

Because of Jesus

Romans 5:1-11

Good Morning again church family, and welcome again to those of you who are joining us online. It is good to be together this morning.

One of the great buzzwords over these past two years of pandemic is the word, “essential.” Meaning that which is most important, most crucial, most necessary. We’ve heard lots of announcements about only doing that which is essential -only the errands that you must run, only seeing the people that you absolutely must see. Family Doctors will only see patients in person for essential needs. We’ve talked about essential workers- Medical Professionals, Clerks at Grocery Stores and Pharmacies. Anyone who doesn't absolutely need to be at work in person, should work from home. Further still, covid restrictions often subtly told us what leaders thought were essentials -schools, church and workplaces were seen as essential, but having guests in your home, or indoor socializing was not. All this talk of essentials got me thinking...what are the essentials of the church? Why does the church exist? What does scripture tell us about what is essential in terms of the “work” of the church? What are all believers called to? My plan for the next few Sundays is to address this question of essentials, to help us together sift through this question of essentials. This may be the first time that Dr. Shahab has inspired a sermon series.

First though, why does this matter? Why is this a conversation worth having? Last Sunday, we looked at the story of Mary and Martha. We heard the gentle call of Jesus to let go of the things that distract us, even the good things, and instead to set priorities of rest, relationship and connection to Jesus. Saying yes to something nearly always means saying no to something else. My hope is that this conversation about essentials will help us in setting priorities in our own lives as followers of Jesus and in our life together as a church, help to tune our ears and hearts a bit more to the voice of the Holy Spirit. Discerning what is important is one way to do that. I remember after Ezra was born and we were navigating the transition to being a family of four. We had meals from our church and my mom came up for a stretch of time to help. I remember the first day that Taylor went back to work (he was working in Saskatoon at the time) and I was home alone for the first time with two children. I promised Taylor that he would come home to two living children and a crockpot supper (that I didn't make.) That was all. Priorities, defining what is essential is valuable all around, for our well-being.

The first essential of the church, as laid out in scripture is not a what, but a whom. Jesus. Jesus is THE essential of the Christian Church. The foundation upon which the church is built. The one in whom we live, and move, and have our being. The one who calls us together and holds us together.

A few months ago, I was having a conversation with a fellow Mennonite pastor who pastors in the United States. We were talking about our own calls to ministry, and how we ended up at our churches. I talked a bit about how important the person and ministry

of Jesus was to my own calling, my own understanding why I've devoted this season of life to serving in the church. She smiled at me and exclaimed, "It's rare to meet another female Mennonite pastor who is as orthodox as I am!"

The concept of Orthodoxy, which basically means right thinking or right belief, has somewhat of a bad reputation in a lot of modern church conversations-including in Mennonite Circles. To be orthodox is often conflated with being the person who insists that there is one right way, and only one right way, to think or believe. Or to be someone who can't make room for other ideas, who can't embrace doubt, questions or ambiguities. And to be sure, orthodoxy has been used in that way, but to let go of orthodoxy, specifically about Jesus, God in the Flesh, would be throwing the baby out with the bath water. Right understanding about Jesus is a way to stay rooted as the Church, to plant ourselves in good soil, in a lifegiving savior. Being rooted allows us, like any growing thing, to bend towards the light. To be cross-pollinated with new ideas, with the good things of neighboring faiths and differing perspectives. To discern what to lean away from. To stretch to our fullest height, so grow and change with the season, and to reap our richest harvest, but none of that can happen unless we are rooted, rooted in the person of Jesus.

As a Mennonite Conference, what do we believe about Jesus? What orthodoxy are we rooting ourselves in? The Mennonite Confession has a section about Jesus, I'll read a portion. The entire "article" is longer, but this section really gets to the crux. "We believe in Jesus Christ, the Word of God become flesh. He is the Savior of the world, who has

delivered us from the dominion of sin and reconciled us to God by humbling himself and becoming obedient unto death on a cross.¹ He was declared to be Son of God with power by his resurrection from the dead.² He is the head of the church, the exalted Lord, the Lamb who was slain, coming again to reign with God in glory....We recognize Jesus Christ as the head of the church, his body.¹⁵ As members of his body, we are in Christ, and Christ dwells in us. Empowered by this intimate relationship with Christ, the church continues his ministry of mercy, justice, and peace in a broken world.

Let's unpack this. First, Jesus is essential to the church because Jesus is fully human and fully God. Jesus is how we know what God is like. God revealed Godself in Jesus. The heart of love, care and sacrifice that Jesus showed during his life and ministry IS the heart of God. To believe that Jesus is God's son, God in flesh, is essential for the church because it removes doubt about what kind of God we're dealing with, what kind of God is active in our reality.

Bishop NT Wright tells this story, " For seven years I was College Chaplain and Worcester College, Oxford. Each year I used to see the first year undergraduates individually for a few minutes, to welcome them to the college and make a first acquaintance. Most were happy to meet me; but many commented, often with slight embarrassment, "You won't be seeing much of me; you see, I don't believe in god." I developed stock response: "Oh, that's interesting; which god is it you don't believe in?" This used to surprise them; they mostly regarded the word "God" as a univocal, always meaning the same thing. So they would stumble out a few phrases about the god they

said they did not believe in: a being who lived up there in the sky, looking down disapprovingly at the world, occasionally “intervening” to do miracles, sending bad people to hell while allowing good people to share his heaven. Again, I had a stock response for this very common statement of “spy-in-the-sky” theology: “Well, I’m not surprised you don’t believe in that god. I don’t believe in that god either.”

