

When I worked for Naramata Centre, and when I was a student minister in Osoyoos, we lived in the town of Summerland, ten minutes north of Penticton. For a town of 10,000 people, there were 11 churches. Crazy I used to think, until we moved to Vernon, a city of about 45,000 that had 42 different churches. There was a little church in Summerland that always looked deserted. It was a nondescript white stucco building that looked more like a community association hall than it did a church. Outside there was one of those reader board signs, like a movie marquis only much smaller. The letters never got changed on that sign; the message was always the same; "Jesus is the answer." Of course I always thought 'Jesus may be the answer, but what's the question.'

Well evidently, according to the writer, or writers of the letter to the Hebrews, Jesus is the answer to every question; at least every question about faith, and mystery and life and the meaning of life. In fact, the point of the letter to the Hebrews is to bolster the faith of a very weary, much persecuted community. The message? Put your faith in Christ, trust in Christ, hope in Christ, for he is God's ultimate gift of grace. And as you heard Rick say, this was an important message to first century followers of the way influenced by Jewish and Greek thinking.

To first century Jews, humankind was a sinful lot, separated from God by the things humans do to each other and to the rest of creation. To make amends, faithful Jews participated regularly in the atoning practice of their faith, offering burnt sacrifices to appease an angry God. The holiest day in the Jewish calendar was and continues to be Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement. But the perpetual death of life as a sacrifice for sin began not to make sense. The prophet Micah proclaimed to his audience, "God does not want your burnt offerings and your sacrifices. What does the Lord require? To seek justice, and love kindness and to walk humbly with God." With that, one sacrifice would do. The death of a sinless man, on a sinner's cross became the final act of sacrifice. And Jesus became that sacrifice, standing in for every other living creature as atonement for all. It made sense to first century Jews following in Christ's way

To those of the first century influenced by the duality of Greek thinking, the world of heaven, the world beyond was the real world. Everything else was illusory, transient, non-permanent. Some might even say unimportant. The world of the gods was the world to attain; it was the world of hope and peace and power...it was ultimately the real world. To this audience the writer of the letter to the Hebrews was saying as human as he was, Christ was the ultimate reality – perfectly human, perfectly divine. Faith in him led to their own ultimate reality. It made sense to first century Greeks following in Christ's way

The lesson that Rick shared helps us to remember that our ancestors didn't get to know any of these promises. . They knew other promises, more closely associated with place...but as Christians assert, the realm of God is less about place and more about a state of mind and a state of being...which of course leads to a state of peace and justice. I would argue that these things are also always seeking a homeland. A state of being and a state of peace and justice are always looking for a place to be experienced. While Abraham and Sarah experienced what they believed to be God presence, God's realm in a place, they didn't know it at first. They saw God's promise from a distance and by faith, were compelled to follow. Moses too.

The letter to the Hebrews asserts that Christ is the ultimate invitation to, and experience of, the realm of God, that state of being, that state of peace and justice. On this side of the death and resurrection tradition, Hebrews affirms that Christ is God's decisive word of affirmation for life; God's decisive act of grace. We can know this by looking at how Jesus lived his life.

Let's do that...what do we know about Jesus? What can we say about him with confidence? Collect...from the congregation.

- Healer, teacher, story teller, miracle worker, student, partied, got angry, enjoyed abundance and pleasure. A woman massaged his feet with her hair. Imagine that.

What do these things tell us about ourselves? Anyone wanna try an answer. What does knowing these things about Jesus tell us about ourselves?

There is a saying from the Celtic tradition that the church's only job is to help people remember their goodness. Let me say that again. The church's only job is to help people remember their goodness. This of course is a reference to the first mythical story of creation where on the sixth day God created all the animals and in particular made humans in God's image, male and female, and blessed them...and then had the nerve to declare it all VERY GOOD. The Celts would say that if all that happens for you in worship today is for you to remember how very good you are, then the work of the church is accomplished.

For me, then, as I re-read the letter to the Hebrews that proclaims Christ is the answer, I'd like to stretch beyond the sacrificial theology of Judaism and the duality of Greek philosophy. I'd like to attempt a third position. The point of Christ is the affirmation of our lives. By faith in Jesus, we are given back our own humanity. By faith in the author of life who raised life from death, we get to claim our humanity, we get to be who we are, the beloved, the holy, the blessed, the good. That's who you are (Lillian, Justin, Rob, Marion, John....etc.....that's who I am.

Friends this is the only reason I'm in the church. I know of no other institution in the world that gives people back to themselves; that gives people the chance to look at their life stories

- through the lens of forgiveness – forgiving one another as we forgive ourselves...
- through the lens of grace....trusting that all manner of things shall be well....
- through the lens of peace...may this peace...the peace that surpasses all understanding be with you.

For more than 100 years Lynn Valley United Church and St. Andrew's United Church in Lower Lonsdale have provided a beacon of hope for seekers of all stripes to find something of the presence of God. Week after week, for over a century, we have faithfully opened our doors to those who might wander into our midst, trusting that they find a place to call home. For many years, many came. Both places were hopping with people, excited to be connected to something relevant, something important, something life changing. More recently, for many reasons, we, like most congregations in the mainline denominations in North America, got caught up in the practice of adapting to less. We responded to a hurting world with more activity and busier committees and somehow, the message of our inherent goodness was lost to the business of social justice. People got tired, and fell away.

As each of our churches sets its course on a new future, welcoming people and cultures far different than our own, the letter to the Hebrews calls us once again to re-connect with the one we follow. By faith, it would seem that Jesus is still the answer. For he gives us back to ourselves. He reminds us of the power of our own humanity and the blessing of our own goodness. I believe it's what we need to remember about ourselves as we bump into one another in our common quest to re-discover what it is we're being asked to be and do as congregations.

I also believe it's the one message the world longs to remember. Pointing to the one we follow, we can say 'this man reminds us of the power of our own humanity and the blessing of our goodness.' Think of the consequences when you remember your own goodness and when everyone around you does also. I think we'd live in that state of being I spoke of earlier, and remove those things from the earth which are inconsistent with this goodness. Together, by faith, let's imagine this good world, for it is not an illusion, and trust it's what we need as we prepare for our futures. Amen.