God's Slaves

1 Peter 2:11-17
Lethbridge Mennonite Church
By: Ryan Dueck
September 9, 2018/16th Sunday After Pentecost

Last week was back to school week.

I don't know if this is still a thing or not, but when I was (much) younger, we sometimes during the first week back in school we would be asked to talk about "what we did on our summer holiday."

I'm going to be doing something like that over the next four Sundays. ☺

During the remainder of my sermons during September, I'm going to take you on a sort of mini-tour of "what I did on my sabbatical."

Today, I'll be discussing a course that I took in May at Regent College in Vancouver called "Church Leadership in a Secular Age." What does it mean to live as "aliens" or "exiles" in the context of an increasingly secular cultural context?

Next Sunday, I'll share about a conference I attended in St. Joseph Missouri called "Water to Wine." I'll be talking about the journey of a maturing faith, of always seeking to be "transformed by the renewing of our minds."

The following Sunday, our focus will be on a MCC learning tour that I co-led to Israel and Palestine. I will be joined by Naomi and Ernie Engbrecht who also attended. I would like to hear more of their voices than my own on this matter, as I've already spoken on this a few years ago when I went on a similar tour.

And finally, on the last Sunday of September I'll be talking about a couple of important books that I read over the course of my sabbatical. I'll be reflecting on the importance of Christian community in an age plagued by loneliness, anxiety, and depression.

My hopes in doing this mini-series are twofold:

1. I want to give you a sense of what I actually did. I do feel accountable to this church to offer something like a "report" and to at least hopefully demonstrate that I stewarded the time that you gave me well.
2. I also hope that the things that I experienced and learned will be useful for you, that they will encourage you in your faith, that they will perhaps make sense of some of the things that you might be experiencing and wondering about in your own spiritual journey.

It's a bit of a smorgasbord of topics—everything from big picture global and cultural issues to very personal realities. But I'm hopeful that at least some of it will land for you personally.

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So, today I want to talk about faith in a secular age and what it means to live faithfully as foreigners and exiles in our particular post-Christian, postmodern Western context.

This comes out of a class I took in May at Regent College in Vancouver called "Church Leadership in a Secular Age." Our instructor was Gordon Smith, a well-known writer and speaker, a former professor at Regent and the current president of Ambrose University in Calgary.

A ***secular*** age. What on earth does that mean?

I suspect that most of us have a few ideas about what the word "secular" describes, but let's try to make them more explicit.

We have a sense that our culture is "less Christian" than it was when we were younger, that churches are emptier, that culture is perhaps coarser and less anchored, that faith is less taken-for-granted than it once was.

We know that we live in pluralistic times. We know that global patterns of immigration have led to many different religions and ideologies living side by side in the same geographical space.

We know that with the explosion of media we now have more access to different belief systems and ways of life than at any point in human history. These realities can make holding a *particular* faith more challenging.

We are aware of a "cultural default" where Christianity is just one option among many and has no unique place at the table. Like religious belief in general, it's just something you do on your own time.

Or, increasingly, something you *don't* do on your own time. Much current research on younger demographics talks about the rise of the "nones" (not *nuns* ☺)—those who respond to the question of religious affiliation with "none." So faith in a secular age is often characterized by a

pervasive anxiety. *The young people are leaving and who knows if they'll come back!* This is an anxiety that I see and feel throughout the Mennonite Church world.

All of this describes a world that I think many of us are familiar with. It certainly describes a world that I am familiar with. We live in a different world even than the one I grew up in—one with a different set of dispositions and a different set of defaults.

And faith is experienced *differently* in a secular age.

We have to wrestle with hard questions about other religions and other philosophies and moral practices.

Faith is easily destabilized and disoriented. It often either it drifts off into a vaguely Christian form of liberal moralism that has no connection to the church or hardens into a rigid conservatism that is unattractive and often difficult to sustain in the face of the complexities of life.

My brother has taught in Christian higher education for the last fifteen years or so and he has told me that he sees this all the time. Students often arrive with a tenuous and fragile faith that is easily lost or rendered irrelevant in the midst of all of the challenges I've described.

When nothing is taken for granted in the world around us (except, perhaps, consumerism and individualism which we will get to later!), we feel like we're constantly having to negotiate our beliefs in a context where they are not only not assumed but sometimes thought to be incomprehensible and irrelevant (or worse).

Now, I should add here that this is not *all* brand new. Faith has always required choice. The early Roman Empire, for example, was a smorgasbord of beliefs and practices. Christian faith has always had to be negotiated in the context of challenges.

But the secular age we live in presents all of these things in perhaps a new and sharpened way. Faith *feels* different at this time and in this place.

Our instructor said that this cultural context can be an invigorating one for faith. It can force us to wrestle with our faith to make it our own. It can push us into important questions about what matters most, and about how we are to relate to other people who think very differently than us.

I'm inclined to agree with him. I think our secular age is much close to the context in which early Christianity took shape than the bulk of Christian history shaped by Christendom where everything was Christian, if often only in name.

But faith is also much harder in some ways. I know this because I hear it all the time.

It forces us to consider how we will react, whether as individual Christians or as churches.

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There are three broad approaches that have been taken and continue to be taken.

The first is to take an adversarial approach to secularism. On this view, secularism is bad and to be resisted. The goal is to return to the good old days when public institutions were Christian, and Christianity was the dominant expression in the public square.

This is the kind of view that one often hears in a longing for the Lord's Prayer and the Ten Commandments to be back in public schools, and a general nostalgia for the days when we lived in a "Christian nation."

