

September 19, 2021

“IT WAS SO GOOD, SO VERY GOOD!”

NORTH STAR MENNONITE CHURCH, DRAKE

Genesis 1:26-31, Revelations 22:1-5, Colossians 1:26-27 (all read from The Message)

Join me in a prayer of inviting God: *“Holy God, be among us. May our joy, may our sorrow, connect us to you, help us to see you, help us to know you, help us to name you. May that happen now, may it happen as we move on, may it happen as we live our lives. Holy God, be real for us, be present for us, be transforming for us always. Amen.”*

It’s good to be here. It’s been a long time.

Next week I will present to a senior’s heritage group connected to Mennonite Church Alberta. The catchy topic that the organizers and I came up with was, *“Living Long Lives Lustily.”* (Repeat) Really. That’s what the posters are announcing, I think, in the Mennonite churches in Alberta. It’s meant to be a little

cheeky, a little shocking, a little attention grabbing, hanging on the bulletin boards of churches across the province.

Today isn't so much a day that calls for shock value, or cheekiness. But I've incorporated some of the thoughts from that message into the one you're hearing today. The point that I want to make, after all, is pretty similar. How are our lives as a spiritual people, how are those lives made good by that spirituality? Is holiness, is faithfulness, in any way connected to "*living lustily*," living with joy and passion? The title of the sermon today is a direct quote from the words Eugene Peterson interprets as Genesis 1:31. "*It was so good, so very good!*" That borders on living lustily, I'll dare suggest.

So of course, we'll begin somewhere else entirely.

In my hand is a card. It's a card that Holly bought two or three years ago when we visited our family who was then living in New Brunswick. It is an artist's rendition, of, Holly tells me, a poppy. I'll give her that, and that it's kind of eye catching.

But if I look at it closely, I note that the depiction of a flower is actually dabs of colour on the card, dabs that mostly don't even touch each other. One petal is completely separate from the

other, and so is the next. The center thing, there's probably a really good name for that, like "*pistol*," or something, the center thing isn't actually touching the petals. The stem stops short of the actual flower, there's serious space between! That whole image kind of offends the engineering part of who I am. And yet, seen from a distance, it offers a pretty good suggestion of what a flower, a poppy, let's remember, looks like.

Now, consider **this** take on a flower. I'm pretty sure this one is supposed to represent a rose. Note, that here, there's none of that nonsense of things just kind of running alongside each other without touching. These petals are made of 20 gauge metal which are welded together. The stem is a quarter inch rod. The veins that are visible on the leaves, the veins that look maybe a little delicate, those were actually created with a hammer and chisel on an anvil. Be careful if you come close, there are pointy edges.

Which of these two examples offer the best understanding of a naturally created flower, an actual flower, in God's creation? The obviously light and delicate touch of a painter, dabbing

lightly with a brush? Or the metal rose, whose path to being involved a torch and an anvil and a welder?

I will suggest that both come a little short of capturing the beauty of a flower that grows in God's creation. Both have, perhaps, that sense of "*being captured*" that's kind of at odds with the stunning presence of a live flower in full bloom. Now, that doesn't mean they are without worth. In fact, money has been paid for this depiction, (card) and a number of these welded units have earned cash as well. They have some value as an effort to represent something of natural creation in our world, while fully acknowledging that they aren't in fact a living, growing entity.

I suggest that these images of flowers offer a metaphor for the real thing. We can learn something about real flowers by studying these models, by considering what the artist had in mind, by what the artist was trying to impart.

So it is with our search for God.

I suggest, again, that there is nothing that we can read, nothing that we can gaze at, nothing that we can hear, that offers us the full knowledge of God. I suggest that every medium that we use,

and that includes the Bible itself, every medium offers a limited metaphor for God.

Certainly the Bible is important. That's why we read pieces of it during a service like this. We read, as we just did, in Genesis, that the experience of God engaging with creation, with humans, was very good. We turn to the end of the Bible, Revelations, and we read from the vision of John, that the future of humanity is about healing the nations. There will be nothing cursed. There will be no darkness. There will only be the light of God. I offer those two readings, from the beginning and the end of the Bible, to show that it is a book of hope, presenting a view of God that is, again, *"so good!"*

Again, this is a metaphor. The writer encourages us that God has been, is, and will be, in control of God's creation. The Bible represents the best human attempt to capture God into written word, just like these images of flowers represent a best attempt at capturing the perfection of a flower.

I recently read a piece wherein a person smarter than I suggested that the only word, the only expression, the only emotion that

we need to experience God, to name God, is the word, “*Wow!*”
When we are amazed. When we are in awe.

The first reading from Genesis, a reading that has become central to my limited understanding of both God and God’s creation, tells us that we are created, in Eugene Peterson’s words, “*godlike,*” and “*reflecting God’s nature.*” Other translations say that “*we are created in God’s image.*” That is a reason for being amazed! For exploding with “*Wow!*” This is certainly a reason to live life lustily. This is certainly a reason for looking around, at every created thing, every created being, and glimpsing something of who God is, and who God calls us to be. That includes the beauty of gazing at a flower.

