

The Gospel of John

John 3:16-17, 12: 44-46, 14: 15-17, 14:25-27

NPMC

5 Epiphany

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Staying Connected to God

"This is how much God loved the world: He gave his Son, his one and only Son. And this is why: so that no one need be destroyed; by believing in him, anyone can have a whole and lasting life. God didn't go to all the trouble of sending his Son merely to point an accusing finger, telling the world how bad it was. He came to help, to put the world right again." (Peterson, *The Message*) This is Eugene Peterson's take on the much loved text of John 3:16-17. We turn our attention to John's gospel this morning: a story of Jesus that is very different from the other three gospels, Matthew, Mark and Luke. You can feel it right from the beginning of the story and hear it in these words that focus differently than the first three gospels. John is at pains to explain Jesus insisting that Jesus came to help the world and not condemn it. John is almost hyper, super intense, very thorough in his desire to communicate how important it is to believe the right things about Jesus! John can go on and on and on about it.

There are parts of the book of John that I am inclined to skip over. He has long sermons using the same words over and over again to explain the same thing but always from a slightly different angle and it can get rather monotonous. So it is best for us this morning to take small bits of John if you don't want to get dizzy. Therefore I have chosen four short sections that I think really demonstrate what John is hoping for us to understand about Jesus, about God and about what it means to believe. Don't get me wrong, the Gospel of John is very important. You just need to take it in small doses.

Believe! Believe! Believe! This is the thrust of his message - belief. John is writing to a community who already has experience with Jesus and he wants desperately to keep them believing in Jesus and strong in the faith. So you will not find parables in the Gospel of John. Parables are those enigmatic stories that uncover the radical ways of Jesus and leave the reader asking more questions than there seem to be answers. The writer of John expects that the hearer knows all about Jesus' teachings and ministry and doesn't need further information about his life. There are no birth stories or genealogies or tales of Jesus' younger years. It feels like John is under pressure: that there is little time to waste. He writes in order to clarify things for those who have already committed their lives to Jesus' way but there seems to be some trouble.

And so this means that the fourth gospel has a particular claim on us too. Our 21st century context is different from the first century but the reasons for John writing as he does has a home in our realities and culture of 2016. In John's time the unthinkable had taken place – Jews and outsiders came together in their belief in Jesus. Suddenly they were a new people, together. This was unprecedented I suspect since the time of Old Testament days when Israel was called out as a new people for the very first time. There must have been a lot of anxiety and suspicion among these newly minted Jesus followers and I suspect that in their distrust of each other – Jew vs. Gentile – they may have easily strayed from the path of faithful living by getting bogged down by administrative and cultural wrangling.

There were naturally so many distractions that it must have been really easy to lose touch with their primary purpose: living faithfully Jesus' teaching and mission. There is always turf to protect and the former ways to be honoured and defended. Jews and Gentiles had different histories and practises. The early Jesus followers had reached a critical stage in their walk with God together. How were they now to leave behind some of their past in order to be faithful to the new and good news of Jesus. What parts of the past do they need to hold on to and what do they need to let go? John hammers home

the message: “Keep the commandments, love each other and proclaim Jesus to friends and neighbours. You are a new people together. These are new times. Don’t lose your way!”

I have to say that the scenario of John’s preaching and teaching is profoundly relevant to us right now. We too are in a new time and we are trying desperately to know what changes are faithful changes. We are not Jews and Gentiles coming together as was the scenario in John’s time but we are faith communities living closely together globally and technologically in a way that is unprecedented in human history. We are Christians living together trying to interpret the bible faithfully when it comes to sexuality. We are Mennonites visioning together in a new time where mission outreach is happening on our doorstep and not so much in foreign countries. Our partnerships are changing, personally, locally and in the church. The way forward is not easy because change is so rapid and constant. The days of setting up a clear and detailed five year congregational plan are gone! We are fortunate here at Nutana Park to implement a five month plan without having to renegotiate details before the situation changes yet again.

