

The Straight Path

Proverbs 4:18-27

Lethbridge Mennonite Church

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For these two sermons in August, I've been trying to combine a bit of "here's what I did on my sabbatical" with some reflections on the theme of wisdom.

Last week, I reflected on my pilgrimage walk on the Camino de Santiago. I pondered a few nuggets of wisdom that I was reminded of along the way. Most of these were not specifically Christian—indeed, they would have echoed themes of philosophers and religious traditions down through the ages.

This week, I'm going to be thinking about wisdom in connection with two events I attended on my sabbatical:

- Anabaptism at 500 events in Zürich Switzerland (late May)
- Mennonite Church Canada Gathering in Kitchener/Waterloo (early July).

And I want to look at wisdom from a more particularly Christian perspective, specifically in connection with our Anabaptist/Mennonite identity. How do we inhabit our history and our denominational tradition wisely?

I want to acknowledge that I am aware that both Jen and Zachary have reported and/or reflected a bit on these two events earlier this summer. So, some of what I say may (or may not) overlap with what you've already heard.

Okay, let's start in Switzerland.

The morning after we got to the end of our pilgrimage walk in Spain, I was off to Zürich, to take in the events around the 500th anniversary of the Anabaptist movement.

I confess that initially my heart wasn't in it. I was tired and not particularly excited about a long day full of talks and exhibits and tours. For some odd reason, I didn't feel like walking much. 😊

But my fatigue quickly lifted at the sight of Naomi and some other friends (some I expected to see—Jen—others I did not—people from our time in BC).

And of course, Zürich is beautiful city to wander around in. We saw the apartment where the first believers' baptisms were said to take place, the spot in the river where Felix Manz was executed by drowning. It was fascinating to see the plaque and to think about what had happened five hundred years ago.

And it was amazing to see Anabaptists from around the world, to see how the movement has grown and changed over the course of half a millennium.

The highlight of the day was the worship service at the famous Grossmünster Church where the great Reformer Ulrich Zwingli had served as pastor.

How incredible, I thought, that this hugely significant church in the Reformed world was now hosting the very group that they had persecuted five hundred years earlier.

How moving to see representatives from the Reformed Church offering statements of Christian unity and reconciliation. At one point, leaders of the Mennonite and Reformed churches washed each other's feet which was quite powerful.

The Lutheran Church was also there, as was a cardinal from the Roman Catholic Church who read a statement from Pope Leo.

It was surprisingly emotional to see these representatives of churches who had visited such violence on the early Anabaptists now offering warm words of repentance and reconciliation, of mutuality where there was once only enmity.

It was also profound, at least for me, to hear statements from Mennonite representatives that acknowledged *our* faults.

One example from the liturgy. After a confession of the Reformed church's persecution of Anabaptists:

As Anabaptist Christians, we acknowledge that we have often overlooked the deep theological roots that we share with the Reformed tradition. We confess that too often our convictions, ideals, and memory of martyrdom have fostered self-righteousness and a reluctance to see the face of Christ in our Reformed sisters and brothers.

For me, this was significant. It is so easy to think that our team is the best team because we're on it.

There was and is much to be impressed by in the Anabaptist movement. Sixteenth century Anabaptists were very serious, very idealistic, and often very young (!) people who sought to follow Jesus diligently.

But they could be quite obnoxious and combative (if you doubt this, read some of their writings!). They could come across as very self-righteous and “holier-than-thou.” There was often very little “love of enemies” discernible in how they spoke about those in the broader church whom they were convinced were in error.

The early Anabaptists seemed to demand perfection from the church—a “church without spot or blemish” (Eph 5:27). At times, they seemed to want to just tear it all down to the studs and start again with the pure and uncontaminated.

This is a dangerous impulse, and one that continues to find expression.

Over lunches and coffees in Zürich, a few of us commented on the similarities between the early Anabaptists and many of the protest movements of our time (over racial tensions and colonial legacies, gender/sexuality battles, etc.).

The idealistic impulse is the same. Tear it down and start again with the pure and uncontaminated.

Everything that came before us was oppressive and terrible and wrong! There is a righteous few who know the truth and who imagine themselves to be dragging everyone else along with them toward progress. It's just that simple!

But it's actually rarely that simple, is it?

If we should learn anything from history—whether Mennonite history, church history, the history of the world, or our own histories—it's that we are not always (or even often) as right or as righteous as we imagine ourselves to be.

I left Zürich very grateful for the witness of those first Anabaptists. Their courage in the face of persecution humbles and astounds me.

I agree with many of their views even if I would hold some of them more loosely with the benefit of five hundred years of history. It was inspiring to be where it all began.

