

Sermon: by Kirsten Hamm-Epp, Mennonite Church Saskatchewan

Good morning everyone, it is really lovely to be here with you today, so I want to start by thanking you for the invitation to be part of your joint worship service. Mornings like these are some of my favourite. Please join me in prayer:

Loving God, we give you thanks for your Church, gathered here together. Be with us as we continue to worship we, may we learn more of you, that we might walk closer with you this day, and every day. In Jesus' name we pray, Amen.

Lately I've had a lot of trouble concentrating. Call it 'something shiny syndrome', call it a summer haze, but this past week I have spent far too many hours staring at my computer screen without much progress being made. I'm sure none of you know what this is like, but when it happens, you find yourself starting at your to-do list, expecting things to take care of themselves, and being surprised when at the end of the day you can't actually cross anything off that list. It's really quite surreal, but again, I'm sure you're all far too good at life to know what that's like.

What finally busted me out of my summer haze, though, was our squash plants. Almost exactly one year ago, Ian (my husband) and I moved into our new house out on the farm. It feels like home now, especially with having a garden and fruit trees and a number of other things planted. We did pretty OK for a first garden, but I learned a few lessons this year:

1. Squash plants are prickly.
2. If you plant your pea fences too close together, they will grow together – and good luck getting at the peas in the middle!
3. If you plant your squashes too close to your pea fences, they will climb the fence and attempt to pull it down. You'll have to prune them, and when you do, be careful, because those suckers are prickly.
4. Maybe don't plant all your lettuce and greens at once, unless you plan to eat like a rabbit for about two weeks!
5. Squash plants are, believe it or not, surprisingly prickly.

The moral of the story is, next time I'm in the garden, I should probably wear shoes.

Or, I suppose, it could also have something to do with learning from mistakes.

Prickly squash plants aside, it was getting outside and getting some dirt under my nails that I needed to get my week back on track. Our passage from Ephesians, which I really enjoy in the First Nation's Version, reminds us that in life we are on a journey.

At the end of that journey we will be like mature human beings, no longer tossed about by the waves and following every voice we hear. We will walk the truth with Christ, the Chosen One, on the path on love.

But we have a bit of a way to go before we get there. We still make mistakes, we are not mature human beings fully reflecting Christ, at least not yet. What I am going to suggest this morning, borrowing my sermon title from Arthur Paul Boers' book on pilgrimage, is that 'The Way is Made by Walking'.

Boers' book is about his pilgrimage on the Camino de Santiago in Spain, walking 500 miles in 31 days. Which is a significant kind of walk to go on. But what I enjoyed the most about his book was his openness about the challenges; the literal and metaphorical ups and downs of journeying 500 miles. (And here if you start to hum a little song about walking 500 miles and 500 more to get to your door, don't worry, it's in my head, too!).

As Boers walked his 500 miles, sometimes alone, often with other pilgrim walkers, there were days the path was so intense it was all he could do to keep putting one foot in front of the other, and he mentions hoping no one would try to strike up a conversation. But then there were days when a comment from a stranger or view of a church on a hill would make him so absolutely certain of God's presence he could not imagine being anywhere else. He sums up his journey this way, "it was incredibly hard, and very good."

In Scripture walking is often used a metaphor for faithful living. The Bible repeatedly reminds people to walk in God's ways.

"Therefore, keep the commandments of the Lord your God, by walking in his ways and by fearing him." Deuteronomy 8:6

Isaiah 40:31, "But those who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength, they shall mount up with wings like eagles, they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint."

And then from Micah, "He has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God."

And in the letters to the early church there are many references to walking in love, walking by faith, walking in truth, walking in darkness or light – references not to the physical act of putting one foot in front of the other, but to the spiritual life of faith.

Walking is such a lovely metaphor for our faith. Augustine, one of the saints of the first century, said of God, "You made us for yourself, and our hearts find no peace until they rest in you."

From the very beginning, Christians knew that there was a journey, a destination, and that our call was to walk faithfully towards it.

Hebrews 11 speaks of this destination:

“They confessed that they were strangers and foreigners on earth, for people who speak in this way make it clear that they are seeking a homeland.”

We are in the already, not yet; living in a world we have been called to bless, but knowing that this world, this land, is not our home, it is not our final destination. This is a difficult path to walk, we have to pack the right things, and packing is something that comes easier to some than others.

We have family friends who go on a six-eight week trip every winter, packing only what they can carry on their backs, and they have it down to a science, accounting for every square inch and ounce. They are also two people whose faith and faithful living I greatly admire.

Packing is a life skill. We were up in Missinipe for a four-day canoe trip last weekend and for the first time ever I think I packed just right. And it was not with a small amount of pride that I noticed that Ian and I were also the lightest packers of the group. It's the little victories in life. But packing also makes a nice metaphor for our spiritual walk as well.

Ephesians tells us we need a gentle and humble spirit, taking love, respect, and peace along with us to walk faithfully. But, most importantly, on this path in the great circle of life, we need to make sure we pack bread and water. Perhaps the most significant metaphors of all.

Our Gospel reading today came from the middle of John chapter six. At the start of the chapter is the story of Jesus feeding five thousand, he provides the people with physical nourishment, but now he wants them to realize that he offers more important things.

“I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never go hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty.”

And this is not the bread of heaven God provided for the Israelites after their Exodus from Egypt, Jesus resisted the temptation to be a God who provides for our physical needs. What Jesus offers endures forever, there is no expiry date, and it feeds us at our very core, it nourishes and sustains the image of God which exists in every one of us.

A quote I came across while at Camp has stuck with me, “look into the world, and you will find something of Him who made it.” *[repeated for emphasis, because it's lovely]* And I think that holds especially true for us as people. We are the image bearers of God. And in Jesus we have been given the bread and the drink we need to help that image grow and thrive within us.

So what does it look like to walk as image bearers of God? Ephesians 4:3 says, “let the Spirit weave you together in peace as you dance in step with one another in the great circle of life.”

Leaving the jokes about Mennonites and dancing aside (low hanging fruit), I believe this passage is telling us that as we walk towards the path of love, the way is ultimately made by walking together.

Because when we walk together, we are not only challenged to show Jesus to the ones beside us, we are also challenged to recognize Jesus within them. He is the way, the destination, the companion, and the nourishment. Life, our life, the life of the world, it all begins and ends with Christ.

And, thank goodness, Christ knows full well our humanity. He knows our path will not be straight, but will most likely look a game of snakes and ladders. Since writing this message I've been in my garden and have had a few choice words for the squash plants because, funny thing, they're still prickly and I still wasn't wearing gloves, or shoes. But on this path of love we walk towards a God who knows and loves us, whether we are on the path or need to be sent out to the garden for a wake up call.

This is all part of the journey. Sometimes we find ourselves on the path, or in the weeds, sometimes we're not 100% sure which direction we're actually going in, but my encouragement to you this morning is to keep putting one foot in front of the other and walk. Walk literally, walk spiritually, walk with Christ, and walk together.

I'd like to close with an adapted version of Hebrews 12:1

“Therefore friends, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses from Aberdeen, Osler and Warman Mennonite Churches, let us throw off everything that hinders and the judgements and differences that so easily entangle, and let us altogether walk with perseverance the path that has been marked before us, following the footsteps of the Loving Christ who sustains us every step of the way.” Amen.