

Finding God's Grace in the Wilderness – Two Philippians 1:2-11; Jeremiah 29:10-14

“To all God’s holy people in Christ Jesus at North Star, together with the overseers and deacons: Grace and peace be with you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus the Anointed. Whenever you cross my mind, I thank my God for you and for the gift of knowing you. My spirit is lightened with joy whenever I pray for you (and I do constantly) because you have partnered with me to spread the gospel since the first day I preached to you. Philippians 1:1-5

“I am confident that the Creator, who has begun such a great work among you, will not stop in mid-design but will keep perfecting you until the day Jesus the Anointed, our Liberating King, returns to redeem the world. It is only right that I should feel such admiration for you all—you hold me close to your hearts. And, since we are partners in this great work of grace, you have never failed to stand with me as I have defended and stood firm for the gospel. Before God, I want you to know how much I long to see you and love you with the affection of the Anointed One, Jesus.”
Philippians 1:6-8

This is a continuation of the sermon three weeks ago and last week’s sermon. In the 1940’s the ordinance of foot washing was discontinued but the library was organized. During the decade of **1947 to 1956**, there were 2 major developments. One physical and one spiritual. People decided to join the country church and the town church together. They became one congregation in town. And there were revival meetings in February 1954.

As often occurs with major changes, tension arose and this delayed a decision about becoming one congregation in one building. The town church was over crowded. Various delays took place as it took time to find a way forward together. It took about 4 or 5 years to come to agreement and then get the new building built with May 27, 1956 being the date of dedication.

Reading church history is interesting because of what is not mentioned. So often troubles between people or families or issues that are used to display power are not mentioned. Or if they are mentioned or alluded to, are downplayed. Especially the same patterns of tension. Much of what is being shared are simply facts and at the most impressions. Even in many Bible stories we get general information and only get a hint of interpersonal jockeying for control, which causes us to guess at what goes on beneath the story. We have to make guesses at people’s motives and often their behaviors.

The same is true here – and possibly more so because it’s recent history and we are related to each other. But knowing human nature, stories of apologies and of repentance are what make faith real and alive. Stories of a third way being decided on, teach us how to live together. Stories of God being present are heartwarming. So these need to be shared and told. This makes faith authentic and meaningful. The stories make for teachable moments.

At one point in our marriage, Rose and I realized that our children knew when we disagreed. But they never saw us make up or the process of coming to agreement. So how would they learn? So we intentionally let the kids know we had worked things out and still loved each other. Sometimes we explained our thinking and process. The same kind of openness is needed with church history.

So it was good to read the following: It seems that much of the building time was also a time of celebration. In spite of the hard work there was good comradeship. So many humorous antidotes came out of the daily routine, most of it in the working language of low German. For example, one day one individual was a little perturbed at another for cutting a perfectly good board too short. The response was that he had already cut the board off 3 times and it was still too short.

And it was heartwarming to discover that there was no hurry to tear down or remove the country church building. How can one walk away from

this God given place of gathering God's people where children played and people got married and so many people's lives revolved around it? The building held spiritual memories. I'm sure the inner turmoil of some, possibly many, was great. Change always carries some loss, even desired good changes.

The other major development in the 1947 to 1956 decade was spiritual. It seems that with Rev. John D. Friesen a revival began. The church leadership intentionally planned for evangelistic meetings, but when he showed up – nothing had been done. The focus on church expansion or building may have diverted people's attention. Or people had a mixture of excitement and uneasiness about revival. This is not unusual. Satan uses even good things to side track us.

John D. Friesen in his book, "Holding Forth the Word of Life," quotes the pastor's wife as responding, "In our church the members do not come to prayer meetings, except maybe a few grandmothers and some retired clergymen might come." However they went ahead with meetings.

Quoting from Rev. Friesen's book: The afternoon sessions were in the German language and the evening service in English. We began the pre-service prayer with a few grandmothers and retired ministers. Soon there was weeping, praying, confession, reconciliations and praising God together. Before the first weekend, all Sunday School classrooms were filled with spiritually hungry people, saved and unsaved. We counselled unbelievers before the service. Every evening the platform was filled with soul sick people who responded to the alter call.

"Old and young came with some staunch members behind the scenes discouraging this type of approach. Day by day people called, asking for help with marriage conflicts and assistance to settle family feuds. The farm forum meetings fell flat because people were in church. Curling finals were cancelled because the participants had given Christ pre-eminence. A Catholic school principal wondered about the

changed attitude of his students. Many old debts were paid during the second week of meetings and in the weeks that followed. People began to freely share their testimony of meeting the Lord for salvation, sanctification and dedication for service. To God be the Glory."

Jake Driediger who put together "Historical Trivia" bulletin inserts for the 1996, 90 years celebration continues the story. "God's spirit was at work with power in the lives of the people of the church and many from the larger community who came to the services. People made special efforts to make confession of sin and plead for forgiveness from their neighbors. Many who had never considered teaching Sunday School, going to Bible study or prayer meetings, did so eagerly.

"There was a great hunger for the word of God and Bible studies during the week became a norm. A new awareness of the lostness of friends and family members became a special concern. It brought on a church involvement in Crusades for Christ in surrounding communities. Most of all, it instilled a new love for God in Christ and a new love and unity in the church and the community."

Jake concludes Historical Trivia # 8 by commenting: "Last week I wrote about the building of the new church. Did you notice the sudden coming together of the people of the two churches with a willingness to build and be one people in one place of worship? I am persuaded that it was the dynamic Holy Spirit renewal that transformed the people of North Star church to a new becoming of God's people in love and unity of purpose."

