

It's been a particularly rough week for our community. Perhaps, like me, some of you grimaced at the irony of our preaching theme – “What is being revealed?” and this week's announcements by Conrad Grebel and Mennonite Church Eastern Canada regarding the past abuses and misconduct of John Rempel...

... a pillar of our faith community; an influential voice for decades in our journey; a crafter of our identity; and a frequent presence in our TUMC worship services.

It's been an ugly week for us and there are more difficulties ahead while we trudge forward.

Worshiping together digitally - separated by screens – hasn't been good. Our pastors and digital ushers have been wonderfully adaptive and helpful... but it still feels isolating, especially today. Today, more than most, I've missed all of you and dread having to preach a sermon following the news of this week, and especially to do so without a “room” to read.

So... if we could... could we all just imagine together being reunited in person? Let's take just a few seconds of silence to imagine being in the sanctuary all together again (everyone remember where you sit)?

Now, while we're imagining, could we also imagine together that whatever happens or has happened with today's worship service that its offered in love, because... I can't imagine we'll each be able to come through this time together, much less this week, without unintended, and under-attended wounds. I can't imagine preaching this sermon in a way that perfectly addresses our hurts and our needs... so please imagine with me, that even in these insufficiencies it's offered in the most love a depressing week could muster.

This sermon series was envisioned with a prayer of illumination... ...so here it is:

Please God... open our hearts to the questions; open our hands to the answers; and open our eyes to the difference between the shadows and the shade.

In times like this, it might be helpful to think of the Church as a Refugee Camp. To be sure, there are many metaphors for the Church... sometimes we're like a hospital, providing healing for those need. Sometimes we're like a park, offering space for the community to gather and play; Sometimes the Church is like a school where we learn important lessons... but perhaps today it's best to think of the Church in one of its oldest and longest similes... the Church is like a Refugee camp.

The image of the Church as a refugee camp feels especially appropriate for a couple of reasons. For starters, from our earliest days the people of God have retained and packaged our story as refugees.

There's hardly a book of the Hebrew Scriptures that wasn't written or edited during and after the exile of Jewish refugees to Babylon. While some letters of Paul were composed in times of “relative” peace, the main Christian stories depicting the life of Jesus and the early Church were similarly composed and edited in or soon after the devastating war between the Jews and Rome. In fact, the earliest Gospel, Mark, is likely written at the height of the conflict, probably to a gathered community of Christians who sought refuge in the border regions between Syria and Palestine.

But secondly, especially now, the refugee camp feels particularly poignant because -even though I'm the furthest thing from an authority on refugee camps- there is ONE thing about Refugee Camps that is

inescapably true: they're a place where all manner of people's emotions and responses find a home. Numerous valid feelings and pursuits are all simultaneously housed the refugee camp: Despair and hope; dread and calm; franticness and boredom; rage and appreciation...

It's understandable that some in the camp would feel hopeless and despair that everything is lost. Obviously, their mere presence in the refugee camp signifies that "it's all over" – their whole way of life has been destroyed. Tears of despair are welcome amongst the refugee community.

It's also understandable that some people would feel hopeful and that while the past has been destroyed, their mere presence in the refugee camp signifies that "there's a future" – and their whole way of life still has possibilities. Hope and planning for the future can also be welcome amongst refugee community as well.

That's part of the beautiful and painful dichotomy of the refugee camp – that some of us can be devastated and others of us can be hopeful and neither group has to force the other to conform. We can all simply be... we can even express different – even conflicting feelings at different times, within different circles... or even simultaneously.

So... today... amongst all its different similes... the Church feels most like a refugee camp to me. There are places to wail; places to rage; places to plan; places to hope; places to learn... and we can all call it "life" in our camp... in ours particularly we call it "worship." And so... this morning as we gather apart, we listen to the stories of our people – many of them also written in the midst of despair and hope; pain and promise; refugees of a kind, all...

How appropriate that our morning's scripture reading would be such an important and well-known passage to the heart of our people? Matthew 22:34-46 contains the cliff-notes summary of Christianity "love God and love others." In fact, the latter is the New Testament's most frequently quoted passage of the Hebrew Scriptures: "you shall love your neighbor as yourself" because loving your neighbor "fulfills the law and the prophets."

There are obviously countless sermons found there.

Not least of which is the point that an "individuated Christianity" is partly responsible for the toxicity of contemporary North Atlantic Christianity. When Christianity becomes about ME – where Jesus died for ME; the Bible means what it means to ME; Church is about MY fulfillment; and Christianity is about how it impacts MY life... that individualized Christianity is doomed to fail and do damage in the process. Individualized Christianity, as we've seen, also leans to a "lowest-common denominator" belief system – where tough questions (both of theology and of leadership) are often viewed as threats rather than contributions to the community.

... but the more I sat with the passage, the more I was drawn to the second section. The one where Jesus asks the Pharisees about the identity of the Messiah. "Whose son is he?" Jesus asks... "the Son (or descendent) of David," they reply. Then how does David call him Lord? If he's David's son then why does David call him 'Lord'? No one was able to give him an answer...

Now, there are a few threads to pull here...

For starters it valuable to remember that in the ancient Jewish context, parents always outranked children... children lived up to parents, parents didn't precede children. Kids are epilogue.

