

First Mennonite Church Edmonton

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When we were first getting to know one another Christine and I started this evening tradition of reading each other ‘bedtime stories.’ We started with reading a silly story; Forrest Gump, because we both wanted something light. Shortly after finishing Forrest Gump, we noticed we really enjoyed it and picked up a larger project. We started into reading the Harry Potter series. And by we, I mean me. It was delightful reading these stories out loud, I was noticing details I hadn’t noticed before because I was forced to slow down. But that wasn’t what surprised me. What was surprising to me was that as I got into the stories, I found myself creating different voices for the different characters. I found myself trying to be the different characters as I read the stories. It became quite fun, unfortunately rather than winding us down at the end of the evening, usually we found ourselves laughing at the ridiculousness of the inevitable mistakes I would make with the different voices. That said, there was something surprisingly engaging about trying to embody the characters and their voices.

A few years ago I had the privilege to spend some time one-on-one with ethicist and former CMU teacher Harry Huebner. I had picked him up at the Saskatoon Airport and was driving him to Rosthern for a Portable CMU weekend. Along the way we started talking about some of the more complicated and uncomfortable situations the church has found itself in. I asked him, how is the church to respond, to which is replied with, “When the Word becomes flesh, life gets messy.” It’s a fantastic quote, which didn’t answer my question what so ever.

I’ve sat with this quote for sometime and in spite of how it didn’t exactly answer the question, I’ve really come to appreciate the complexity of it as a response. And while it doesn’t give a direct answer, it certainly makes you think. I’ve come to see that there are two ways that this phrase can be understood. Both have to do with the Incarnation of Jesus. Both have to do with how we understand “When the Word becomes flesh.”

The first way to understand this quote has implications for us as God’s church seeking to follow Jesus. When the Word becomes flesh, when **we** begin to live out Jesus’ teachings, when **we** embody and bring the teachings of Jesus to life, life has a way of getting a little messier.

The second way I’ve come to understand this quote, has implications for how we understand Jesus and how Jesus lived the Good News of God. When the Word becomes flesh, when the logos becomes human, when Jesus comes to earth, life gets messy; because Jesus brings to life, unabashedly, God’s will, God’s dream, God’s vision for creation. And Jesus and his teachings certainly upset the status quo at that time, and ever since.

In either one of these cases, either when we choose to live out Jesus’ teachings, or when Jesus becomes human, we learn very quickly that God’s Good News doesn’t live in the cut and dry world of black and white, it’s not a neat and tidy this or that, right or wrong, it’s not legalistic, rather, God’s Good News, either embodied in Jesus or lived in our lives, resides in very large swaths of the grey areas of life; it resides in the spaces of love and compassion, understanding and grace, or to say in differently; in the messy areas of life.

As we continue on thinking about what “We declare, what we have seen and heard.” We move our attention, this week, to the Good News of the New Testament, and to the Good News embodied in Jesus.

About a decade ago when Mennonite Church Canada was having discussions surrounding faithful interpretation of scripture, one of the things we were reminded of was that Jesus interpreted scripture, what one person identified as a “hermeneutic of Jesus.”¹ No where is this more obvious than in the scripture that was read for us today. Where Jesus takes the scroll of Isaiah, and after finding and reading what we label as chapter 61, he proclaims that he is the fulfillment of this prophecy. That, he, Jesus of Nazareth, is the fulfillment of this promise of God to “to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners.”

Time and time again, we see Jesus, not abolishing or replacing what’s been said in the Old Testament, not negating God’s Good News, rather we hear Jesus **extending** God’s Good News. We could almost say that the Good News of the New Testament is an extension of the Good News of the Old Testament; that Jesus’ Good News is a revision and expansion of God’s Good News.

Where God’s Good News was that God is with you, God leads you, God is present to you in the joys and in the struggles; that God is present and at work in the world; the Good News of the New Testament; the Good News of Jesus is that, all that has been said before is true AND, it’s for all, it is extended not just to God’s chosen peoples, but to all of creation! Theologian Andy Brubacher Kaethler, (it sounds odd to say that because he was my youth pastor) in a recent article in the Conrad Grebel Review writes: “Jesus is both the bearer of Good News and the Good News itself. The Good News is not just an idea, is God’s presence. In the Incarnation there is completely congruency between medium and message, between the person of Jesus - who was born, taught, healed, was crucified, and rose again—and the Good News of salvation, liberation, and reconciliation.”²

This, of course, landed Jesus in hot water. If we were to read on from where we stopped, we will see that Jesus claiming his identity, embodying his calling as Messiah, doesn’t always lead to acceptance, it leads to instead a messy life.

This is where the other understanding of Harry Huebner’s phrase applies to us. We are called to embody the Good News; a Good News of both Testaments, a Good News of Old and New, that God is present to everyone and at work in all of creation...it’s that tricky three letter word again...all. We are called to bring the Good News of the New Testament to life, to take the words of scripture and transform them into flesh, we are called to embody them; Incarnate them. And when we do life will get messy.

It may place us in uncomfortable situations, it may lead us to tough dilemmas, it may cause us to speak when we’d rather be quiet, it may move us to open our hearts when they may rather be closed. There is a quote by Theologian Henri Nouwen which I hand hanging on the cork board in my office. It says “Jesus has a different vision of maturity. It’s the ability and willingness to go where you would rather not.” Maybe I can amend this for our purposes and say, that Jesus’s vision of maturity is the ability and willingness to let life get messy.

And here’s the assurance that is Good News for us, as we live out our calling. We don’t do this on our own. We do this with a God who has promised to be with us, a God who sends the Holy Spirit to guide and equip us, to inspire us and lead us. And we do this all in the context of being a community. We receive help form one another. We are encouraged and strengthened

¹ <https://www.commonword.ca/FileDownload/16231/BFC-4.pdf>

² Brubacher Kaethler, Andy, “The Enduring Significance of the Incarnation for the Church In a Digital Age,” *Conrad Grebel Review* 39 no. 2, (Spring 2021): pgs 100-101.

by each other's witness. We are challenged and supported by one another, and because of the unique gifting of the Holy Spirit, each of us has our own unique role to play in sharing and witnessing to God's Good News.

This witnessing and sharing that we do, isn't just something we do 'out there' it's also something that we do in here, in God's Church. I forget where I read this but someone once remarked that what we do here, within the Church, is practice for what we do outside the walls of the church. We practice life in here, so that we may live it out there. And this applies to many situations. We practice grieving together, we practice celebrating together, we practice reconciling and forgiving together, we practice...sharing and witnessing together, so that when we walk outside the doors of the church we can live out these habits that we have formed in here.

Growing these habits, practices, are what we commit ourselves to when we chose baptism. These are a part of the Jesus Way that we are choosing to adopt. And it's not only at baptism. We also committed today to help pass on these habits and practices to Finley. Though child dedication we promised to not only help Andrew and Lauren, but also by our example we promised to help share these habits and practices with Finley. And not just Finley but to all, to everyone in the church, the young, old, the familiar face, and the new comer. We practice sharing the Good News of God and Jesus here, so that we can share it out there.

The Good News of the New Testament isn't all that different to the Good News of the Old Testament. It is, rather, more of an extension, and one what we're called to bring to life. Scripture is called the living word of God, it's brought to life when we start living it. That's the calling that God, Jesus and the Holy Spirit have placed in our lives. To encounter God in the Scriptures, to embrace the teachings of Jesus, and to Embody the Living Word of God. And to remember, "When the Word becomes flesh, Life gets messy." So let's make a mess.

Amen