Church history shows that when the Holy Spirit moves, miracles occur. Miracles of confession and forgiveness. Miracles of healing relationships and changing to being truer followers of Jesus Christ. Greater need for prayer. Greater desire to dive into and learn from God's Word. Restitution. In short, we become more disciplined and stronger on our faith journey. We become convinced, convicted

and converted. And this also occurs with people who have been following Jesus. Revivals are a gift from an Almighty God that we need to join in with, pay attention to, and learn from.

But church history also shows that it's hard to sustain the movement of the Holy Spirit as occurred. Obviously with revivals there is excitement as well as resistance. New spiritual dynamics are always embraced as well as feared. Change may be invited or forced and loss of control is always opposed. Like today, some people want to get back to normal. But will we be able to embrace the new normal – whatever that turns out to be with the coronavirus? And even more, can we mimic our biological and spiritual ancestors in their positive traits of finding their way to this promised land while resisting the temptations of wilderness living? Instead let's embrace the gifts and opportunities and learnings that wilderness living offers us!

Please listen to these two scriptures with two focuses in mind. Church history with facts and accomplishments. But more importantly, what our Savior already has and wants to offer us even more – spiritually.

“Here's what I pray for you: Father, may their love grow more and more in wisdom & insight so they will be able to examine and determine the best from everything else. And on the day of the Anointed One, the day of His judgment, let them stand pure and blameless, filled with the fruit of righteousness that ripens through Jesus the Anointed.” Philippians 1:9-10

“This is what the LORD says: “I will come to you and fulfill my good promise to bring you back to this place. For I know the plans I have for you, plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future. Then you will call on me and come and pray to me, and I will listen to you. You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart. I will be found by you, and will bring you back from captivity. I will gather you from all the nations and places, and will bring you

back together from where I carried you, declares the Lord.” Jeremiah 29:10-14

In the decade of **1957 to 1966**, there was much to change organizationally as one congregation. The church language was German, as was with many Mennonite congregations. But the shift to English was slow and resolute. The reluctance to change came from several fronts. For some the change watered down the distinct culture of the low German working language. Almost all of the training of leaders had been in German so they needed to learn the English Biblical terminology.

The change was to accommodate their children and grandchildren who were not fluent in German. Then there was the low esteem and distrust toward German speaking people in society because of two world wars. And I suspect the change was harder for women who were not forced to use English in their daily lives. For others changing to English came from a keen sense of evangelism to the larger community. . In 1949 at an annual meeting the youth stated they would like an English service once a month in each of the two meeting places.

In Drake this change had already occurred in the early 1920's with an independent group who were known as the English Mennonite Church. When the new North Star place of worship was built in the village in 1928, most of those with Mennonite background joined and reverted back to German. But gradually with Sunday School and then in the country church, incremental change occurred with different worship services, along with having dual language services or one service with 2 speakers- one for each language. In 1964 a new pastor was hired whose German church language was limited. Then in the fall of 1966 the brotherhood decided that in the search for a new pastor, he would not be expected to preach in German.

This was a tough time for many persons. It's normal for people to feel lost, in chaos, in the wilderness. I can attest to my own experience. When we returned from 9 years in Brasil – I was

surprised I could not pray in English! I found it very awkward. It was not a lack of knowledge of English. It's just that my personal prayer language was Portuguese! It took several years for me to adjust and feel comfortable!

For many immigrants, familiar scripture verses, preaching terminology and the words of many hymns they have grown up with were gone from public worship. They had to learn a new church language – even if they knew English. But for the younger generations they found new life in a worship language they could freely participate in. The language change to only English took about twenty years – gradually and carefully.

This is a familiar story not just with Mennonites but continues today with many immigrants. It is commendable that on this point the church did not divide into two language focused congregations. One draws the conclusion there must have been much love, tolerance and understanding, working toward the good of everyone and for the witness of the congregation in this community. Thanks be to God.

Also in these years – change was necessary – maybe even overdue! One example is – the unthinkable occurred. For 57 years an elder had always served for life. But on September 22, 1963, Rev. Paul Schroeder, resigned to answer God's call to go serve the Rosthern congregation. He had served as leader in this congregation for about 20 years.

During this decade and later, changes in leadership and other circumstances necessitated a change in the traditional way of doing church. A movement was beginning to take shape which took the almost total responsibility of the church program falling on a few to a many facet structural people base of leadership. The movement to our present, more efficient shared congregational board leadership system had begun.

The decade of **1967 to 1976**, was a time of great change in the church. By one count more than 40 first time ideas were put into practice. How

many more were rejected? The congregational structure was changed along with a new constitution. The church programs extended into many new areas. More young people attended Bible School, college and university. Local and international outreach efforts began. In 1969 was the first congregational meeting with every member having equal voice and voting rights. And the first deaconess was elected in 1973. All this matched the changes going on in the wider church as well as society.

North Star Mennonite congregation made some very difficult, yet mostly redemptive decisions during this decade. One can just image the excitement and tensions that occurred. And it must be remembered that not only was the church changing – so was society – and farming practices.

We have much to be thankful for today. A rich heritage. Being part of God's story here at Drake. Not just surviving hard wilderness times but also not being diverted from The Almighty's way in the good times. Even now though it's not unusual to hear people remembering the good old days, when they look to the future.

These were all commended for their faith, yet none of them received what had been promised, since God had planned something better for us so that only together with us would they be made perfect. Praise be to the Holy Creator Almighty God. They found grace in the wilderness as they learned to adapt to great social and technological changes – and not get sidetracked. Amen.