

Osler Mennonite Church  
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### **The Difference Easter Makes**

**Acts 10:44-48; John 15:9-17**

Good morning everyone! Happy Mother's Day. It's great to worship with you today. The lectionary texts used this morning from Acts and John work very well together in that they serve as a call and response to Jesus' invitation to discipleship. In these verses we see a shift to a new way of being God's people - one that, without conditions, is revealed as the Holy Spirit, given for everyone. Following the death and resurrection of Jesus, it is perhaps the most obvious sign and gift of love. In response, God's people are invited to offer the overwhelming gift of love with the world. This radical love, given through the sacrifice of Jesus, makes the difference in how we as Christ followers engage the world.

Like many of us, I've noticed a significant number of my facebook friends share the news of their COVID-19 vaccination by taking a selfie in the line at the drive-thru immunization sites, holding their vaccine card or their COVID-19 sticker. Like many, I also chose to participate in this trend when I received my Moderna vaccine last Monday. It's a moment that many of us have been looking forward to and is certainly something worth celebrating. As a fairly extroverted person, I like to celebrate memorable occasions in my life - baptism, birthday, or any Friday after 3:30pm, with my friends by either having a big party with food, drink, and good conversation. These gatherings allow us to share the exciting things in each other's lives with the people we love. Getting your COVID-19 vaccination is certainly one of these life-events that many of us want to share with each other. It's been something many of us have been waiting for since the start of the pandemic, so it would seem like that kind of thing that we would celebrate with a big party with all our good friends and family. Now, of course we can't do that, so we share it online as it is currently one of the best ways to celebrate that experience with our community.

Throughout the pandemic we have been encouraged to consider the needs of our neighbor. It's common for folks, particularly those in my age demographic, to express a confidence that they would "be okay" if they got COVID. Whether or not that would be true, our society has been encouraged to consider the needs of the neighbor throughout the pandemic. It's been an important consideration that we have had to make with nearly every "social" decision we have made this year - which includes attending church.

As it relates to the pandemic, making decisions based on the health and safety of my loved ones and neighbors have been personally easier for me to see the line between what is a right and wrong decision, based on the parameters that have been set, by both myself and the health authority. However, as I read the text of John and Jesus commandment to "**love each other as I have loved you**" (John 15:12), and to abide in this love, I'm reminded that we are **called** to this because it is not always an easy decision. I can think of many times where choosing love has not been a default of mine - particularly those who may not hold the same worldview or values as I do.

One of the COVID-19 vaccination posts I saw recently was from a friend in Manitoba who shared: *"I got vaccinated to protect those in my town I disagree with."* The friend came from a community in Manitoba that has dealt with several large outbreaks, and several large anti-mask and anti-lockdown protests. I was moved by my friend's post because the category of "those I disagree with" has not been an impulse of mine to consider when making decisions about caring for my neighbor. It's often hard for me to find space for love when in heated conversations - typically with those within my extended family. I will admit that it has even been hard for me to comprehend what love can look like when most of the time the conversations are started with arguing, raised voices, or even in quiet moments, complete disregard for truth and facts. What does love look like in these situations?

Peter's sermon in Acts 10 features several instances of calling the Gentiles to repentance. Following Christ's death and resurrection, this is the question we have - what

difference does Easter make? As we see in the story, prior to any dramatic conversion or baptism of the Gentiles, the Holy Spirit falls upon them. Theologian Jerusha Matsen Neal underscores the Spirit's "unprecedented gift" coming to an unexpected community and at an unexpected time. "Nowhere else does Luke narrate an event in which the gift of the Holy Spirit comes prior to baptism." says Matsen Neal. Acts 10 makes plain that God will do as God will, and that ecclesial practices and norms do not have the final say on the boundaries of the community.

I wonder how many of us would find ourselves in Peter's shoes. Peter, like many of us, has created a single narrative of who God is - a God who is accessible only to those who subscribe to specific ecclesial practices. As Acts 10 makes clear, there is a "joining of Jew and Gentile" in the outpouring of God's Spirit. This does not result in a betraying of identity, but it does prohibit any notion of Easter that maintains the status quo. These final five verses of Acts 10 do not resolve questions or tie up loose-ends; they open up a new, beautiful set of disruptive possibilities. What does Easter mean for the world? And more to the point, what does Easter mean for us? The Spirit's interruption of Peter's sermon convicts our desire for patterns and normalcy, and asks us to live as Easter people.

Last week I had the opportunity to speak with the folks at Foothills Mennonite Church in Calgary, and the scripture we referenced, in John 15:1-18 speaks of God's relationship with creation and creations relationship with each other, through the metaphor of the vine, vinegrower, and branches. This image, which is echoed again in our lectionary text for today in verses 9-17, instills this prerequisite - **that we abide in each other**. We are called, just as God showed love to us, we share that love with each other. We see an echo again to the Acts text, it was shown to all, without any prereqs: **You did not choose me but I chose you. And I appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last (John 15:16)**.

Gennifer Benjamin Brooks, a professor at Evangelical Lutheran Theological Seminary in Illinois says that the call we have to abide in God's love and each other speaks of an

interrelationship is both “wrought by and required” for true community. This gift of love in Acts, which we read in John is also a mandate to love our neighbors, can be filled with strife and difficulty.

Being members together in the Body of Christ makes us all friends, all neighbors, and therefore it is important the church acknowledge, not so quickly decide who is in and who is out. The church that is committed to the love that Jesus calls us to live, must offer that life-giving friendship openly and equally to all people. It’s a call to a life-changing posture of hospitality. It’s a call to re-thinking status with those that we do not understand, just as Jesus shifted from the language of servant and master, towards friends. But Christ requires it of the church that is committed to bearing fruit that will last.

With all relationships comes also the role of accountability. The love we are called to is not just an emotional, cozy feeling, but a conscious decision to put yourself on the line and risk everything for the other. This kind of love will make sure that justice is done in the world. A Mennonite pastor named Kyle Penner from Steinbach Manitoba recently shared a social media post which was featured by CBC Manitoba titled: “How to vaccinate Southern Manitoba” - his first point: don’t blame and shame - an impulse that is easy for many of us to shift towards. The 20-some points that were made by Penner to help calm and reach vaccine hesitant folks were centred around community building and relationships. When we know each other and trust each other, we can learn from each other and grow together. This is what abiding in each other and Christ’s love will look like.

Today on Mother’s Day many of us will experience some of that coziness that comes with love, and celebrate mom by having lunch with her, Zooming, etc. Many will also experience the emotions of pain, and loss. As we receive the gift of love we remember that it is a gift we must also show to those around us. Today, it might be mom, it might be affirming the person in your community who is a mother figure, it might be caring for someone who is experiencing loss

today. We must be gracious to one another and allow the Holy Spirit to move among us in unbounded ways. Amen.