Bleed Into One

Revelation 7:9-17
Lethbridge Mennonite Church
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I occasionally listen to a podcast called “The Pastorate.” It’s basically a series of long-form interviews with pastors, theologians, authors, and Christian leaders.

And, occasionally, artists. I’ve mentioned singer-songwriter Jon Guerra in past sermons. I’ve quoted his lyrics and played a few of his songs. He’s an artist that I’ve come to admire over the last few years.

He was recently the guest on The Pastorate. Among the topics discussed was how art forms us as human beings.

According to Guerra, art—songs, paintings, stories—speaks to us in ways that other things don’t (or can’t). Here’s how he put it:

> I can tell you something about God in… sentences that are true. God is gracious. God is love… his mercy knows no bounds.
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> I could say all these things or I can say, a man had two sons and the younger son said, give me my inheritance and he went away and he squandered it and he found himself eating with the pigs and he thought to himself, aren't my father's servants better off than this? And so he went and humbly walked back with remorse and seeing him along far away, the father runs to meet him… and he says, let's throw a party.
>
> We're going to kill the fatted calf. My son was lost and now he's found.
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> I just, I said more about God to the heart than I could ever in those… [first] sentences… these… sentence are true, but art is like that. Art is a parable. Art

> is… let me put you in contact with God in a way that makes the hair on your arms stand up a little bit.[1]

I think Jon Guerra is absolutely right about this. This is why art speaks to us in such deep and powerful ways.

This is why, on my blog, a story that I tell from the jail about forgiveness will generate way more traffic and feedback than a exegetical essay on Matthew 18 (where Peter asks Jesus how many times he should forgive).

This is why singing, "you restore and you refine, you redeem and reconcile, you bring all things back to your loving arms" moves me (and many of us) more than a chapter in a theological textbook on eschatology.

I think we all crave contact with God in a way that makes the hair on our arms stand up a little bit.

Well, speaking of art and music podcasts…

Those who know me well know that I have long been a big fan of the Irish rock band U2. They are—incredibly!—in their sixties now and have a new album coming out this month.

Their 1987 album The Joshua Tree might have been the first cassette tape (remember those??) that I ever bought, and my twelve- or thirteen-year-old self was utterly captivated as I listened to it over and over and *over* again in my parents' basement.

Their music has always been saturated by a spiritual hunger, a restless curiosity, and sometimes overtly Christian themes.

At any rate, in anticipation of their new album, I've been dipping into their catalogue a bit and listening to a few podcast interviews with the band (old and new).

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[1] From The Pastorate Podcast: Jon Guerra on How Music Forms Us, Pastoring Artists, and How Art Works Like a Parable, Oct 19, 2026

One of these was on a podcast called Broken Record, hosted by legendary music producer Rick Rubin. It was a wide-ranging and interesting conversation, even if most of the technical music production stuff went over my head.

My ears did perk up, as they tend to, when the talk turned to God and spirituality.

Rick Rubin strikes me as kind of "typical California," in many ways. There was plenty of talk about yogis and mystics and transcendental meditation and the creative energy of the universe. He liked to think about God as light and possibility and complexity and creativity.

He was very "spiritual" and even ok with using the word "God," as long as it didn't mean anything too specific.

When this podcast had meandered along this terrain for a while, Rubin eventually summed it up in a fairly common sentiment: "I believe all streams lead to the same river."

It brought to mind a song from that U2 cassette that bought in 1987 called "I Still Haven't Found What I'm Looking For":

> I believe in the kingdom come
> Then all the colours will bleed into one.

All streams lead to the same river. All colours bleed into one.

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I thought of this common sentiment when I read this week's lectionary reading from Revelation:

> I looked, and there was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, robed in white, with palm branches in their hands.

The book of Revelation is among the strangest books in our bibles. It is also among the most poorly interpreted.

I would say at least in part because people fail to understand that this letter is better conceived of as art than as a journalistic itemization of end-time prophecies.

Revelation is a kind of theological drama in which John uses poetry, wild visual symbolism of beasts and harlots and horsemen and dragons, numbers—this strange work of theological imagination, all to help his readers see reality differently.

It's the kind of thing that can make the hair on your arm (or the back of your neck!) tingle!

Ultimately, it was written help first century Christians recognize that the apparent powers of history are not ultimate, that violence and domination do not have the final word, and that the crucified Jesus is the true Lord of history.

And so we have this image of an uncountable number of people from every tribe and tongue, the rich tapestry of human diversity, together as one before the Lamb.

All streams leading to the same river?
All colours bleeding into one?

Some have interpreted this image in this way. Some say this points a kind of universalism where everyone is saved in the end.

And I understand the impulse behind it. We want to be tolerant of other viewpoints. We want to seek truth wherever it is to be found. We know we don't see the whole picture (or at least we should know this).

But statements like "all streams lead to the same river" actually require a fair amount of ignorance or naiveté about what various religions and philosophies actually teach.

Yes, there is wisdom and truth to be found in different religions and philosophies. But there are real differences between Christianity and Buddhism and Islam and Rick Rubin's California mysticism and every other belief system on the planet.

Differences that can only be made to sing the same song by reducing them to less than they actually are. Different religions offer different diagnoses of the human condition, different solutions, different expectations for the future, different things hoped for.

