

27 April 2020

John 1:1-14, 1 Peter
2:1-3

Faithful Presence:
Becoming like Jesus
First Mennonite
Church

When we talk about God, we tend to use default adjectives: God is **omnipotent** (all powerful); God is **omniscient** (all knowing); or, God is **transcendent** (beyond or above the range of mere human experience). We talk about God being up in heaven, as if heaven has a specific physical location in space.



When I was a child, my image of God was of an all-powerful, all knowing king, sitting up in heaven on a throne. In my childhood imagination, God was always stern and serious, and often angry. In Psalm 139, it says, *You know when I sit down and when I rise up; you discern my thoughts from far away.* While this Psalm was meant to provide comfort for us in times of pain and suffering, to a kid whose image of God was of an angry Sovereign, this passage provided little comfort. Rather it was a reminder that God was always watching to see if I screwed up, and keeping track of the times I did.

In stark contrast to my static, unchanging view of God, is the God of the Bible. In the Bible you have a God who created the heavens, the earth, and everything that lives upon the earth. This God loves and cares for all creation. Just listen to some of the words of Psalm 8:

*O Lord, our Sovereign,
how majestic is your name in all the earth!
When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers,
the moon and the stars that you have established;*

*what are human beings that you are mindful of them,
mortals that you care for them? (Psalm 8:1, 3-4)*

The God of the Bible was invested in creation, wanted to be in relationship with it, with us. This God didn't just remain up in heaven, but, in the evocative words of Eugene Peterson's translation of John 1:14, **God became flesh and blood and moved into our neighbourhood.**

Isn't that a great image? God became flesh and blood and moved, not just any neighbourhood, but into **my neighbourhood.**

What kind of neighbourhood did God move into? Surprisingly, God didn't move into an upscale, wealthy, and exclusive neighbourhood, but into the neighbourhood of an aging couple with no future and no hope, and then into the slum neighbourhood of their descendants—oppressed and marginalized Jews who were in bondage in Egypt, and had to flee for their lives into the desert. The neighbourhood God's presence was most keenly felt was in broken, marginalized, and poor neighbourhoods.

One of the earliest and most persistent charges against Jesus was, "This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them" (Luke 15:2). Jesus is crucified for welcoming sinners to his table—not only welcoming, but also actively seeking them. At the end, with whom did he choose to dine at his "last supper"? Sinners. And in his resurrection, at a new beginning, with whom did he choose to dine with his first meals (Lk 24:13-35)? Sinners.

The neighbourhood where Jesus ministered, the neighbourhood where Jesus mediated God's grace to people with his own incarnational presence—this neighbourhood was too unsavoury for many of the faithful. Yet, for those in ministry, indeed for all disciples, being faithfully present in our neighbourhood with those on the margins, the troubled, the afflicted, and the challenged— is what the church's incarnational ministry ought to look like (*Incarnational Ministry*).

The recipients of 1 Peter were trying to figure out how they were supposed to be God's presence in their neighbourhood. As the reading is so short, I will read it again.

*So put away all malice and all guile and insincerity and envy and all slander.
Like newborn babes, long for the pure spiritual milk, that by it you may grow
up to salvation; for you have tasted the kindness of the Lord.*

These words were written almost 2000 years ago to an incredibly small group of Christians who lived in the Roman Empire, in the present-day country of Turkey. The church at that time was a tiny minority within a large pagan neighbourhood. Most people living at that time didn't know anything about the Christian faith. Those who did, didn't like Christians, because Christians lived and acted differently, didn't conform to the dominant values and customs of the neighbourhood. As a result, these Christians were harassed and treated badly. How should they respond? How do you respond when people aren't nice to you, treat you badly? The writer of 1 Peter wrote these words to comfort and encourage this small group of Christians to remain faithful. But how?

