The First Christian Value

Genesis 50:15-21; Matthew 18:21-35
Lethbridge Mennonite Church
By: Ryan Dueck
September 13, 2020/15th Sunday After Pentecost

In her excellent sermon last week, Jen mentioned that the beginning of September felt like a dividing line, a beginning of a new season. I feel the same way.

For me, the dividing line is always the Sunday after the Labour Day long weekend. This is when the "new year" really begins. This is when all of our regular routines begin again.

Except this year, there's nothing regular about our routines. We're gathering together for worship, but only with a lot of restrictions. And not everyone can come. Some people in our community have not been in this building since early March and don't anticipate coming any time soon.

Kids are back in school, but we've already seen cases starting to pop up in at least one local school. Will it just be little pockets here and there? Or will there be a rash of new cases? We don't really know.

Many of us continue to work and do our best to live our daily lives as normal, but for all the gains we've made over the last few months, it still feels very much *not* normal. Things feel fragile and precarious. We're not sure how long even our "new normal" will even last.

I remember thinking when this pandemic began way back in March, "This is really hard, but it will *surely* have run its course by September!"

Well, here we are. COVID-19 is still with us and what the future holds remains unclear.

On Wednesday, I attended a Zoom meeting with other MCA pastors and each one of us was feeling a little apprehensive at the outset of this new season. Some churches are gathering as we are, in limited form with a lot of restrictions. Some are still meeting online only.

Few pastors are looking terribly far ahead. We're mostly just trying to do the best we can in very unusual times.

I left that meeting feeling a little discouraged. There wasn't much joy or enthusiasm. I think we were all kind of sick of staring at our computer screens, tired of preaching into cameras or mostly empty sanctuaries, tired of all the not knowing and uncertainty.

I wouldn't say we were having a collective vocational crisis, but I don't think I would be stretching the truth to say that we were all struggling in our own ways with what it means to be a pastor in a pandemic!

Well, after the meeting I came across something profoundly encouraging via a friend on Facebook.

Some of you will remember Andrew Dyck from CMU who did a portable session with us here a few years ago (in the distant past when people could still travel and do things like retreats!).

Andrew posted a story from nearly sixty years ago at Princeton Theological Seminary where the famous Swiss theologian Karl Barth was delivering a series of lectures. The following exchange with a student took place during the question and answer period:

> Student: "What one thing, sir, would you tell a young pastor today if you were asked, is necessary in this day and age to pastor a Church?"
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> Barth: "Ah, so big a question! That is the whole question of theology, you see! I should say, I hope that during your studies you have visited yourself earnestly with the message of the Old Testament and of the New Testament. **And not only of this message but also of the Object and the Subject of this message**… And then the other question: are you willing now to deal with humanity as it is? Humanity in this twentieth century with all its passions, sufferings, errors, and so on? Do you like them, these people? Not only the good Christians, but do you like people as they are? People in their weakness? Do you like them, do you love them? **And are you willing to tell them the message that God is not against them, but for them? That's the one real thing in pastoral service and that is the question for you**. If you go into ministry to do that work, pray earnestly. You'll do difficult work but beautiful work.
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> But if I had to begin anew for myself as a young pastor, I would tell myself every morning, **well, here I am; a very poor creature, but by God's grace I have heard**

> **something. I will need forgiveness of my sins every day. And I will pray, God, that you will give me the light, this light shining in the Bible and this light shining into the world in which humanity is living today**. And then do my duty."

Andrew posted this for his CMU students studying to be pastors, but I think it is just as applicable to those of us who have been doing it a while.

It was just what I needed to hear this week, at any rate.

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Well, speaking of forgiveness, this is obviously the theme of both our texts this morning.

Joseph forgives his brothers in Egypt despite them having sold him into slavery years earlier.

Jesus tells about a master and a servant and about the dire consequences of withholding forgiveness.

Neither story is complicated or requires much detailed exegesis or explanation. As is so often the case with the best stories, they are sufficient in and of themselves to make the point.

I also don't think I need to stand up here and wag my finger and tell you (and me) to be more forgiving. I think most Christians have at least a vague idea of what Jesus taught about forgiveness, and that as Jesus' followers we should be quick to forgive.

