

The next 500 years (Short Ver.) Mt 7:24-27
II Cor 5:14-20; Eze 36:25-27; I Cor. 3:11

Someone read Ezekiel 36:25-27

“I will sprinkle clean water upon you, and you shall be clean from all your uncleanness, and from all your idols I will cleanse you. A new heart I will give you, and a new spirit I will put within you; and I will remove from your body the heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. I will put my spirit within you, and make you follow my statutes and be careful to observe my ordinances.”

Back in the days of Coach Vince Lombardi, the professional Green Bay Packers had a most interesting beginning to one season. It was July of 1961 & the 38 members of the football team were gathered together for the first day of training camp. The previous season had ended with a heartbreaking defeat when the Packers squandered a lead very late in the 4th quarter and lost the NFL Championship.

All the players knew that at the first team meeting, the legendary coach would waste no time getting straight to the point. Many of the men, half Lombardi's age and twice his size, were openly fearful, dreading the encounter. The coach did not disappoint them, and in fact, delivered his message in one of the great one-liners of all time. Football in hand, Lombardi walked to the front of the room, took several seconds to look over the assemblage in silence, held out the pigskin in front of him, and said, “Gentlemen, this is a football.”

In only 5 words, Lombardi communicated his point: We're going to start with the basics and make sure we are executing all the fundamentals. He took nothing for granted. He began a tradition of starting from scratch, assuming that the players were blank slates who carried over no knowledge from their previous years of playing. The 1961 season was the beginning of Vince Lombardi's reign as one of the greatest football coaches of all-time. He would never lose in the playoffs again. Lombardi won five

NFL Championships in a span of seven years, including three in a row. He never coached a team with a losing record.

This year is the 500 anniversary of the beginnings of the Reformation in Europe. This year is picked because Martin Luther posted his 95 thesis 500 years ago, this year. There have been a lot of changes in the last 500 years. Society has changed politically, socially, and economically. The whole world was being “discovered” by Europe as they conquered much of it. As major efforts were made to spread the good news of Jesus Christ around the world, the Christian church has become divided. And with the industrial revolution picking up impetuous, the whole world has seen a lot of transformation.

So it's important to reflect on the 500 year anniversary of the start of the Reformation, and the results that we experience today. Many people have pointed out that followers of Jesus have not done a good job of accepting and working with differences between people. It has been noted by many, that Sunday morning is one of the most segregated times of the week, and that church is one of our world's most separated institutions. Most of us seem to find it easier to worship with people who think like us, share our economic class, are of the same race and ethnicity, share our culture, and share our values – theological, political, social, and economic. We followers of Jesus haven't been a great witness of unity and peace.

We confess to many examples over these 500 years where colonialism was violent, the divisions within our own congregations showed our meanness and judgmentalism;, abuses and sexual violence, lust for power and wealth, our witness was downright evil, and on and on.

Here is just one sad example of many. When Mahatma Gandhi was a university student in South Africa, he decided to give Christianity a try and went to a worship service in an Anglican cathedral. While sitting in a pew in the back of the church, one of the ushers came

and tapped him on the shoulder and politely told him that colored people were not allowed to worship in that particular cathedral.

Reflecting on the event, Gandhi later remarked, “That poor usher. He thought he was ushering a colored man out of a cathedral, when in reality he was ushering India out of the British Empire.”

We could add, he was ushering many Hindu’s away from Christianity, because a person as influential as Gandhi, if he had become a follower of Jesus, may have led many in India to become Jesus people. Plus, it’s enough to say, as much as colonialization did convert people, it also turned many people around the world off to Christianity, including our own First Nations people.

The hymn we just sang, (145 HWB), “There’s a Wideness in God’s Mercy,” has 14 verses, of which we only sing 5. The ultimate theme of this hymn is based on the premise and paradox that a sovereign God, unlike earthly rulers, demonstrates welcome, kindness, grace and mercy. All we need to do is have a simple faith that “rests upon God’s word.” However two of the verses describe us in negative terms.

But we make His love too narrow
By false limits of our own;
And we magnify His strictness
With a zeal He will not own.

For the love of God is broader
Than the measure of our mind;
And the heart of the Eternal
Is most wonderfully kind.

This reflection is regretful, but I think a truthful introduction to our theme today, and the next few weeks, to say, we simply have to do better this next 500 years. Like Vince Lombardi, we need to focus on the fundamentals of following Jesus. Get back to or keep doing the basic exercises of the Christian faith.

Someone read Matthew 7:24-29

Jesus said, “Anyone who listens to my teaching and follows it is wise, like a person who builds a house on solid rock. Though the rain comes in torrents and the floodwaters rise and the winds beat against that house, it won’t collapse because it is built on bedrock. But anyone who hears my teaching and doesn’t obey it is foolish, like a person who builds a house on sand. When the rains and floods come and the winds beat against that house, it will collapse with a mighty crash.”

