

How to Hold a Conviction

Proverbs 12:15-18; John 8:31-32

Lethbridge Mennonite Church

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January 11, 2026/First Sunday After Epiphany

Today marks the beginning of our 2026 Faith Questions sermon series, the series where your questions set the preaching agenda from the time roughly between Epiphany (which was last Tuesday) and the first Sunday of Lent (which this year is Feb 22).

This is the eighth year that we have done this. I usually begin these series with a few introductory comments and caveats about all that this series will and won't be able to do, but I think most of you know the drill by now so I'm just going to jump straight in!

Here is a look at the road map for our 2026 Series. As you can see, this year we'll be exploring five questions.

(You may have already figured this out from the visual Annie created for this series, depending on how good your eyesight is!)

This year's series is a bit shorter than last year's (which I think was seven or eight sermons).

This is because, a) this year there are fewer Sundays between Epiphany and Lent than last year, and b) I received fewer questions this year than last year.

As you can also see, we're going to cover quite a broad range of topics. From communion to democracy to gendered language in our hymnals to life after death!

As always, it is fascinating to get a window into what you are thinking about when it comes to the life of faith!

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Our first question seemed like an appropriate one to launch a series based on questions.

Why is it so vitally important for us to be “right”?

Why do we in the church (and in the broader culture, I would say) exert so much time and energy in making sure we have the right ideas?

Why can't we just decide not to care so much about doctrines and politics and all these other things that so reliably divide us and just love each other?

As it happens, this week the *Canadian Mennonite* published an article I wrote on some of these themes called “A Tear Trickles at the Edge of Reason.”¹ What a fantastic title! (I didn't choose it, sadly... I think I have Will Braun to thank for this one).

I don't often quote myself, but I will do so here. I began with kind of a mid-life reflection on beliefs/behaviour, truth/beauty, etc.:

I wonder if one of the tasks of faith in the middle-stage of life is to unlearn the notion that whoever dies with the most correct ideas about God in their head wins. To open oneself to the possibility that faith is less about arguing than evoking, less about proving than reminding and revealing...

According to [philosopher and theologian] James Smith, “The logician speaks a tongue that's foreign to the heart...”

I [love] logic, philosophy and theology, but, like Smith, I think I have come to a point at which I am deeply aware of the limits of these endeavours.

God is not a syllogism. The life of faith is not primarily an argument or a solution to a rational problem. The gospel is not the system we so often and eagerly reduce it to, but a story.

And you and I are not data machines in need of the right inputs. We are lovers who need to be loved into remembering. We are dreamers who need more expansive imaginations. We are a ragged choir in need of a better song.

Whew. That last paragraph is an impressive bit of poetry, if I do say so myself!

¹ <https://canadianmennonite.org/a-tear-trickles-at-the-edge-of-reason/>

But as I was admiring my literary handiwork on Friday afternoon after the *Canadian Mennonite* came into my inbox, I began to ask some questions of myself.

Have I constructed something of a false dichotomy here? Are we *either* logicians *or* artists? Is it *either* the brain *or* the heart? Should we *either* care about being right *or* care about being loving, compassionate, kind, etc.?

Have I perhaps even done this with the Scripture readings I've chosen for this morning.

In John 8, Jesus says we can *know* the truth and the truth will set us free. This could easily be used to justify doubling down on the idea that Christianity is primarily a cognitive exercise (having enough right ideas about Jesus) and that this is the source of our salvation and freedom.

Proverbs 12 urges a bit of humility and a willingness to consider other perspectives (don't focus so much on your rightness!). The wise listen to advice. The words of the reckless who are convinced of their rightness can pierce and cause pain. We should use our words and our ideas to bring healing not divide people.

Let's not be so concerned on being right and just try to be kind.

But can we just divide human experience so neatly?

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This week, I spent some time reading a book by New York Times columnist David Brooks called *How to Know a Person*.

It's an excellent book and one that I recommend highly. He offers a compelling diagnosis of our cultural moment and a heartfelt plea to recover the moral skills necessary to see and understand people, particularly in a context of deep polarization and difference.

