to others as we would have done to us (Matthew 7:12).

The former urges us to better memory, the latter to better imagination. We need both, if we are ever to develop the heart of a stranger.

Or, to switch metaphors, if we want to learn how to see properly.

Bartimaeus had a simple request of Jesus. He wanted to see.

And I wonder if the same could (or should) be said of us. Why else do we come to Jesus, if not to learn how to see properly? To see the world as Jesus sees it. To see our neighbours as Jesus sees them. To see hospitality as Jesus sees it.

Sometimes it seems to me that the life of faith is nothing more or less than the

gradual, painful, halting, exhilarating and liberating process of coming to see things the way that Jesus sees them.

I close this Mennonite Heritage Sunday sermon with something that would have been unimaginable at various points in our denomination's history.

A quote from the pope.

This is from Pope Francis's recent encyclical, *Laudato Si* ("Praise be to you"):

> How wonderful is the certainty that each human life is not adrift in the midst of hopeless chaos, in a world ruled by pure chance or endlessly recurring cycles! The Creator can say to each one of us: "Before I formed you in the womb, I knew you" (Jeremiah 1:5). WE were conceived in the heart of God, and for this reason "each of us is the result of a thought of God. Each of us is willed, each of us is necessary."

This is how Jesus sees us. All of us.

This is the way that Jesus invites us to see our neighbours.

This is what makes the extending of mercy, love, and welcome the appropriate responses to our Mennonite heritage, to our story of God's walking with us as a people.

May God help us to see as Jesus sees. To have the heart of a stranger.

Amen.