

Last week we looked at what held the new Christian communities together in Asia Minor – now Turkey. What bound them together both internally and together as a larger community was God's great mercy shown to them through Christ's resurrection. Through the resurrection of Christ, the communities – and individuals from within the communities were now birthed anew - regenerated as sisters and brothers into the family of God – they received a new inheritance – one that would not fade or be taken from them and a new living hope that would enable them to tolerate and endure whatever difficult thing they faced.

This living hope in a God whose great mercy and love is not conquered by death – instead defeats death. This living hope in God through Christ inspires and motivates Christians throughout the centuries to take courage – even when times seem dark.

I mentioned Erland Waltner last week. I got to know Erland when I was at Seminary and attended and later was a pastoral intern at Hively Ave. Mennonite Church. Erland and his wife, Winnifred, were in my care-group. I was always delighted and impressed by his pastoral wisdom.

At the end of Erland's chapter in his *Believer's Church Bible Commentary* on 1 Peter 1:3-12, he recalls a sermon he preached that first Easter after the bombing of Pearl Harbor.

He writes: "The day which we live seems to be another "good Friday" in the world. All that is good and true and pure, it seems, is being nailed to the cross. A sinister darkness has enveloped the earth, and the lights of hope were going out one after another..."

...On the first "Good Friday" ...there was darkness upon the earth while sinners scoffed, and believers stood by in helpless confusion.

On that third day there came a new Dawn to end that starless night. Death could not hold its prey. ... Tear-stained faces glowed with new hope, downcast eyes were lifted up to behold a risen savior, brokenhearted men stood up with new courage. New life had come out of Death.

Before there could be an Easter, however, there had to be a Good Friday. Before there can be New Life, there must be Death. Darkness precedes the dawn. But here is the glorious Easter message: THERE WILL BE ANOTHER DAWN when the dark night is ended, and the King of Righteousness shall put His enemies under His feet and shall reign forever (Waltner, Erland, and J. Daryl Charles. *1-2 Peter, Jude (Believers Church Bible Commentary)*, Herald Press, Harrisonburg, VA, 1999, pp. 54-55.)"

This is the living hope – that death is not the end – that God brings new life in places that are bleak and broken – and that, when we pray, "Your Kingdom Come" we mean that God will and is lighting the darkness.

But wait. There's more. There's always more.

1 Peter 1:17-23; 2:1-3 – italics mine

¹⁷ If you invoke as Father the one who judges all people impartially according to their deeds, *then* live in reverent fear during the time of your exile.

¹⁸ *You know* that you were ransomed from the futile ways inherited from your ancestors, not with perishable things like silver or gold, ¹⁹ but with the precious blood of Christ, like that of a lamb without defect or blemish.

²⁰ He was destined before the foundation of the world, but was revealed at the end of the ages for *your* sake.

²¹ *Through him* you have come to trust in God, who raised him from the dead and gave him glory, so that *your* faith and hope are set on God.

²² *Now/Since* that you have purified your souls by your obedience to the truth so that you have genuine mutual love, *then* love one another deeply from the heart.

²³ You have been born anew, not of perishable but of imperishable seed, through the living and enduring word of God.

2 Rid yourselves, therefore, of all malice, and all guile, insincerity, envy, and all slander.

² Like newborn infants, long for the pure, spiritual milk, so that by it you may grow into salvation — ³ if indeed you have tasted that the Lord is good.

Some would say, “being born again is all you need.” But Peter says, there’s more. You’ve got to pay it forward.

Waltner explains: “Peter has called his hearers to activate Christian hope with conduct that is both obedient and reverent (Waltner 62). God has given Christians a new birth into a new family. Christ’s death has redeemed them, that is, set them free from the old way of life. From the vantage point of their new life, then, their old traditional ways of doing things are revealed as empty and pointless, with no lasting value.

Peter urges the new Christians to conduct themselves as God’s children in their new family of God. That means modeling their behavior and their values not after their culture or their tradition, but after their new parent, God, who has given them new birth.

And since God shows no favoritism in judgment, Christians too must set aside the social norms and love each other without hypocrisy (Jones, Judith. “Commentary on 1 Peter 1:17-23.” *Working Preacher from Luther Seminary*, 11 Nov. 2020, <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/third-sunday-of-easter/commentary-on-1-peter-117-23-3>).

This is how the world will know you are a follower of Christ – by your love for each other, by your love for your neighbour and your love for your enemies (Waltner 62).

And so, we could say with full confidence:

One who follows Christ will pay the same love promise to the world as Christ gave for you...
Without partiality...Without pretense...without hypocrisy

Peter uses two words for love in this passage – he uses Agape and Philadelphia.