“When Jesus had finished saying these things, the crowds were amazed at his teaching, for he taught with real authority—quite unlike their teachers of religious law.”

It’s important to note that Jesus ended the Sermon on the Mount with this parable. Many Anabaptists consider the Sermon on the Mount, Matthew 5 to 7, to be the Bible within the Bible, the core foundational teachings of Jesus.

We also have much to celebrate because in the 500 years since the Reformation the Christian Church has impacted the people of this world in many many positive, life giving ways. The Gospel has been shared with most people around the world. Thousands of schools and hospitals have been started. Missionaries have had a great influence on the economics and culture in many places around the world like building infrastructure and good accounting practices. Translating the Bible into local languages has been a key work of missions. So we should not beat ourselves up too much. The cause of Christ is alive & well around the world

The best form of flattery is imitation – like the Buddhists in Taiwan started their own Sunday Schools. relief work & social work after seeing the love followers of Jesus extended. Our Bible scholarship and study materials have provided us with many rich methods, ideas and are full of ways to address our cultural realities. Music and worship brings us variety and blessings for every taste and style. And all the declarations that God is dead – have proven false.

Church life has never been uneventful and at times and places around the world it has been down right difficult if not dangerous. But today, it's unsettling, especially for us in North America. Congregations are becoming smaller and some are closing. All kinds of church institutions are closing. Church life has been really great for us for the last 50 years, but now it seems it's falling apart and feels fragile. The desire to be faithful and pure has caused us to work hard, to spread the Good News, even though it's been painful at times. But today we wonder what the future of the church will be.

Many people have written about what's going wrong, in North American society as well as within the church. There are many changes we cannot control. But there are some things we are responsible for. In our last congregational meeting it was noted that some of our changes here at North Star were because the society around us has changed. Each congregation needs to reflect on their own unique dynamics, history, location, culture, economics and their life cycle as we talked about in our last congregational meeting.

So what do we do? How do we adjust to the changes we face? How do we do more with less? What should our priorities be? How do we get the next 500 years of church life off to a good start?

The simple answer is – focus on the fundamentals of the Christian faith. It's reminding ourselves to keep the main thing the main thing. It's making sure our foundation of belief and our actions are solid. It's keeping Jesus central. It's refining what is the third way, neither Catholic or Protestant, that Mennonites like to say we are. I just gave you 5 answers to how to prepare for the next 500 years. But not so simple, eh? And if each of you had the opportunity to list 5 answers – we'd have more ideas – many similar and some different.

Here's Scripture that I think is foundational.

Someone read 2 Corinthians 5:14-21

“For the love of Christ urges us on, because we are convinced that one has died for all; therefore all have died. And he died for all, so that those who live might live no longer for themselves, but for him who died and was raised for them. From now on, therefore, we regard no one from a human point of view; even though we once knew Christ from a human point of view, we know him no longer in that way. So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, every thing has become new!

“All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us. So we are ambassadors for Christ, since God is making his appeal through us; we entreat you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.”

This Scripture puts Jesus front and center – which is where we should be. At our last congregational meeting we took a quick look at North Star's Statement of Purpose & Statement of Vision. These are great action, theological and commitment statements. How do we renew, refresh and refocus these statements?

North Star is an unusual and unique church name. A church name is revealing about the formation and foundation of the church. In the history book, here is what is written. “In the years that this church was first organized, the common mode of travel was by horse and wagon or sleigh. In the dark winter nights, on unmarked trails, it was quite common for the traveler to get their directions from the North Star. Thus in seeking for a name for the church, the thought was offered, if only the church could be a guide for people in their spiritual life as the North Star was for the traveler. Out of this was born the Name, North Star Mennonite Church.”

In the 1971 Church Directory, Pastor Henry Funk wrote, “Since those days of unmarked trails until this day of paved highways, 65 years of history have come and gone. Those years of history are not the dead story of a dead past, but are the living, interwoven stories of real people – of the joys and sorrows, of the hopes and aspirations, of the victories and failures of real people. Through all these years, what the church has tried to stand for has remained as firm a guide as the North Star on a clear winter’s night.”

“The real, guiding star of the church of Jesus Christ is Christ himself, and he is even more unchanging than the North Star – no other foundation can anyone lay than that which is laid, which is Jesus Christ.” (I Cor 3:11)

So let’s focus on the fundamentals, the basics of following Jesus. Let’s keep Jesus the centre, the foundation of our faith. The extra things of congregational life are wonderful, but to get a good start on the next 500 years of church life, let’s carry out the drills, the exercises that lay the groundwork for the Christian life.

What are those?

More to come in the upcoming Sundays.