Of course, it's debatable how "Christian" our nation or *any* nation ever was. And we should never forget that the days when our nation was "Christian" often weren't really "good old days" for minority groups such as our indigenous neighbours or women.

Aside from that, the days of living in a mostly homogenous societies where everyone looked the same and believed the same and had the same cultural backgrounds and practices is long gone.

As one commentator has put it, "This is no time for nostalgia, for 'good old religion.' The train has left the station." We're going to have to learn how to live well with diversity, with our own perspective being just one of many in the context of pluralism.

The second option is retreat. Again, secularism is bad and the world "out there" is frightening and confusing and disorienting, so we'll just hunker down in our churches in "holy huddles" with people who are like us. This is one that Mennonites have historically been very good at, even if less so in recent times.

There are a few dangers with this approach. It's hard to love your neighbours much less your enemies well if you avoid them. It's hard to be salt and light if you're isolating yourselves from the world that needs preservation and light.

This view also leads to privatizing religious identity and expression. Our instructor said it creates something of a "firewall" between religious conviction and practice and the rest of society.

There's not much connection between church and everyday life. Church is where we do our churchy things, and then we operate in a different mode out there in the secular world where our faith has little to contribute.

The third option could be described as redemptive engagement or faithful presence. Not surprisingly, the one that I think is the most hopeful of the three.

Here, we embrace our Christian faith as a minority presence.

We serve and love our neighbours. We speak respectfully and joyfully about the hope that we have in Christ.

We don't insist that our views have any special privilege in the public square, but we also refuse to just park them at the door when we enter important conversations.

We recognize that *all* people, whether they claim to be religious or not, have faith-based convictions about life's big questions about meaning and morality, and that we should not be ashamed to speak about our own.

We speak with honesty and humility about why we live the way we do, why we value what we do.

We are genuinely curious about the views of others and open to learning the truth that their views contain.

We try to embody healthy communities (communities that, incidentally, many people in our world are desperately hungry for—more on this in a later sermon).

And, if necessary, we suffer in imitation of Christ (I'm speaking here of genuine suffering like our Anabaptist forbears, not the imagined suffering that we often see Christians complaining about when their views aren't given special status in the broader culture).

All of this, I think, is part of what it means to redemptively engage the secular world that we live in.

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Our instructor told us that the New Testament book that offers us the most help in learning how to live as exiles—those who both at home and not entirely at home in a given context—is 1 Peter.

Our passage this morning says in a more succinct ways what I have spent the last ten minutes talking about.

How should we live as exiles? *Live such good lives that they may see your good deeds and glorify God.*

So far so good, right?

But I'm guessing there may have been part of that passage that made at least some of us squirm.

What's all this business about submitting to authority? Seriously?! Doesn't Peter know that there are human authorities that must be resisted? Hasn't Peter heard of social justice?!

Well, he probably did. I think we must remember that Peter was writing specific instructions to specific people at a specific time with specific authorities in mind; he probably wasn't imagining his words to be the final pronouncement on all Christian political engagement for all time.

And of course, we know that there are many examples of faithful Christians who did *not* submit themselves to every human authority (like, for example, the apostle Paul, many of the early apostles, and the broad tradition of Christian martyrs!). But that's probably another sermon for another time.

I want to end by focusing on verse 16.

> Live as free people, but do not use your freedom as a cover-up for evil; live as God's slaves.

This verse strikes me as among the most important ways in which we can "redemptively engage" our secular culture at this particular time and place.

The idea that there could be limits on individual freedom, that our freedom could be *for* anything besides our own personal desires and fulfillment—the idea that we ought to voluntarily "enslave" ourselves to someone other than, well, ourselves?! The idea that Jesus (or anyone else) can and should tell us how to live?! This is radical stuff.

In a cultural context where we are trained in countless ways, whether through the media we consume or the messages we hear in advertising or the countless other inputs we daily receive that the highest goal we should aspire to is to be true to ourselves, ***we say*** with the saints down throughout the ages, "No. The human task is *not* to be true to myself. My 'self' isn't always trustworthy, after all, and there are parts of it that I should *not* be true to! My task is to be true to God and to God's purposes for the flourishing of humanity and of all creation."

This is a very strange idea for a secular age. We chafe at authority, knowing full well all the ways in which it has been and continues to be abused.

There is perhaps no more cherished belief in our secular age than that the individual is sovereign.

And yet, I am not the captain of my own ship. Neither are you. And when we act like we are, we are simply enslaving ourselves *to* ourselves, which will end badly—for us and for my neighbours.

Not only does it render worship and service improperly, not only does it fail to appreciate the fact that we have a calling that is higher than ourselves to God and neighbour, not only does it lead to damaging forms of consumerism that have negative effects on the created world, it can have a terrible effect on communities and individual mental health.

The idea that we are on our own and accountable only to ourselves is, I think, and indirect cause of the skyrocketing anxiety and loneliness and depression that we see all around us. But that's also another sermon for a few weeks from now.

We are not on our own. And we are not our own.

These are among the most countercultural things that we can say. And, more importantly, they are among the most important things we can demonstrate with our lives.

We are God's slaves. It's jarring language, I know. It's meant to be.

We are enslaved to the law of Christ that brings liberty. We are enslaved to the only taskmaster who can finally be trusted with a human life—the one who alone knows what a human life is for, the one who has walked the road ahead of us and the one who will lead us home.

Thanks be to God.

Amen.