

In his book upon which we are basing this sermon series, Peter Enns references wisdom in his subtitle. Many have linked Jesus to wisdom by virtue of our New Testament scripture passages in relation to Proverbs 8.¹ Jesus was there at the beginning. Wisdom was there at the beginning. Jesus = wisdom; that is how the thinking goes, and to be honest that is our confession. We, at least our wing of the Mennonite tradition, truly believe walking the way of Jesus is the wisest way to compassionately live and die. Today we are exploring the God of the Bible through Jesus Christ.

This is quite an important topic for me. You see, we live in an age of dis-information and alternative facts. CBC, PBS and the Christian Science Monitor are my triumvirate of trust-worthy news, but how do I live in relationship to the news, to my family, to my congregation? What is our baseline for ethical and unethical action? What is our hope when we fall short of perfect? These are significant questions in this time and place. We must equip people to speak and live well in areas of disagreement sensitively, intelligently and faithfully to the wisdom we follow. We are invited to draw people to a place of restoration and renewal. Jesus is the lens through which we make sense of the world. This morning I will offer several avenues in which we can begin living this, again.

Point One: Live in the image of God via Jesus

Hans Denck, one of my beloved early Anabaptists, is quoted as saying, “the medium is Christ whom no one can truly know unless [they] follow him in [their] life, and no one may follow him unless [they] have first known him”.² What comes first—the chicken or the egg? To understand the bible, to understand God, to understand Jesus—we must strive to walk the way. We strive to walk the way. I offer a story which I think reflects Jesus Wisdom: “How to Treat Burglars”.

In the middle of the night I heard footsteps along the passage outside my bedroom door...I hastily rose, opened the door, turned on the passage light, and to my horror...I found myself face to face with two ruffianly looking men.

Now I always had a horror of the thought of burglars, since an unpleasant experience in my father’s house, but strangely enough intuition came to my rescue. For without a moment’s thought, although my heart was beating furiously, I quietly placed my hand on the arm of the man who was close to

¹ For example see Cynthia Bourgeault’s *The Wisdom Jesus: Transforming Heart and Mind—a New Perspective on Christ and His Message* (Boulder, CO: Shambhala, 2008).

² C. Arnold Snyder, *Anabaptist History and Theology: An Introduction* (Kitchener, ON: Pandora Press, 1995), p. 164.

me and said in a friendly way: “Hullo! What are you doing here?” “We are burglars,” replied the man. “Yes, I can see you are,” said I, as I glanced at the floor, which was strewn with my papers and belongings, and at his pockets which were bulging with my property. “But”, I continued, as I looked into his eyes, and felt that at the back of all this unpromising exterior here was a fellow human soul, who had just gone astray, “isn’t that rather a poor game to play? Come, let us sit down and have a talk about it, and find out why you are burgling. I expect you have been up against hard times.” “Yes,” said the man, “but we didn’t expect this.” “No”, said I, cheerily, “and I didn’t expect you.” Then I saw that the second man had hidden himself, and was crouching behind a screen near the door, so I turned to him and said: “Come along, you, and sit down let’s have a talk. [they talk]

Then suddenly I said: “Oh! Perhaps you are hungry—let us go down and get something to eat,” so I led a little procession down to the kitchen... Arrived at the kitchen, I went to the larder and to my disappointment found that there was no cold meat. So I apologised to my guests, who were now seated at the kitchen table, saying I was awfully sorry that there was no meat, but I would fetch some eggs... I returned and made some teas for us all... I commented on their poor appetites and they said: “What could you expect? It has been rather an exciting evening for us”.³

In this story I am not suggesting that we open up our apartments and houses to the destitute of our community looking for some quick cash. But you know something? The destitute will come into our lives. How, then, shall we respond when we meet them hither and yon? Ideally, we would engage with the grace of this woman whose story is chronicled in *Victories Without Violence*. Systemic poverty is with us. I would hope that we might address the systemic issues while also honouring the humanity of those on the other side. The other side of the window as one comes to a stoplight. The other side of the street as one ambles through downtown. The people beyond the prickly caragana which gives me the allusion of safety and security. Even considering these situations opens space for the wisdom of Jesus to enter in. We meet God and learn to recognize God as we walk the way of Jesus. And that way is engaging the other. The Jesus Way, I contend, is one of the most if not the most effective way of living compassionately into this wisdom of which Peter Enns speaks. It is a wise way.

Point Two: Dwell in the image of God

³ A. Ruth Fry, *Victories Without Violence* (Santa Fe: Liberty Literary Works Ocean Three Books, 1986), p. 15.

While serving a church in Minneapolis I formed a friendship with someone in the ecumenical community who identified as Quaker. Upon hearing his affiliation, I craved a bowl of oats and an oil change to the Quaker State brand. On a walk he disclosed that he was not always Christian. In contemplative silence one day he sensed the presence of Jesus embracing him from behind. He described it as a type of blanket being draped over a cold soul. According to him, he knew it was the Risen Christ. It gave his life direction to the point of leading a non-profit organization committed to peace building within the Twin Cities.