In Zürich, we were given a glimpse of an Anabaptist movement not defined by what we're against but by what we are for.

We took our place in a broad and beautiful body of Christ where we have the humility to admit that our little corner of the church is not necessarily the one, true and only church, without spot or blemish.

We located ourselves in these deeply Christian practices of confession, absolution, reconciliation, and mutuality. We acknowledged that while our tradition is and has been a blessing to the broader church, we also have much to receive from others.

We recognized human sin and frailty and pledged to move forward learning from the mistakes of the past.

It was a beautiful thing to be a part of.

A month later, I was in Kitchener/Waterloo for the Mennonite Church Canada national gathering.

Again, it was wonderful to see friends both old and new. It was the first time I had spent any significant time in southern Ontario, one of my many deficiencies as a Mennonite, and one which never failed to produce astonishment in those to whom I admitted it. 😊

But I must be honest. I did not sense as much of the spirit present in Zurich at our Gathering.

While there were a few welcome exceptions (Doug Klassen’s closing sermon, for example), much of our time together in Ontario seemed (at least to me) to be dominated by the issues dominating the social justice landscape.

Whether it was relationships with our indigenous neighbours or our response to climate change or issues around gender and sexuality or adopting the correct position on Israel and Palestine or becoming more culturally diverse in our churches, the call was pretty clear. *Do better.*

After three days of this, I was in a conversation with a few others about what we were making of the conference thus far. I heard of one person who said, “I’m getting weary of hearing, in some form or another, ‘Stop sucking so much.’”

Indeed, I was a part of a few unpleasant, even confrontative interactions with people who were appalled—I don’t think this is too strong a word—that I didn’t have a sufficiently “progressive” view on one or more of the big issues.

As I mentioned last week, I turned fifty on my sabbatical (indeed, *at* the Gathering in Ontario). I’ve been a pastor for the better part of two decades. And I’ve been in the Mennonite Church Canada world for fourteen years. So, I think this qualifies me to say a few things that I’ve observed over the years (in both conservative and progressive contexts).

I could be wrong (or less right than I think I am) but take this for what it’s worth.

One is that each one of those four issues—and indeed *any* issue that divides people, inside or outside the church—is almost *always* more complex than just lining up with the “progressive” or the “conservative” position.

And yet, it didn’t feel like there was space to express even this most basic observation at the Mennonite Church Gathering in Ontario.

Again, there were exceptions here and there, but mostly it felt, at least to me, like if you didn’t uncritically adopt the most “progressive” view on these issues, you were out of step and probably a bit suspicious.

It will not surprise you to hear that for some time now I think that we risk getting the order of operations wrong in the Mennonite world.

It's not that our Christian faith shouldn't inform how we think and act with respect to controversial issues. It absolutely should.

But too often instead of starting with Jesus and the fullness of his gospel (including his assessment of human nature!), we *start* with the issues and then bring Jesus in the side door to justify our positions.

The second thing I have observed is that we so easily forget the humility that was evident in Zürich.

We are human beings who only ever see in part, who remain sinners, and who therefore must remain humble. We do not know as much as we think we do. We are not (nearly) as righteous as we imagine ourselves to be.

We often make things worse when we are convinced that we are making things better. We regress when we imagine we are making progress, and we move forward when it feels like we are failing.

This is who we are as human beings, and this is who we have always been.

And of course, social justice activism can easily come with the same kind of self-righteousness that those first Anabaptists exhibited toward those they disagreed with.

As I reflected on these two experiences, a kind of sad symmetry occurred to me. The first Anabaptists were too often self-righteous and quick to condemn those who had the wrong views (we confessed this publicly in Zürich).

Today, Anabaptists can at times also be self-righteous and quick to condemn. The difference is that instead of baptism, nonviolence, and the sacraments being the issues, at least in some Mennonite Church Canada circles, it is often now climate change, indigenous issues, gender/sexuality, and Israel/Palestine.

The issues have changed. Too often, the spirit has not.

How desperately we all need to be guided by the Spirit of Jesus as we walk the Way of Jesus.

Near the end of Proverbs 4, we heard these words:

Keep straight the path of your feet,
and all your ways will be sure.

²⁷ Do not swerve to the right or to the left

Now, on a literal level, straight paths are kind of boring.

The Camino de Santiago would have been a very dull walk if it was a literal straight line. The journey was interesting because it weaved and twisted and turned, went up and down, etc.

Our lives do not move in straight lines. Sometimes the detours are the most interesting parts of our journeys. They are how we learn and discover new landscapes and grow.

But in context, I think the term “straight path” is referring to a singularity of purpose. A clarity of vision. Keeping our eyes fixed on an unchanging goal.