I'm not sure you noticed, but the writer used this odd and earthy metaphor of food in order to instruct this beleaguered group of Christians about living out their faith even when it was hard. *Like newborn babes, long for the pure spiritual milk, that by it you may grow up to salvation; for you have tasted the kindness of the Lord.*

Why use the metaphor of babies longing for food when talking about the Christian faith? I'm not a dietitian. Nor am I a nutritionist. But, I do know that the phrase, **you are what you eat**, is true. Nutrients from the foods you eat provide the foundation of the structure, function, and integrity of every little cell in your body, from your skin and hair to your muscles, bones, digestive and immune systems. Eating a well-balanced diet is important for your body to remain healthy and grow.

Conversely, scientific studies show that fast food, junk food, and processed food are not good for your body because they lead to increased obesity, heart disease, diabetes and other chronic diseases. What you eat in private, you wear in public.

I think the writer used the metaphor of babies longing for food—milk—is because they need milk to grow. In a similar way, how will Christians respond to those in our neighbourhood who don't like us? Will we respond with force, violence and hate—common methods and strategies of our society? Or will we respond with Christ-like methods and strategies? And what do those methods and strategies look like in the real world?

The writer of 1 Peter says, in order to figure that out, you must consume that spiritual milk. In other words, you must you must ponder your faith, reflect on the author of your faith, Jesus, and then practice it when you are out in your neighbourhood. With food, what you eat in private, you wear in public. With the Christian faith, the kinds of spiritual disciplines you consume, the TV programmes

you watch, the websites you visit, the books you read, will manifest themselves in outward action.

Christians sometimes think that faith is all about giving yes or no answers in a catechism exam or intellectual assent to certain timeless truths: The virgin birth? Check. The inerrancy of scripture? Check. The penal substitutionary view of the atonement? Check. The premillennial return of Christ? Check.

The problem with this way of believing is that it's static, frozen, and rigid. Too much like my childhood image of God, full of those trite Sunday School clichés: God is all powerful. God makes the rules; we're made to keep the rules. Keep the rules and you'll be blessed. Break the rules, you'll be cursed. Nice and neat. No loose ends.

When Peter talks about longing for spiritual milk and tasting the goodness of the Lord, he's talking about spiritual practices that enable us to foster and deepen our relationship with God so that we can be Christ's presence in our neighbourhood. How can we be Christ's presence in the neighbourhood?

I think every congregation in the western world, including every congregation in Canada, is trying to figure that out! I have several thoughts about this.

1. First, in order for us to be the presence of Christ in our neighbourhood requires us to commune with God and with others. The Lord's Table is centred around presence. God's presence to us, our presence with him and with others. When Jesus says 'do this in remembrance of me' He is saying 'when you eat, be present to my presence' here around this Table. Communion, of course, has at its root in the word commune. To spend time with. This is the very nature of the Table, Christ's presence with us in the bread and wine.

The Table teaches us to be present to Jesus and others through the postures of confession and submission. We confess our sin to God and others. We submit ourselves to God and the Kingdom, as well as submitting ourselves to others out of reverence to God (Ephesians 5:21).

Sharing communion is a communal activity. Can't be practiced alone. Sharing communion with others opens space for God to work between and among us. As we learn to be present to Christ in the sharing of communion, we are better able to be present to people in our neighbourhood, the place where we eat and drink the rest of the week.

