

First Mennonite Church Edmonton

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I am by no means a great writer. I'd love to be, but I'm not. English was a challenging course for me. Anyone who has had to copy edit my writing can tell you that my grammar is atrocious. Ev could tell you about my either overly-liberal, or overly-conservative use of commas. Writing is a struggle for me, it takes me a while to put my thoughts into order, and then it takes even more effort for me to put my ordered thoughts onto paper. It's just how it's always been.

Given that reality, it is a bit of a surprise then, for me, that I am a minister, where writing, one could say, is a core competency. I have gone back and re-read things I wrote months and years ago, and I just embarrassingly shake my head wondering, what was I thinking, what was I trying to say? I often think to myself how humbling, and perhaps even embarrassing it would be to have my sermons, or even my COVID Pastoral letters collected and added to Holy Scriptures. I really don't want that. Fortunately for me, I don't expect that my writings will never experience that sort of celebrity. Thank goodness. But that's not the case for the Apostle Paul.

For the next number of weeks we're going to be going on a little trip, a journey if you will. What we're going to do in worship is follow Paul and his letters through the early churches and visit each one, exploring what was going on there, what they were struggling with as they tried to be followers of the Way, and to hear what Paul's counsel was to them. I think this is important for us because it puts Paul and his writings in their context.

Paul has received a bad wrap over the course of history. Many people would prefer to omit Paul and his letters from the New Testament because of his writings. He's been accused of being sexist and homophobic. Now, I have no interest in trying to defend Paul or his writings, rather what I'm hoping we can do over the course of this sermon series is place Paul and his writings in their appropriate setting. I want us to recognize that Paul wrote to a particular people, at a particular time, about particular issues.

When Paul composed his letters to his many churches he did so not with the expectation that they would come to compose a majority of our New Testament, defining a significant portion of Christian theology and ethics, instead he was trying to help establish and support struggling churches. Each of his letters, each of the churches he wrote to, were trying to figure out what it meant for them to be Christ's church in each of their unique settings. Whether it was Antioch, or Corinth, Thessalonica, or Galatia, Ephesus, or Philippi, Paul was trying his best to help them out with the most advanced technology at the time, the humble letter. These humble letters, we kept, preserved in some way, and were shared. And over the course of a slightly complicated history, they found their way into our Holy Scriptures. I sometimes wonder what Paul would think of that!

What's interesting to me in many of his letters Paul references a foundational experience for him. In one way or another Paul writes about his experience encountering the Resurrected Jesus on the Damascus Road. Sometimes it's an allusion through vague language, sometimes it's a little more explicit, and in noticing this it seemed right to me that we should at least start our Journey where Paul started his journey. With his experience on the Damascus Road.

In looking at this story, two things caught my attention. The first thing that caught my attention was that this dovetails us nicely into Mennonite Church Alberta's E3 action plan. Encountering, embracing, and embodying Jesus. What's delightful about Saul/Paul's story is that we can see each of these movements in his life. He has a decided ENCOUNTER with Jesus. A dramatic encounter that, well I don't know about you, but I would probably rather not have. He sees and hears Jesus in a blinding light. Paul's experience is a literally eye opening experience to the resurrected Jesus. And out of this encounter with the risen Jesus, Saul/Paul has a choice, to heed the words of Christ, or to deny his experience. Paul chooses the former and EMBRACES this experience. In fact this experience becomes a cornerstone for Saul/Paul in how he understands the Jesus way. Saul/Paul embraces what he has learned, that Jesus did live, that Jesus taught, that Jesus was crucified, that Jesus died, and on the third day Jesus rose from the dead; that Jesus is the Messiah. And by embracing this learning he EMBODIES it in his calling to preach, in his calling to plant churches, and foster new growth in the Jesus Way. This experience of Saul/Paul shapes him and his life in a way that I don't think even he imagined.

The other thing that I noticed with this story is that it ties in nicely with last week's sermon about foundations. And so you know, this was not done on purpose. This experience of Paul's was foundational to him. It was a defining moment in his life. Prior to this experience Paul, was called Saul, and he was zealous in his persecution of the followers of the Jesus Way. In fact, with the way that he's introduced earlier in the book of Acts one would think that the author was setting Saul up to be the antagonist of the book. Except, he's not. I suspect his introduction and setup was done on purpose to illustrate just how much Saul/Paul does a 180 turn to become an equally zealous apostle. And it's this complete turn around which I think is the beautiful challenge for us today and this week.

Paul's 180 degree turn around can be described as repentance. Often you hear the word, repentance, somewhere in the season of Advent. It's usually talked about when passages focused on John the Baptist are preached. John's call 'Repent for the Kingdom of Heaven is near' is often the hook that many preachers grab onto when they preach the annual repentance sermon. The sermon that calls on followers to turn away from practices and things that get in the way of their relationship with God and Christ. But I think repentance doesn't need to be isolated for the season of Advent. In fact, at the beginning of many of our seasons repentance is an important practice. Whether it be Lent, Easter, Advent, Christmas, or even the start of the Fall semester, all of these are excellent times to take a step back, to do some self reflection, and consider what needs to be repented off. What needs to be let go of? What do we need to turn away from to grow closer to God.

When I talk of repentance however, prefer to think of it not as the negative, what do I need to turn away from, but that what are we turning our selves towards? What are we aligning

ourselves with? What are we casting our gaze or pledging our allegiance towards? I like to think of repentance in this positive way because it helps guide us into thinking of who do we wish to be, who do we wish to become, there's a forward movement, instead of looking back, looking at what am I turning away from, what am I eliminating. They really are just two ways of looking at the same thing. I just prefer the positive. And this is very much in line with Paul's experience. In his Damascus Road experience Paul turns his gaze towards Jesus, Paul repents and orients himself to the Jesus way, he re-directs his zeal toward Christ and God's Kingdom.

And I think this is the Damascus Road challenge for us. To take time to intentionally reflect on what we want to turn our gaze towards, what, or who do we want to be? How would we like to strengthen our relationship with God, with one another, with our neighbours and with God's creation? Its questions like these that can help us understand the foundation of our relationship with God. It's questions like these which can positively direct us to grow in our faith. It is questions like these which can shape us in the way that Saul/Paul was shaped. And it's questions like these that we need to continually revisit over the course of our faith journey. For the next number of weeks we're going to visit the churches Paul planted, we're going to revisit Paul's letters and we're going to see what challenges these early churches, and what challenges Paul may have for us today. Paul may not be writing to us, in our setting, but perhaps there is something that transcends time that may still challenge us today. But let's not get ahead of ourselves, we already have one challenge for this week. I'd like to challenge, or encourage you to consider, perhaps in the breakout rooms afterwards, perhaps throughout the week, what changes would you like to make, to grow closer to God.

Amen