No one can truly know Christ unless [they] follow him in [their] life, and no one may follow him unless [they] have first known him. Being present to the image which forms us—it comes through habit, through awareness, through openness. Wisdom comes as we place ourselves in an emotional and physical posture to receive; when we open ourselves to gazing at the Divine. In his MC Canada Assembly sermon Doug Klassen reflected on this concept of gazing.

“This is more than seeing, or looking at, but gazing upon. When you gaze upon another person and in so doing lock eyes with them, your brain realizes that you’re dealing with the mind of the other person who is gazing back at you. The first look at someone is often analytical and critical. Most of our interactions stay at this level. But if it ever gets to the point where you can gaze deeply into the eyes of another,

...it is then that compassion, empathy and love engage. The early Christians realized what Meister Eckhart would later say, “The gaze with which we look back at God, is the same gaze that God, at first, looked at us.” The eye is the lamp of the body, Jesus once said. We are shaped by that to which we gaze. When not occupied by words or work, to what is it that we gaze? Gaze well, my friends. And consider that upon which you gaze.

Point Three: There is no flat bible

So we see God in a new way; or we are seen in a new way. It really doesn’t matter much, but things change. How we hear and read and live changes. I would like to think that is the intent of Peter Enns in his book *How the Bible Actually Works*.

I give my bias here in that I think the bible works through the lens of Jesus. For me, Jesus is the interpretive lens through which I seek to understand any sacred text of any tradition. I believe the spirit of Jesus was there at the beginning. I believe Jesus lived in the manner God desired. Jesus is our source and foundational stone as we consider conversation and action.

In the early 16th century conversations in court, the early Anabaptists (the early Mennonites), expressed their preference of the New Testament to the Old

when in debate about theological concerns.⁴ For them the bible was not flat. Wisdom came from Jesus. Read the words of Jesus, they were saying. Walk the steps of Jesus, they were saying. Live the Jesus Wisdom. The path is made, according to Brian McClarian, by walking it. I, we, our spiritual ancestors have come to own that we learn by doing.

This did not sit well with the imperial magistrates. They found the Anabaptists in contempt. Some of them got drowned and others burned. Some recanted. In many respects this is reflective of our current situation.

My final take for today:

- Take Jesus seriously in your living and your dying. Extend peace as you are able. Offer healing as you are able. Be one who blesses others into a better life. Some may not approve of such compassion or generosity, but I think it makes sense through the Jesus lens. This is not to understate God's justice. Jesus, I think, helps us hold justice and compassion together.
- In those disputations of which we find ourselves, let us cling to Jesus and what he did and what said. We find ourselves in heated conversation with family and friends, many of whom are Christian. I think our appeal is to Jesus Christ. The bible is not flat, for us it has been distilled through the filter of Jesus Christ. And this takes me to a final story, which I find moving. It seemed wisdom personified in our world.

Martin Niemoeller:

Martin is quoted as saying: "When the Nazis came to get the Communists, I was silent, because I was not a Communist. When they came to get the Socialists, I was silent. When they came to get the Catholics, I was silent. When they came to get the Jews, I was silent. And when they came to get me, there was no one left to speak."

Martin Niemoller was a U-Boat commander in the first World war who survived. This made him sort of an icon, a hero, in the country. He was committed to God and country. He actually became a pastor, I say sardonically.

"[W]ithin months of Hitler's rise to power in 1933, Niemoeller had begun to feel uneasy with the hateful extremism of the Nazis. He was further disedified by the emergence of the so-called German Christian movement, which virtually identified the gospel with the Nazi ideology. Many distinguished church leaders and theologians felt no such qualms, and Niemoeller began to attract

⁴ *The Mennonite Encyclopedia* (Scottsdale, PA: Mennonite Publishing House, 1956), pp 70-74.

controversy. At first his principle concern was to maintain the independence and freedom of the churches from political manipulation...

The conflict became clear when anti-Jewish legislation was applied even to baptized Christian pastors of “non-Aryan” extraction. Niemoeller believed that to acquiesce in such measures would spell the end of the church. In response he helped organize a petition that collected the signatures of twenty-three hundred pastors pledging their opposition to the Aryan laws...Ultimately, the question for Christians was “Which God do we worship: Christ or Hitler”.

The ramifications of such action were significant. Despite being a war time hero, Niemoller was shunted off to the concentration camp of Sachsenhausen and then to Dachau. He survived the war. “For years after the war he had maintained a sense of pride in his record of military service. But his attitude toward war began to change after the dropping of the atomic bomb. When he later learned of the immense destructive power of the hydrogen bomb, he went home, reread the Sermon on the Mount, and declared that he could no longer justify the use of force. As he described the key to his ethical principles, he said it was easy. In every situation he simply asked himself the question, “What would Jesus do?”⁵

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⁵ Robert Ellsberg, *All Saints* (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 2011), pp 29-30.