Even people who have no connection to or interest in the church know that this is what Jesus was about.

Indeed, even in a post-Christian, secular, "spiritual but not religious" culture such as ours, forgiveness is admired and often celebrated. Sometimes I even see forgiveness advocated as a form of "self-care" or a means of achieving various mental health outcomes.

I regularly find it fascinating how "Christian" many of our assumptions and ideals remain, even in a cultural context that often claims to have "moved beyond" religion in general or Christianity more specifically.

This week in the *Winnipeg Free Press*, for example, columnist John Longhurst wrote an article called, “Judeo-Christian' terminology no longer reflects today's spiritual diversity.” [1]

According to Longhurst, the appeal to the “Judeo-Christian” values or principles of America (or Canada) is actually a relatively recent invention, arising during WW2 to “when Americans tried to make sense of their country’s role in repelling the Nazi assault on Western civilization.”

The phrase got even more traction during the Cold War as a way of providing a contrast to communism. Since then, it’s often been used as a way to provide a thin religious veneer to Americanism or capitalism or various other conservative social and moral agendas.

“Judeo-Christian values,” according to Longhurst, is an outmoded expression that has been used and misused for a long time now. It doesn’t reflect the spiritual and religious diversity of our times.

Canada should instead look to Indigenous spiritualities to “reach its full potential and discover its true identity.” What is needed for our time is not misguided appeals to “Judeo-Christian values” but a “multi-faith-Indigenous tradition.”

I think Longhurst is partly right. And partly wrong.

I think references to “Judeo-Christian values” *have* been profoundly misguided and that they *have* often used religious terminology as a way of advancing political and economic preferences.

Those who speak mostly loudly about Judeo-Christian values have often fallen embarrassingly short of precisely those values. The list of examples here would be too long to enumerate.

And I think we absolutely have a duty to respect and learn from the wisdom offered by a variety of spiritual and religious traditions in our pluralistic context.

But I think Longhurst underestimates how deeply embedded Christian values are in our most cherished assumptions. Whether it’s the value of the individual or the duty of justice or the care society owes to the weak, the poor, and the vulnerable or an admiration, at least in theory, of forgiveness…

[1] https://www.winnipegfreepress.com/arts-and-life/life/faith/a-changing-landscape-572325672.html?fbclid=IwAR18BH2iA6ESuUJfr4wAJ-Br_E0SsqrwFsUa26MNV2eaZKFoXHfZw70OTpM

Each one of these cultural assumptions are alive and well in the secular west. And each, I would suggest, owes its existence to the biblical narrative and, more specifically, to the revolution of Jesus of Nazareth.

Tom Holland makes this point in his recent book *Dominion*. Holland is not a Christian, but he recognizes how deeply Christian his moral assumptions are by virtue of being formed in a culture that came out of Christianity:

> Today, even as belief in God fades across the West, the countries that were once collectively known as Christendom continue to bear the stamp of the two-millennia-old revolution that Christianity represents. It is the principal reason why, by and large, most of us who live in post-Christian societies still take for granted that it is nobler to suffer than to inflict suffering. It is why we generally assume that every human life is of equal value. In my morals and ethics, I have learned to accept that I am not Greek or Roman at all, but thoroughly and proudly Christian.

We are more Christian than we realize, Holland says, even those from other religions who have interacted with Christianity throughout history of the west, even those among us who claim to be thoroughly secular.

And so, I would prefer that we keep and rehabilitate the term "Judeo-Christian values" and be more honest about two things:

1. The expression *has* often been misused to refer to things that have little to do with either Judaism or Christianity (i.e., Americanism).
2. Having said that, we should be more willing as a culture to acknowledge our debts. So much of what we value and demand in our world would be inconceivable were it not for Jesus and both the story that preceded him and the revolution he launched. Saying that "we are more diverse now" doesn't acknowledge how thoroughly Christian even our diversity is in what it values!

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And this finally brings us back to the theme of the morning. If we are going to rehabilitate expressions like "Judeo-Christian values" or "Christian values," we should make sure the values we're talking about are actually Christian.