At one point early in the book, however, he tells a story that I think perfectly highlights the trouble with this separation between what we believe and how we act.

He was talking about the importance of how we “show up” for each other in social contexts. He was interviewing an elderly woman in Waco, TX about her life spent as a teacher in a tough neighbourhood and about the impact she had.

Brooks’ interviewing style is, in his own words, “earnest and deferential, not overly familiar, not too personal.” His posture is that of a student.

And with this posture, he got one kind of response from the woman he was interviewing. She told him about her life in a detached way. She presented herself as a kind of tough but fair drill sergeant. Ordered, disciplined, committed.

Then a guy named “Pastor Jimmy” came in the room. Pastor Jimmy was teddy-bearish man in his sixties who built a church for homeless people under a highway overpass, who led a homeless shelter by his house, who served the poor.

I’ll let Brooks describe how he “showed up” to the same woman:

He saw her across the room and came up to our table smiling as broadly as it is possible for a human face to smile. Then he grabbed her by the shoulders and shook her way harder than you should ever shake a ninety-three-year-old. He leaned in, inches from her face, and cried in a voice that filled the whole place: “Mrs. Dorsey! Mrs. Dorsey! You’re the best! I love you!”²

Brooks said he had never seen a person’s whole aspect transformed so suddenly.

The old, stern disciplinarian face she’d put on under my gaze vanished, and a joyous, delighted nine-year-old girl appeared. By projecting a different quality of attention, Jimmy called forth a different version of her.

The moral of the story, at least as Brooks tells it, is that in our world of polarization and suspicion and hostility, we need more people willing to show up for other people like Pastor Jimmy and less like, well, himself.

Now, I’m not sure what you think of this. I’ll say that I found myself nodding along as I read, even as I know that I will never be the kind of person who shakes ninety-three-year-old women and yells “I love you!” at them in public places.

² David Brooks, *How to Know a Person: The Art of Seeing Others and Being Deeply Seen* (New York: Random House, 2025), 29-30.

But perhaps we can all move the needle a little bit toward attending to others in ways that call forth the kind of joy Brooks describes.

At any rate, what does any of this have to do with this morning's question? I'm getting there, I promise.

In the process of urging his readers to adopt more of a "Pastor Jimmy" like approaches to their neighbours and how this would transform our social fabric, Brooks says this:

When Jimmy sees a person—any person—he is seeing a creature who was made in the image of God. As he looks into each face, he is looking, at least a bit, into the face of God. When Jimmy sees a person, any person, he is also seeing a creature endowed with an immortal soul—a soul of infinite value and dignity. When Jimmy greets a person, he is also trying to live up to one of the great callings of his faith: He is trying to see them with Jesus' eyes—eyes that lavish love on the meek and the lowly, the marginalized and those in pain, and on every living person. When Jimmy sees a person, he comes in with the belief that this person is so important that Jesus was willing to die for their sake...

Brooks goes on:

Now, you may be an atheist, an agnostic, a Christian, a Jew, a Muslim, a Buddhist, or something else, but this posture of respect and reverence, this awareness of the infinite dignity of each person you meet is a precondition for seeing people well.

You may find the whole idea of God ridiculous, but I ask you to believe in the concept of a soul...

If you consider that each person has a soul, you will be aware that each person has some transcendent spark inside them. You will be aware that at the deepest level we are all equals. We're not equal in might, intelligence, or wealth, but we are all equal on the level of our souls. If you see the people you meet as precious souls, you'll probably wind up treating them well.³

³ Brooks, 31.

Can you guess what I'm going to say next? Can you guess what I may have scrawled in the margin of my copy of this (excellent) book?

Can we actually do this? Can we just decide to believe in the concept of a soul because it may lead to a desirable behaviour?

I understand why Brooks says what he says. He is writing in the context of pluralism, where all people of all kinds of different tribes and tongues and creeds are trying to live peacefully in the same space.

