

Scripture Passages:
Psalm 119: 1-16; 105-112
Christina Reimer, Feb 16, 2025

I have a ritual with my 17-year-old son Christof when he leaves for school every morning. As he walks out the door, I yell out to him: “be a good person!” As parents, we have so little control over what happens for our kids. But maybe if MY kid remembers who he is as a Mennonite Christian, he can affect positive change within his sphere of influence. I believe that we all need regular reminders of who we are and whose we are. Followers of Jesus, loved by God.

Our readings from Psalm 119 offer reminders like this. Verse 11 says: “I keep your word close, in my heart. Don’t let me stray from your commandments.” Sometimes we need a voice to tell us: be a good person. Don’t forget who you are.

We have been having collective feelings of anger and fear these days in response to the destructive decisions and rhetoric of Trump. Understandably, we are disoriented about how it has come to this and many of us are feeling overcome with reactive emotions. In chaotic moments like these, it is easy to lose our internal alignment towards what is good and true. And it is crucial that we remember who we are and whose we are.

Hungarian-Canadian physician and trauma therapist Gabor Maté talks about anger and forgiveness in a way that empowers in times when we feel helpless. He advises his patients to *feel* the full extent of their anger. And when we feel this deeply, fully, anger will hopefully dissipate and we will be released from its grip. Maté says that forgiveness towards those who have harmed us is not about the other person’s need for our forgiveness. Forgiveness is about feeling anger fully and then letting go. Forgiveness is self-liberation.

I just came home from a trip to Timiskaming First Nation where I facilitated a number of workshops on conflict resolution and leadership. The participants were all managers and directors in their respective departments in the community: health workers, teachers and principals, caretakers, housing officials, and police officers. One of the police officers felt compelled to wear his uniform the whole time, even though he wasn’t on duty. It was interesting for me because I could finally ask a cop what was in all of the different attachments they carry on their belts. Luckily, he wasn’t annoyed by my curiosity or by the fact that I teased him about bringing his weapons to a conflict resolution training.

I reflected on the fact that I don't usually come into direct contact with law enforcement, but have lots of opinions on how the police function in our society. I also reflected on the fact that I don't usually engage with people directly who have radically different world views than I do, except sometimes in my trainings. Officer Frank openly challenged my thinking on conflict and I had to stretch myself to dialogue with him and find common interests like public safety, care for community, and keeping the peace.

On my long drive to and from home, through rather nerve-wracking weather conditions, I listened to a few podcasts that inspired my thinking for this sermon. The first was a CBC interview that Matt Galloway did with The New Yorker's editor David Remnick. What caught my attention was Remnick's answer to Galloway's question about how he approaches reporting on the conflict in the Middle East. Remnick talked about how entrenched people's perspectives are and that no matter how fairly and truthfully The New Yorker writers try to report on this issue, they always fail. But more interestingly to me, was Remnick's comment about how he defines liberalism. He said that to be truly liberal in our mindset, we need to hold together contradictory truths. A progressive thinker, according to him, manages to consider multiple truths as potentially valid.

The philosopher Martin Buber defines different types of dialogue. He calls one type "monologues disguised as dialogue." When we engage in this type of "conversation", we uphold the pretense of dialogue when what we are actually doing is talking *at* someone and not actually considering their point of view. Our main interest in this type of "dialogue" is making ourselves heard without listening to the other. Remnick encourages us to entertain various perspectives at the same time so that we can enter into true dialogue with an other.

The second podcast that I listened to on my drive was an episode of CBC's "Ideas" (yes, I have been trying to support Canadian content these days). Host Nahlah Ayed interviewed two political scientists, Shalini Satkunanandan and Jeffrey Church, on the work of 19th century German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche. Nietzsche is a well-known critic of Christianity, and, in the spirit of dialogue, I think we should host the thoughts of such critics.

Satkunanandan and Church commented specifically on Nietzsche's book "Thus Spoke Zarathustra." This book is famous for its statement: "God is dead and we have killed him."

Many of us are familiar with the “God is dead” portion of this work, but Nietzsche also talks about the important concept of “passing by” or Übergehen in German (passing over, transcendence). Passing by is not lazy, apathetic, or passive. Passing by is a conscious choice to not engage in reactive, futile dialogue while, at the same time, pondering a better way forward.

Nietzsche comments on how polemic public discourse participates in a back-and-forth dialogue that is unhelpful when it comes to real change in our thinking as a society. When we are politically at odds, we turn towards resentment and become entrenched in our view of the other party. But if we can take the messy stuff of our present day, step back and consider our possibilities, we can move forward and be creative and form new values while “passing by” things that cause resentment and division. As Christians, I think we need to listen to our critics, like Nietzsche, but I don’t think we need to create new values. Our values have been laid out in scripture. We are followers of Jesus and loved by God.

I’ll end with some words from Psalm 119:

Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light for my path. I have taken an oath and confirmed it, that I will follow your righteous laws.

Through the storm and confusion, let God’s law be a lamp to your feet and a light for your path. Don’t forget who you are and whose you are.

Amen.