SO, In the Jewish catalogue of messianic expectations the messiah was restoring David's kingdom... the kingdom would be special because it was David's... David wasn't a precursor to the Messiah, the Messiah was a restoration of David. Therefore, the Messiah being a descendent/fulfillment of David was the identity.

Jesus, in referencing this apparently unexpected passage, turns the commonly held view on its head... revealing just the opposite. David himself challenges the primogeniture view... David calls his messianic descendant "Lord." David sees himself as prologue to the Messiah.

It was so jarring to the belief structure that the revelation may have shook their view of reality beyond the point of acknowledgement. "No one was able to give him an answer."

That's the trouble with "revelations" – any new revelation reveals that our understanding of reality was insufficient or lacking clarity in some way.

So... what's being revealed!? It's always two things: "Reality" is always being revealed... and our incomplete understanding of it.

Revelation always invites us to humbly admit that we DIDN'T have the right view, we DIDN'T see it all clearly. That's why revelations always feel so disruptive – they are! Revelations always disrupt, in fact, they MUST disrupt our reality... or they wouldn't be revelations.

But... when we hold our views of reality with open hands... with a willingness to learn – a teachability – perhaps revelations wouldn't be so jarring.

And there's something poignant for us in this passage, especially this week:

The past can be ugly. There can be ugliness in our past as a community and as individuals... and our presents can still produce beauty -which also means that the ugliness of the present can still produce a beautiful future...

And in the Refugee Camp, both despair over the ugliness and hope for the beauty can be sheltered.

... and then...

"No one dared ask him any more questions..."

I always read this last line as a sort of victory lap... a tag line where the Gospel author spikes the ball in triumph. Jesus silenced his opponents... afterall, from here on out in Matthew's Gospel the discussions between Jesus and his opponents are almost entirely one-sided. Jesus teaches about THEM, but they are done asking him questions – at least until his trial... when it is Jesus who stays silent... until they ask "are you the Messiah the Son of God?"

I always though 22:46 was Matthew proclaiming Jesus victory over silenced opponents... but now... I don't know why we should think that.

Why SHOULD we expect that Jesus' opponents – who Matthew consistently depicts as foils and counter-examples... suddenly, unexpectedly, and finally do the right thing by remaining silent!? Literally, the next sentence Matthew writes says "...do what they teach, but do not do as they do."

Why should their silence and discouragement from asking questions be seen as "proper" response? They haven't responded properly to Jesus ever! They aren't responding properly when they're discouraged to ask questions.

It reveals an apprehension – more questions open the door to more reality-shaking answers. Jesus has revealed that their understanding of the Messiah is lacking in some way... more questions threaten more insights into the ways things really are.

Matthew isn't saying Jesus was victorious when they stopped asking questions... Jesus is a Rabbi... the whole POINT of Rabbis is to help people process their questions... Jesus isn't victorious... they failing.

Jesus doesn't win... Jesus isn't honored... Jesus isn't elevated when we stop questioning... we fail.

We MUST dare to ask questions – especially when reality is revealed to be different than we thought. Not only do we honor Jesus with our question asking, we help reveal reality more fully.

BUT... we should also be prepared for the difficult, humbling realities that lay in store down that road. We may have to acknowledge some ugliness. We may even come to realize that Jesus often doesn't answer our questions the way we'd like him to.

In fact, in Mark's Gospel a beautiful pattern plays out. Jesus is asked about 34 questions throughout the Gospel of Mark:

- Why do John's disciples and the Pharisees fast, but your disciples don't?
- Why don't your disciples follow the Sabbath laws?
- Don't you care that we're perishing?
- What have you to do with me, Jesus, Son of the Most High God?
- Why do your disciples not live according to the tradition of the elders?
- Why couldn't we cast out the boys demon?
- Is divorce lawful?
- What must I do to inherit eternal life?
- Who can be saved?
- Who gave you authority?
- Should we pay taxes to the emperor or not?
- How does marriage work in heaven?
- When will the end come?
- Where should we prepare for Passover?

All kinds of questions... 34 of them...

Now... Jesus DOES give some kind of response... most of the time:

Sometimes Jesus will give indirect answers:

“who can be saved?” “For mortals it is impossible, but with God all things are possible?”

“Where should we prepare the Passover meal?” “Follow a boy through the city.”

“Why couldn’t we cast out this demon?” “This kind can only come out through prayer.”

Jesus’ favorite response is to answer a question with a question:

“Is divorce lawful?” “What did Moses say?”

“Should we pay taxes to the emperor or not?” “Why are you testing me?”

“How does marriage work in heaven?” “Isn’t this why you’re wrong?”

Sometimes he won’t give an answer at all:

“Don’t you care that we are perishing!?”

Throughout the 34 questions posed to Jesus in Mark’s Gospel... you know how many Jesus actually gives a clear, full, direct answer to?

TWO...

One takes place at his trial, when he is asked, “Are you the Messiah, the Son of the Most high God.” Jesus’ response: “I AM.”

The other is our passage for this morning: “What is the greatest commandment?” “Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength... and the second is like it, “Love your neighbor as yourself.” On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.

We shouldn’t expect Jesus to answer our questions the way we want, but apparently the two questions he’s given clear answers to are: WHO ARE YOU? And HOW DO WE FOLLOW YOU?

Like most things in our refugee camp... we’ll have mixed emotions and responses to that reality too... and together... that’ll be ok...

...if we keep asking questions.