It's natural to want to try to find common ground with those who might not share his beliefs (Brooks was raised as a secular Jew and has since become attracted to the Christian story—he describes himself as “a wandering Jew and a confused Christian”).

I get this. You probably do, too.

But it seems obvious to me that this is a case where what we believe cannot be separated from how we act.

The truth of the matter matters.

For David Brooks' project to work, it matters if he is *right* about the value of a human being.

Do we *actually* have intrinsic value or are we are just chunks of meat and bone produced by time and chance?

Are we *actually* precious, do we *actually* have a “transcendent spark” or is this just something we tell ourselves to make ourselves feel better?

Do our souls actually have an immortal destiny or is our story over once we hit the dirt?

Does Jesus' view of the weak and the marginalized *actually* tell the truth of our moral obligations and God's vision for humanity or doesn't it?

On each one of these questions (and countless others—I've just picked this one example for my sermon) it matters deeply if we are right or not.

We cannot so easily separate what we believe from how we should act.

They are all connected in deep and unbreakable ways.

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Now, of course this does not necessarily mean that if we have the right ideas about God and human beings and our reason for being on the planet then our behaviour will always wonderfully and consistently reflect this.

If only!

We are not machines, where the right inputs always lead to the right outputs. We are human beings—beautiful, broken, conflicted, idealistic, inconsistent human beings.

I have seen many people act in ways that were far better than what they say they believe to be true about the world. People who say they believe that there is no objective moral meaning in the world, yet who act in deeply moral ways.

And of course we are all (sadly) well-acquainted with the opposite: people who claim to believe all the right things, yet do not act consistently with them.

Just this week, we had the example of prominent Christian author Philip Yancey admitting to having an extramarital affair that went on for eight years.⁴ He is sadly hardly alone when it comes to prominent Christian figures caught in a scandal.

But none of this takes away from the fact that what we believe to be right and true about the world has a deep connection to what we will at least aspire to when it comes to our behaviour.

Indeed, one could argue that one of the reasons so many people feel free to speak and act so terribly toward each other these days (particularly online) is because we treat people as if they are *only* perspectives that we either agree with or don't.

As the Christian story fades from our cultural consciousness, we increasingly *don't* seem to believe that people have inherent worthy, dignity, beauty, that they are precious no

⁴ <https://www.christianitytoday.com/2026/01/author-philip-yancey-confesses-affair-withdraws-from-ministry/>

matter what they believe. They are only the positions they hold, positions which we either find admirable or abhorrent.

To whatever extent people believe and act according to this view, I think they are wrong. And that it matters deeply.

Last Sunday we heard the first chapter of John's gospel which contains two of my favourite words: are "grace" and "truth." *Grace and truth came through Jesus Christ.*

How desperately we need both.

"Truth" to remind us that we were created to love truth, to seek it to pursue it, to seek to live according to it.

"Grace" to remind us that we are also fallen, that we are prone to errors, that we sometimes see what we want to see, that we sometimes deliberately choose falsehood over truth because the truth can be hard.

That we need to be merciful with one another because God is merciful with us.

And I think that given who we are, we must always hold our convictions with humility, with grace, with a willingness to admit that we have things to learn.

I think that if we are to err in the direction of grace or truth, we should err on the side of grace, not because truth doesn't matter but because of who we are as fallen human beings who so often wound each other in how we weaponize our view of the truth.

Jesus, however, perfectly embodied both words. Grace and truth.

Perfect virtue and deep conviction. Behaviour and belief in holistic unity.

In our passage from John, we see this. I only read part of it earlier—the part about "knowing the truth." But the fuller context is this:

If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples. ³²Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.

Holding to Jesus' teaching (behaviour) leads to knowing the truth (belief). They cannot be separated. Jesus, I suspect, would have very little patience for the whole, "let's just not worry about who's right and wrong and focus on loving each other."

Yes, he summed up the entire task of a human life in twin commands to love God and neighbour.

But we will only pursue the life of love that Jesus commands if we think Jesus is telling the truth, if we think he is right.

The truth of the matter, matters. It always has and it always will.

Thanks be to God.

Amen.