Why, I wonder, do most people associate this expression with a kind of heavy-handed moralism or an attempt to police the behaviour of others instead of, say, forgiveness?

Why, when one hears an appeal to "Christian values," do people not instinctively think of forgiveness?

Forgiveness is, in many ways, the first and ultimate Christian value.

I use the word "first" in two ways.

First chronologically. When does Christianity begin? It's an interesting question to think about, isn't it? Is it when Jesus calls his first disciples? Is it during the Sermon on the Mount when Jesus reinterprets the law? Is it Pentecost, when the Spirit breathes life into Jesus' followers?

Personally, I think it's when Jesus is on the cross, in the last moments of his life, arms stretched out in agony, praying, "Father, forgive them they don't know what they're doing." They didn't know what they were doing then, and we still don't today.

But in that moment, Jesus reveals God's fundamental disposition toward a sinful and broken world. And it is a disposition to forgive, before it would even occur to us to ask for it. Christianity was birthed out of unmerited forgiveness.

First in importance. Jesus makes this uncomfortably clear in our gospel text from this morning. If we don't forgive, the consequences are dire. If we don't forgive our brother from the heart, Jesus says, we should expect punishment like the servant in the story.

This ought to get our attention. Jesus clearly thinks that forgiveness is of utmost importance. It's not an optional extra in the Christian life, not a nice disposition to cultivate once we've done the more important work of figuring out our "position" on all the moral issues of the day. It should be the first thing that his followers are known for.

And it should be "from the heart," Jesus says. What on earth does that mean? Are you supposed Can you even forgive someone "from the heart" under the threat of punishment?

I think Jesus simply means that our forgiveness must not be calculating but genuine. It should emerge from a heart tuned to forgiveness; a heart that is primed not to self-protectively withhold but to give.

It's in many ways a default approach to our neighbour and ourselves. It requires an ability to truly enter experience of someone else, what David Brooks described in an article in the *New York Times* this week as "a deep and perceptive capacity to see the struggles of others."[2]

This disposition is always necessary in a world where we do wrong and where wrong is done to us. It is perhaps especially necessary during trying times like 2020.

We are all struggling in our own ways. Many people are under profound financial, relational, and health stress these days. And conflict naturally emerges when we are under stress.

I have heard many examples recently of churches who are deeply divided about how and when to reopen, how and when to physically gather, about masks and whether they should be required.

I have heard many stories of relationships between spouses and parents and kids and roommates and co-workers that are being tested due to all of the enforced proximity of this last half year or so.

I see in the broader culture a kind of nastiness in our online discourse about all the usual big issues that people differ on which are amplified by the stresses of the times.

Underneath all of this, is the basic reality of human beings who are fearful of what they don't know, human beings struggling to cope with uncertainty and anxiety.

We are all, as Karl Barth said, "very poor creatures… who will need forgiveness of our sins every day."

Those with hearts primed to forgive have the capacity to see behind the behaviours that annoy and offend and hurt one another, to the reality of broken human beings who don't know what they are doing.

Could this be a time and a place for Christians to renew their commitment to the first Christian value of forgiveness? I think so. I hope so. I pray that this will be the case.

[2] https://www.nytimes.com/2020/09/10/opinion/trump-coronavirus-military-comments.html?action=click&module=Opinion&pgtype=Homepage

A thousand counterexamples spring to mind and I instinctively want to address them. What about abuse? What about when the wrongs done to us endanger others? What about when the wrongdoer shows no signs of remorse? What about…

These are important. But I am hesitant to go there this morning. I've done so in past sermons about forgiveness (I preached one in 2018 that talked about some of these things specifically[3]).

But this morning I want to resist the temptation to qualify the call to forgiveness as a way of life simply because the instinct to qualify, to limit, to say "ok, but" and "how many times?" is precisely what Jesus is critiquing in Peter!

Peter wants to place limits on forgiveness, to make it more reasonable, more manageable, less demanding.

Jesus won't go down this road with Peter and he doesn't go down it with us, either. He simply says, "forgive, as you have been forgiven."

May God help us to be true to this first Christian value.

Amen.

[3] https://rynomi.files.wordpress.com/2018/04/please-forgive.pdf