Christianity is scandalously particular.

God Incarnate, inhabiting the flesh and blood of Jesus of Nazareth, a first century Jewish rabbi, who embodied a radical love and proclaimed a kingdom unlike any other, who was betrayed, denied, mocked, abandoned, and executed by those he came to save.

God on a cross, dying the shameful death of a criminal to expose human wickedness and injustice. God, emptying himself of divinity, taking on the form of a slave, humbling himself, going to the very outer reaches of love's possibility in place of, for the sake of his wayward daughters and sons.

And then, of course, God bursting forth from the grave. Life out of death, light out of darkness, hope out of despair, victory out of defeat.

This is not one way among others of expressing a universal truth. This is not one tributary feeding into a more beautiful and universal river. This is either the truth of God and of the human condition or it is not.

Christianity does not politely take its place at the religious smorgasbord. This story is far too holy and wild and devastating for that.

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And yet…

To say that Christianity does not politely take its place at the pluralistic religious smorgasbord, to say that I don't believe all religions are basically different ways of saying the same thing, to say that I don't think that all streams lead to the same river, all colours bleed into one, is *not* to say that I think God's saving love cannot reach beyond the boundaries of institutional Christianity.

Here I have long been guided by the view expressed by C.S. Lewis in *Mere Christianity*:

> Here is another thing that used to puzzle me. Is it not frightfully unfair that this new life should be confined to people who have heard of Christ and been able to believe in Him? **But the truth is God has not told us what His arrangements about the other people are. We do know that no [one] can be**

> **saved except through Christ; we do not know that only those who know Him can be saved through Him.[2]**

I think there is a wideness to God's mercy that we can barely fathom and that we should never seek to place limits upon.

But my reason for thinking this is very specific in nature. It is not because of some fuzzy appreciation for "inclusivity. It is not because I think we should avoid making exclusive truth claims.

I am drawn to this position for one reason and one reason only: because of the character of God.

I believe that God is perfect love and that part of this love is perfect justice. I believe that God alone embodies the perfect combination of mercy and patience and judgment and truth.

I believe all of this because I have seen it in Jesus Christ.

Too many theories about the final judgment make Jesus seem double-minded. In his life, he saw and understood people perfectly, and responded to each person based on what they needed at that moment.

For some, it was a harsh word of warning (often religious people), for others it was an act of mercy, still others the lifting of a burden or the asking of a penetrating question. Nearly always, he forced people to challenge their assumptions about God and to make a choice.

But often when it comes to the final judgment, many imagine that this same Jesus will pronounce the eternal sentence based on whether someone said the right prayer once upon a time or has enough right beliefs about God in their head.

Christ alone sees each human life truly. Christ alone knows what each of us face, what each of us are capable of, what obstacles have been placed in front of us. Christ alone can be trusted to judge.

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[2] C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (London: Fontana, 1952), 62.

And we do believe that it is *Christ* who will judge. This is what Christians have confessed from the beginning. *I believe that he will come again to judge the living and the dead…*

All that is inconsistent with the kingdom of God, all that is rebellious and incongruous with God's new creation, all that is wicked and false and unworthy will indeed be judged.

This is actually very good news for anyone who has found themselves ground down and abused by the kingdoms of this world.

And in the end, those of us who *have* encountered Jesus, those of us who in whatever way have been exposed to his light and truth, those of us who are attracted to his way, Jesus' question for us is the same one he addressed to Peter (Matthew 16:15): "Who do you say that I am?"

Jesus claims to be the way, the truth, and the life. Not *a* way, a truth, *a* life. We are called to answer according to the light we have been given.

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I began this sermon by talking about how art can speak to us in ways that other things (like sermons, perhaps!) cannot.

And so I want to end with art. That line from the U2 song, in particular.

> I believe in the kingdom come
> Then all the colours will bleed into one.

Perhaps the key word in those lyrics is "bleed."

It's not that the colours are all the same, or that there is something intrinsic in each of their natures that tends toward oneness or anything like that.

No, the Christian conviction is that if all the colours are indeed to become one, it will be because of the blood of the One whose kingdom comes.

It is the finished work of God, in Jesus Christ, that is the hope of the world.

And in the end, the Christian hope is not, actually that all the colours bleed into one (poetic as this sounds). If we actually think about it, colours are quite beautiful in their difference. Most of us would prefer more, not less colour in the world to come!

I was actually curious about what it would look like if all the colours bled into one and so, naturally, I asked ChatGPT about it.

Apparently, it depends on whether you're combining light or pigments. If you mix all the pigments of the colours together, you generally get a very dark, muddy brown or nearly black.

Anyone want to guess what happens what happens when it's light and not pigments? Well, apparently all the visible wavelengths together produce white light.

How interesting that in the image from Revelation every tribe and tongue and language is brought together before the throne and robed in white.

Our various colours and differences do not disappear. They are, rather, brought together and "robed" with a unity provided by Someone else.

This is a beautiful hope and a beautiful image for All Saints Day, this day where we celebrate the communion of saints across space and time.

Our differences are not erased. Our cultures and languages and histories and even personal stories are not melted down into a kind of muddy brown ugly sameness.

Rather, they are healed and redeemed and judged and liberated to become the best of what they were intended to be because of the blood of Christ.

For this we say, thanks be to God.

Amen.