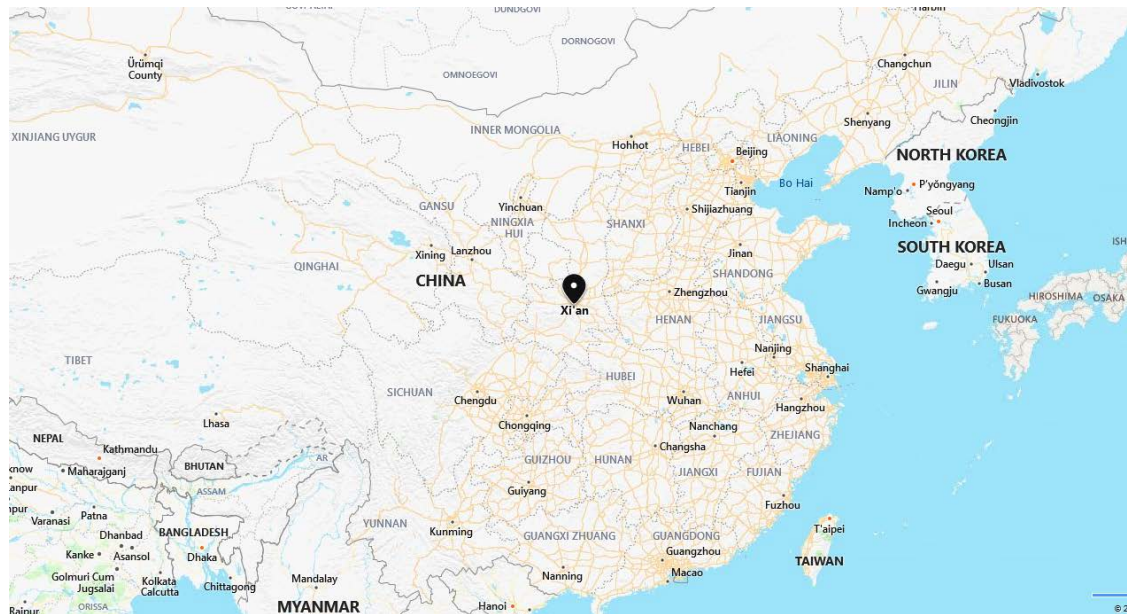
2. Being the presence of Christ in our neighbourhood involves not just believing in Jesus, but **following Jesus**. We are in the season of Easter where we celebrate our Risen Lord. And this Jesus whom we follow wants to take us to new places, give us new experiences, push us to encounter new people. But we have to be open to God's Spirit.

It takes a lifetime to fathom Jesus; it takes a lifetime to appropriate Jesus, it takes a lifetime to be clothed with Jesus. And the question comes to each of us: are we working to rid ourselves of the old self—rid ourselves of all malice, guile, insincerity, envy, and slander, replacing them with Christ? Are we daily, as sure as we put on our clothes in the morning, also putting on Christ the Lord?

3. Finally, being the presence of Christ in our neighbourhood does not mean us taking God to places where God is not. Evangelism doesn't mean that we have all the answers, but evangelism simply means Good News. How can we become Good News to our neighbours?

To put it another way, the question is not, "Is God there?" but "What is God doing?" Where is God as we go about our everyday activities? The short answer is, God is already there, engaged, waiting for us to notice.

One of my favourite places to visit when I lived in China was a city called Xian. It's a city in



central China, home to about 10 million people. It's on the Silk Road, which was an ancient trading route that stretched from China to Central Asia, India, and west until Europe.

The reason I loved visiting Xian was because I love history, and Xian had a rich and ancient history. Xian was China's capital for around 1000 years, from about 200BC to almost 1000AD.



So, there are many ancient places to visit, including the Terracotta Warriors. Thousands of life-sized clay warriors were forged to guard and protect China's first Emperor, Qin Shihuang in his afterlife. There were many other ancient tombs around Xian too, as well as museums and ancient Buddhist

Temples.



One of my favourite places to visit in Xian wasn't in the city itself but about a 2-hour drive outside the city. It wasn't on any tourist map, but was situated out in the countryside nestled up against some rolling hills. It was the site of the first Church in China, and was built by the

Nestorian Christians in the 6th century. This group of Christians followed the Silk Road, eventually arriving in Xian where they built a church and a pagoda in Chinese style. All that remained was the Pagoda and a Nestorian Stele. A stele is usually a



huge piece of carved stone erected in the ancient world as a monument. The Nestorian Stele outlined some of the Christian beliefs to the Chinese.

To touch something that old was a significant spiritual moment for me, because it was a solid reminder of God's loving presence. God was present in China long before I arrived there. It was present in China long before the Nestorians arrived there. Not only was God's loving presence there long before the Nestorians or I arrived in China, but God's loving presence would remain there long after I was gone.

We don't take God to where God is not. God's loving presence was here

before the universe itself, and it will be here long after the universe has passed away. Being a Christian presence in our neighbourhood is but one small mark on a on a much bigger timeline.

It's not up to us to make history turn out right. It's not up to us to fill the church. Our job is to be a faithful presence in our neighbourhood by cultivating the spiritual practices that will allow us to grow in faith. Thanks be to God.