

The Cure

Philippians 3:4b-14

Lethbridge Mennonite Church

By: Ryan Dueck

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When I was a kid, I remember casting a glance at the clock when our pastor got up to deliver his Sunday sermon. You could set your watch by his sermons, so it was a fairly reliable gauge for how much longer I would be expected to sit still.

Some of you may be anxiously looking at the clock this morning, given all that is yet to come in our worship service.

I want to set your minds at ease. My sermon this morning will be short. Really.

I simply want to reflect on Paul's declaration that compared to knowing Christ, everything else in his life is counted as "loss."

To do so, I want to begin with two stories. The first takes place at a coffee shop that Zachary and I visited on Wednesday morning as we were discussing plans for the young adults group in the year ahead.

As we were settling in, Zachary said, "Did you see what somebody wrote with chalk outside on the sidewalk?" I had not.

"You should look. I could see it being something you would be interested in," he said with a grin. "You'd probably use it in a sermon or something."

And lo, it has come to pass!

On the sidewalk was the message: **Authenticity is the cure.**

Interesting.

The second was a conversation I had with a young woman on Thursday. She is currently attending a Christian college in Canada and wanted to discuss a meeting she recently had with a former professor who had decided that Christianity was no longer for him.

It was a good conversation where difficult questions were broached and hard questions were asked in a spirit of curiosity and humility. But she was a bit troubled by something her former professor said at the end. “Just make sure that you always stay true to yourself.”

“That didn’t sound quite right,” my young friend said. I told her that her theological radar was working as it should!

I think that these two stories, in their own ways, express one of our deepest cultural scripts in the post-modern West. They speak of where we believe value, identity, and meaning are to be found.

Be true to yourself. Be authentic.

This is a phrase that certainly contains some truth. I am deeply convinced that our selves have value and worth, that each voice is precious, that each soul matters, that the world needs the contribution that only our unique selves can make.

We particularly need to hear this if we have been ground down by negative voices in our lives or if our experience of the world has mostly been that we aren't good enough.

Yet often when I hear these words, I find myself thinking, "Be true to myself?! Ugh, what a small and inadequate thing to be true to! Have you ever examined an actual self?!"

This script ignores what is, to my mind at least, an absolutely vital truth that we are in desperate need of preserving (or recovering): There are higher and better things to be true to than our selves.

Indeed, a life devoted to not much more than personal authenticity will almost invariably end up wandering down all kinds of unhealthy, possibly even destructive paths.

The reason for this is quite simple: Selves are not infallible guides.

In the biblical narrative, this has been true since Genesis 3 when the serpent whispered, "you can be like God." And in many ways, the rest of human history has been a demonstration that we are absolutely not up to the task!

Selves are profoundly self-interested. Selves are yanked around by desire and emotion and a need to belong. Selves can be inattentive to what matters most and far too easily distracted.

And, of course, from a Christian perspective, selves are sinful. Jesus made this pretty clear throughout the gospels, but Mark 7 lays it out as plainly as anywhere:

[Jesus] went on: “What comes out of a person is what defiles them. For it is from within, out of a person’s heart, that evil thoughts come—sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, greed, malice, deceit, lewdness, envy, slander, arrogance and folly. All these evils come from inside...”

If we’re honest—and it’s hard to be honest—when we look inside ourselves, we see that Jesus is telling the truth about us.

Our hearts are a mixed bag. We find goodness of all kinds, certainly. But we also find the things that Jesus talks about in Mark 7.

In the deepest parts of who we are, we find things that are not worth being true to.

“Be true to yourself” is, it turns out, bad advice when it comes to how a life should be understood and lived.

Or, more accurately, it’s only partial advice. Our selves are indeed wonderful, glorious, unique treasures. They are gifts from God and they are among the ways in which God’s love is reflected out into a world in desperate need of it.

But the goal of life, fundamentally, is not to be true to our selves. ++There are parts of our selves that our only task is to die to so that something better and more beautiful might be brought forth.

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Paul’s cultural script was not the same as ours. “Be authentic” was not the default of his time as it is for ours.

But he, too, spent most of his life operating according to a particular script about what a life was for and what gave it value.

We can get a sense of his script by the credentials he lists off in our text this morning:

- Circumcised on the eighth day, as all good Jewish boys are
- Member of the tribe of Benjamin—Jacob’s youngest and most-cherished son
- A Hebrew of Hebrews—pure blood!
- A Pharisee—devoted to God’s law.
- Persecutor of the church (zealous commitment to Torah)
- Righteous—Paul not only understood the law but also followed it scrupulously!

In short, Paul came from the right stock, was super smart, and super religious. According to the script he was operating out of, he was hitting it out of the park.

Yet in verse 7, he says that he has come to regard all of this as loss. Why? “Because of the surpassing value of knowing Jesus Christ my Lord.”

We know Paul’s story. How he was confronted and struck blind by the risen Christ. How his entire story was rerouted. How a persecutor of the church became its first and most famous missionary and theologian.

And now, everything to which Paul previously attached value, all the scripts that defined and gave meaning to his life, everything in which his identity was located, he now regarded as rubbish, in order that he may gain Christ!

These are strong words. Paul is saying that his identity—past, present, and future—is now located with Jesus Christ and his purposes.

Not with his ethnicity. Not with his religious knowledge. Not with his moral performance.

Not with anything but the basic reality that he is a creation of the living God, chosen, loved, forgiven, and redeemed by Jesus Christ.

I wonder, could we say the same?

Everything to which we attach value... everything that defines us... everything that gave meaning to our lives... all the places we turn to locate our identity...

Rubbish when compared to being found in Christ?

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The message on the sidewalk, well-intentioned though it no doubt was, is wrong. Authenticity is *not* the cure.

Religious knowledge is also not the cure. Ethnic identity is not the cure. Righteousness and moral performance are not the cure.

The cure is Jesus Christ. His life, his teaching, his death, his resurrection, his ultimate reign.

Today is World Communion Sunday, where we remember that we are a part of a big and deep and wide body of believers across space and time.

It is a day where we remember that whatever our differences in the body of Christ—and there are many, obviously!—we are united by this one thing.

We believe that the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ is the hope of the world (at least we should!).

That it is the cure for our souls.

That it is the cure for all who are weary of their inability to do enough, achieve enough, be authentic enough...

That it is the cure for those who are wearied by their own sins and failures and are hungry for mercy.

That it is the cure for a world in desperate need of healing.

May God help us to resist the cultural scripts that don't tell enough of the truth about who we are and what we can hope for.

May God help us to be true, ultimately, to Jesus Christ and his gospel.

Amen.