At this point the undergraduate would look startled. Then, perhaps, a faint look of recognition; it was sometimes rumored that half the college chaplains at Oxford were atheists. “No,” I would say; “I believe in the god I see revealed in Jesus of Nazareth.” “

Jesus is not a concept. Not a place to arrive. Not a higher consciousness. God chose to reveal Godself in a flesh-and-blood, tears-and-laughter, muscle-and-bone, soul-and-body human. We can relate to Jesus, because we are human. We can understand God because we understand Jesus. It is essential that we understand God by understanding Jesus.

Further Jesus reconciles us to God. This is what our text for this morning, that Carol read for us, is alluding to. There are lots of ideas about what exactly it means to be saved, how that happens, and what we’re being saved from. I’ve read lots of books and listened to lots of differing sermons and lectures on the question of atonement—that is being saved. Ed and I took a whole course on the topic in 2019! There’s so many different theories and perspectives, so many different ways of understanding sin and how Jesus did that. I feel like I had more questions and less answers after that course.

What I think is essential for the Church is to hold that something in our world, in our reality, in our experience is fundamentally broken. We're not alright. This is not how we are supposed to be or how this world is supposed to be. And that breaks God's heart. God longs to bring all creation, including humanity, back to connection and relationship with God. And somehow, in a way that is hard to fully comprehend, Jesus does that. It is a beautiful, divine mystery. If the Church is going to be a place of life, a place of healing, and a place of honesty, we need to live into the reality that something was and is broken, and Jesus was and is fixing that something. As it says in verses 10 and 11 of Romans 5, "For if while we were enemies, we were reconciled to God through the death of his Son, much more surely, having been reconciled, will we be saved by his life. But more than that, we even boast in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received reconciliation."

It is essential too, for our life as the Church to know that Jesus invites us into something new, together. In the book of Acts, we witness the birth of the church. In the earliest history of the church the followers of Jesus were called the "Followers of the Way." Doesn't that sound like a very trendy church name? Peter and John are sort of the "main characters" if you will in the first chapters of Acts and they deliver two big sermons to the crowds, so to speak, Peter in Acts chapter 1 and Peter and John in Acts 4. And these two sermons are both at their core telling the story of Jesus. How Jesus fits with the old prophecies that promise a coming messiah. How Jesus was raised from the dead. How God showed Godself through Jesus.

It's very striking that the earliest recorded sermons are not about ethics, issues, or even life together, they are about Jesus and how Jesus changed and continues to change our world. Peter and John preach these sermons and people believe and they start gathering together, eating together, worshiping together and asking the question, what does this mean for life? For our group? What does this mean for our communities? Those questions come, but Jesus is the start of that conversation. 1 Corinthians 3:11 says it this way, "For no one can lay any foundation other than the one that has been laid; that foundation in Jesus Christ." Churches go through seasons, they change and develop with the people who reside there, like a beloved family home. Things get moved around, walls get painted, additions built on, artwork switched out, and kitchens expanded to suit the people who live in the home, but the foundation remains. Because as any good home inspector will tell you, a good, solid foundation is essential.

Next Sunday, we'll continue talking about essentials and how scripture guides us in that. But to close this morning, I'd like to share a piece of my story and why I'm here, in church, because Jesus brought me here and keeps me here.

The life, death and resurrection of Jesus is a story that I feel like I have always known. Growing up, I felt like I had a place in my church and people there cared about me. I'm thankful to God for that gift-I know it is not everyone's story.

However, as I departed for College, I was witness to an ugly political situation that saw my beloved mentor leave the church. And as I studied theology and sociology at College, I began to ask questions that had never occurred to me before. As my own

disenchantment with the church, and evangelicalism in particular grew, I, mercifully, ended up back at the story of Jesus. And it was there that I found fresh hope.

Here was a God who had room for everyone. Jesus gathered together a rag-tag group of followers- fishermen, tax collectors, women. Parents and children. Come, follow me! No hint of discrimination, of an insider's club, a private meeting. In the fields, on the hillsides, in the temples, on the well worn planks of fishing boats, Jesus said, "Come to me all you who are weary and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you for my yoke is easy and my burden is light." Here was a God who was no divider of persons. Come, follow me!

Over and over again in the Gospels, I met a God who loved all people-especially those on the margins. The poor. Women. Foreigners. Children. Doubters. Cynics. Oftentimes, I was frustrated by Him- "Just answer the question!" I was bewildered by Him. But it was Jesus and only Jesus that felt like something-someone that I could get behind. That I could believe in. I am the Bread of Life. I am the light of the world. I am the resurrection and the life. I found myself saying along with the disciples in John 6:68, "Lord, to whom else would we go? You alone have the words of life."

Jesus and his calling is the foundation of our life both here and in the life to come. And for all of the ugly that has taken place in his name, He is still there. In the gospels, inviting everyone to his banquet, with scars on his hands and feet, seated at the right hand of God. It was Jesus who saved me from throwing my hands up and walking from the whole business of faith. 1 Peter 1:3 puts it this way, "Praise be to the God and

Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! In his great mercy he has given us a new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead.”

I'd love to hear your story.

Amen.