So, back to what John is saying to his crowd and what is important for us too! He repeatedly explains, describes, the relationship between God and Jesus so that believers understand how to stay connected to God. First of all, God is not a blood-thirsty dictator. God came to help the world. And second, if you don’t know any more what God looks like, if you have lost touch with God, just look to Jesus. Jesus is a part of God, comes from God and however you might envision this relationship, is so much a part of God that when you see Jesus, you also see God. If you know God, you also know Jesus. Add the gift of the Holy Spirit to this mix and you have three descriptions for the Divine presence that accompanies each one of us, always.

That's huge! This image of God keeps us connected. Through the ministry and merciful acts of Jesus we are reminded that God wants us to remain close; that God is forgiving and compassionate and just. Jesus helps us to see this when we lose track of God's grace. Old Testament stories too easily lead to an understanding of a condemning God. John reminds us that God so loved the world. God wants people, wants us, to cultivate a deeper faith and a keen sense of connectedness. Through the life and ministry and self-giving of Jesus along with the gift of God's Holy Spirit that remains with us, we are given the evidence we need to feel connected to God and to each other.

"If you love me you will keep my commandments," Jesus says in John's gospel. And what are God's commandments? A set of guidelines by which we might stay connected to God and maintain good and wholesome relationships with each other. Obeying God's commandments is the foundation on which we build our love for one other. The Ten Commandments, the Lord's Prayer and other instructions in the Bible are meant precisely to keep connections alive, an open mind to process the new things that the faith asks of us and an open heart to recognize God's desires for us as freeing.

"I have come as light into the world," says Jesus. God's desire is that we don't muck around in the dark forever but that we find light and life and delight in what we have been given. Jesus' way is that light. The Spirit's presence is enhanced living. Together these ways of knowing keep us connected to the source of Good. And to these we turn when facing trouble in interpersonal relationships, in the church and in our world.

We have a mitt-full of trouble right here and right now. I am going to name a few things that are troubling our folks at Nutana Park these days. I guess I am going to say the "quiet part loud." We have disagreements in our community at Bethany Manor these days. Some of our folk are directly involved in a conflict there that has been evolving over the past months. Others who live there are aware of the difficulties but are not

overly worried about the situation. There may be many of you here this morning that are not aware of the tensions that exist. However the governance questions at Bethany Manor will be dealt with over time let us keep in mind the image of God's help in the world. The Spirit is here to help us think and live and act in the light. We pray for the peace that Jesus leaves with us as Bethany Manor folk seek to make things work well in their community.

We have marriages that are strained to the breaking point. Having been through a marriage breakup myself I am aware of some of the pressures and hurt and disorientation involved. Again, the Advocate, the Spirit of truth, accompanies us – couples who are struggling, friends who support and the larger community of Nutana Park – as we live through trouble together and into the hope of new solutions and healthy family configurations.

We continue to struggle with faithfulness and sexuality. Conversations continue around biblical interpretation and sin. We experience some divide in our community about how we interpret the bible regarding same sex marriage in this new time and changing time. We have four generations that are well represented in this congregation; that is a new phenomenon in itself as we live longer and with more vitality into old age. Our divide is not necessarily along generational lines but think about it, the oldest generations have the more difficult task. They have had to live through significantly more change over many more years and winds of interpretation have blown them about some. "Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid." Can we shed some of our anxiety and trust that God welcomes new expressions of faithfulness for new times?

Finally I propose that our Mennonite organizations both in Saskatchewan and in Canada are under significant strain these days. The older structures, from the not so distant past, no longer reflect how Mennonites are giving of their time and money. I

believe that Mennonite congregations are giving as much or more to the work of the church today. Our people are engaged in mission closer to home and in the communities in which they live. There is a shift away from a focus on overseas mission to local initiatives where there is need. New global partnerships are being formed at the same time as local churches are responding to the world in ways that best reflect their present situation. We have not lost our connection to God or to our mission. The Anabaptist message of nonviolence and peace remains a gift that we have to offer the world. It is imperative then that we dig deeply into our heart-felt beliefs to find that trust and peace for ourselves. We can only serve the world when our own connection to God is strong.

The Gospel of John guides us into a wholesome relationship with God and with each other. We believe that God desires that we know “the Way.” Jesus lived it and the Spirit tugs us into the center, toward the light and into the heart of God. In this way we stay connected: to God, to our mission and to each other. “God so loved the world that he gave his only son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.” That is such good news! AMEN