Proverbs 4 was not written by a Christian (it was written at least five hundred years before Christ, probably more). But from a Christian perspective, the “straight path” that our feet must walk is Jesus. He is the Way, the Truth, and the Life.

And not just the Jesus we prefer. Not just the parts that affirm our politics or our ideologies (conservative or progressive) or our preferred theologies (conservative or progressive).

A month or so ago, Naomi and I were out on the Sunshine Coast of BC and every morning I would get up, pour myself a coffee, and go sit on the porch overlooking the ocean.

I decided that I was going to read the gospel of Matthew from start to finish.

Like many who preach regularly, I have grown accustomed to approaching Scripture in bite-sized sections. It had been a while since I just read an entire book of the bible.

So, I did. And I came away with an entirely unoriginal but still important observation/reminder.

We all create Jesus in our own image.

We focus on the things he says and does that resonate with us—our experiences, understandings, and preferences—and we largely ignore the things he says and does that we find baffling or confusing or annoying or just plain hard.

For example, Mennonites love the social justice-y parts of the gospels, the parts that emphasize Jesus' practical moral teachings. The Sermon on the Mount, for example, which is kind of like our bible within the bible.

But to take just one example, the gospel of Matthew is also *saturated* with supernatural healings and exorcisms and miracles. Like, they're *everywhere*. Matthew 8-10 (right after the Sermon on the Mount) is almost one healing after another!

It's easy to miss this if you just rummage around in the gospels for the parts that reinforce what you already believe or want to be true.

And it can make for slightly awkward reading for those of us who live and move and have our being in the vaguely progressive terrain of the Western church.

I don't tend to preach much on healing and certainly not on demon possession. When I do touch on such passages, I probably tend to treat these stories as first-century manifestations of the inbreaking of Christ's kingdom, not as experiences that Christians should expect today.

But of course, other parts of the church in other parts of the world unapologetically focus on healing, exorcism, wild and charismatic manifestations of the Spirit.

They focus on all the parts of the gospel of Matthew that people like me tend to read around or skip past. Indeed, these are the parts of the global church that are experiencing numeric growth (including in the Anabaptist world).

I don't want to romanticize the church in the global south—I have heard from some Mennonite leaders there that the church is "a mile wide and an inch deep." And perhaps they are inclined to skip past the parts of Matthew that people like me are drawn to. Again, we are all tempted to create the Jesus we prefer.

But in the end, I don't want a Jesus in my own image, even if there are parts of the gospels that make me scratch my head and that I would prefer to avoid.

A Jesus in my image is no more or less inspiring than me and I am not particularly inspiring.

And a Jesus that simply reflects our preferences can never challenge or correct us.

We need the Jesus with the radical social agenda, the Jesus with the strong call for justice. We also need the Jesus who heals the lepers, opens the eyes of the blind, and binds and casts out the demons (I am reminded of this every Monday in the jail).

We need the Jesus who embodies love and peace and compassion, and we need the Jesus who names sin for what it is and tell the uncomfortable truth about who we are and what we're prone to.

We need the Jesus who tells us we are loved as we are, *and* we need the Jesus who unflinchingly names our idolatries.

We need the Jesus who is the Friend of Sinners whose mercy outruns our own, *and* we need the Jesus who is the Judge of the Nations who turns over the tables of our corruption and greed.

We need the Prince of Peace and the Lord of Creation, the lover of our souls and the refining fire.

We need Jesus as he was and as he is because this is the Jesus who saves. And this is the Jesus who is the hope of the world.

This is the Jesus that is to be our singular focus, the straight path that we walk.

I've talked a lot this morning about the church, the good and the not so good.

Given the history of the church, given some of the present realities of the church, it can be easy to despair or kind of throw our hands up in the air and say, "well, what's the use in trying, we're just going to keep screwing things up!"

One of the last things I did before my sabbatical began back in May was to attend a pastors' retreat at a Roman Catholic Retreat Centre in Cochrane.

Our director said two things that I wrote down in my little notebook and that I will end with today. I leave them with you to ponder as you consider how to walk the path God has called you to walk wisely.

The first is as simple as it is profound:

God does not love us because we are good; God loves us because God is good.

The church has always been full of sinners and will remain so until Christ comes again. If Mennonite history and church history more broadly teaches us nothing else, it should teach us this. Our hope is not in our performance but in the mercy and love of God.

The second thing she said was this:

A cynic is someone who is prematurely disappointed in the future. A Christian sees the world as Christ sees it, which is to say, as redeemable.”

It's easy to be a cynic. It's harder (but also more hopeful) to be a Christian.

May the path our feet tread be always directed straight toward Jesus. May we not swerve to the left or the right.

May we see the world and the church as Christ sees it. As redeemable.

Amen