In Colossians, the last reading that you heard, Paul suggests this.
*“The mystery in a nutshell is just this. Christ is in you.
Therefore, you can look forward to sharing God’s glory. It’s
that simple.”*

That is a profound statement. That is a statement that to me, is worthy of the “*Wow!*” that we mentioned a minute ago. That’s a statement that can take away the desire to fall into an argument with anyone who thinks, or says, or lives, differently than you,

and instead, offer simply a “*Wow!*” at the lessons of God that they offer to you.

“Christ is in you. It’s that simple.”

On August 24, a number of us met on Stony Knoll, outside of Laird, on a rainy day. It is only a 10-minute drive from my home. We met to re-commit to the relationship of friendship and trust that was formed by a signing of a document on that same site in 2006. It committed the Lutherans of the area, the Mennonites of the area, and the Indigenous folk formerly of this area to work at issues of justice together. It committed us to building relationships, to having fun together, to sharing our tears and our stories, sharing our food, to being neighbours in the very healthiest sense of that word, “*neighbours.*” I suggest that it was in the friendship, in the trust, in the building relationships that God’s presence was felt that day.

One of the organizers suggested that I be presented as a Mennonite elder, during a time of mutual story telling. An Indigenous custom was brought into play, where, as I was introduced, I was offered a gift of tobacco. (Show)

I felt tremendously honoured and humbled, as I looked around that tent and took note of all those who should have received that honour before me. It was another of those “*Wow!*” moments. But as I reflected on why that gift felt so significant, I was brought to one word to explain my emotion. Respect. Through this ancient tradition, I was being offered respect. The thought came, that here is a lesson, a lesson of God being offered, if only we have ears to hear it. Here is a lesson that is directly connected to being created, “*godlike.*”

Last week, as I sat with my eldest granddaughter, watching TV, a series of political ads appeared. My thoughtful 19-year-old granddaughter made the observation that “*those politicians just talk about the wrongness of the other leaders, without saying a word about their own party or their own platforms.*” My eyes went to the tobacco, standing on the mantel. Respect is a casualty of much about the way we do politics, sometimes family, sometimes church.

The Christian church, perhaps the Mennonite denomination can learn lessons about offering respect.

The larger residential school story, horrendous as it is, is a story of the Christian church withholding respect for the spirituality of another, and the brutal consequences of that. Exclusivity has long been built into how we understand God, the church, and our role as Christians.

Instead of teaching that exclusivity, maybe we should instead have offered tobacco. Or a stick of farmer sausage, just to be culturally a little closer. Certainly, we should have offered respect.

I choose to be a Mennonite Christian. It has little to do with exclusivity, with being the only one who is right. It certainly has to do with being born into this denomination. It has to do with finding myself, from the time of my birth, finding myself in a community that lives in a life affirming way. It has to do with assumptions that we make, common assumptions that draw us together in holy community. It has to do with seeing the Bible used as a tool that invites, that respects, all people, all of creation. It has to do with finding expression to those parts of my spiritual being that leads me, as our sermon title suggests, to a life that is *“so good, so very good!”*

When your path runs alongside mine for a while, wherever those paths start or end, let's offer each other, in real or symbolic ways, tobacco. Let's celebrate. Let's remember that the Greatest Commandment is not about knowing the best theological facts, but about loving God, and loving all others as ourselves.

If our God is as big, as all encompassing, as awesome, as the presence that Moses encountered in the burning bush, and I certainly believe that God is that big, then God is also waiting in the person of my new friend on Stony Knoll, is also waiting in the person of my Muslim ophthalmologist as I threaten to hug him after my eye surgery, is also waiting in the persons of my offender friends, is also waiting in all of God's people. That's what Paul is saying in Colossians. Christ lives in each one.

It really is that simple. And it really calls for a "*Wow!*"

Let's pray. "*Holy God, be among us. May our joy, may our sorrow, connect us to you, help us to see you, help us to know you, help us to name you. May that happen now, may it happen as we move on, may it happen as we live our lives. Holy God, be*

*real for us, be present for us, be transforming for us always.
Amen.”*

AS WE WALK OUT INTO THE BEAUTIFUL CREATION OF GOD, LET US FIND GOD. LET US RECOGNIZE GOD. LET US NAME GOD. AS OUR DAYS TAKE US DOWN MANY ROADS THIS WEEK, THIS MONTH, THIS LIFETIME, MAY THE FINDING, THE RECOGNIZING, THE NAMING OF GOD GO ON. MAY WE DISCOVER, AGAIN AND AGAIN, A LIFE THAT IS “VERY GOOD, SO VERY GOOD.”

AMEN.