²² *Now/Since* that you have purified your souls by your obedience to the truth so that you have genuine mutual love,
then love one another deeply from the heart.

Agape –is a pure – God-given love and it is one of the tell-tale signs that the person is transformed by the love of God in their lives. In 1 Corinthians 13, Paul says a community who shares agape love is a community where the people together are patient and empathetic, they are not jealous, not boastful, not conceited, rude nor selfish. They are not easily enraged, nor do they hold grudges for earlier indiscretions. Agape love is delighted when truth is revealed and tries again, trusts, endures and hopes for the best in others – always. Nothing can take away agape love.

Philadelphia – literally means love for the people who have come out of the same womb – siblings – those who call another brother and sister. It is a reciprocal love that is shared because the other is your sibling (Waltner 64).

Note where Peter uses these two words in verse 22. He says,

Now/Since that you have purified your souls by your obedience to the truth so that you have genuine ~~mutual~~ ~~love~~ agape, *then* ~~love~~ philadelphia one another deeply from the heart.

And here, we've translated ektenos to mean "deeply from the heart" but really it means earnestly, zealously, eagerly, freely, splendidly...even extravagantly (Logos).

Because you have born anew by the grace and mercy of God through Christ you are able to show genuine agape love to others. Now that this has been transformed within you then, eagerly, and freely show philadelphia love not only to each other in the church, but also beyond your church family to neighbors and even enemies (Waltner 64).

Reflect your rebirth into God's family by extravagantly living genuine agape and philadelphia to the people in your church, your community and even your enemies.

"[Peter] knows that [philadelphia] love and agape love, even in a community of shared belief is impossible without the new birth into the family of God, through Christ (Waltner 65)."

Agape and philadelphia can't just be commanded in yourself – they don't just appear because you will it. Agape and philadelphia are spiritual gifts – but are available for everybody through the grace of God and through individual spiritual growth (Waltner 66).

Spiritual growth is a journey – it is a continual process of discipleship that may mean that in time, with the grace of God and heaps of growth, you'll think differently than you did before – perhaps even love differently than you did before.

In the same way that practice makes perfect, practicing spiritual disciplines – like studying the word, practicing hospitality and prayer invite these disciplines to become habits and these, in turn, invite the risen Christ to come in and be a part of us. This is what growth is – it is an amazing and wonderful miraculous transformation into the people whom God calls us to be.

Growth in our relationship with Christ demands that we put aside thought and behavioral habits of relationships that have no place in the family of God. Malice, guile, insincerity, envy and slander – Peter names a few of many more toxic relational habits that we use against each other. They're so easy to do and it's so hard to break free from the hold that they have on us. We're all guilty of at least one of these.

Christ loves us so much that he died for us. God loves us so much that Christ was raised from the dead. We know death is not the end! We know we are reborn in the family of God. But we won't grow in love, in fellowship, into our salvation if we don't eat what God provides.

Peter continues. ² Like newborn infants, long for the pure, spiritual milk, so that by it you may grow into salvation— ³ if indeed you have tasted that the Lord is good.

Pure spiritual milk – isn't for babies – it's "the good stuff". It's the word – the Gospel of Jesus – it's the wine with meat pairing – it's the cool water on a hot day - yet it is also more. It's the "sustaining life of God given in

mercy to the children (Waltner 66).” And we need to keep drinking the goodness of the LORD because without spiritual growth we may survive but we fail to thrive. Not only we – but everyone around us is affected too.

Taking off the toxic clothing and putting on love may need to happen every day – it’s a spiritual discipline – it’s a drink of the goodness of God – it’s a “becoming” on the road to completion – a now- and-not yet growth into salvation.

You’ve got to do your part to grow and become the person who God is calling you to be. You’ve got to want to do the work for love – and then you’ve got to do it.

You can be an amazing person – you can be the most generous person, you can give all your money and support for programs that will help the poor, you can counsel all sorts of problems out of people, you could be so smart, so popular, you could know everything about the bible and God and how to be a good Christian. You could have amazing faith in God and talk all the right spiritual talk – you could even die for a noble cause, but if you can’t move yourself to take off the resentment that you feel towards your sisters and brothers in the pews beside you – then sorry honey, you’re just a noisy gong or clanging symbol; hard to ignore, noisy, aggravating, and headache inducing.

A great many influential theologians, professors even pastors have used their positions to sexually and emotionally abuse the people around them. Similarly, our sisters and brothers in Anabaptist churches around the world have bullied their way to prestige and power from within the congregation – holding back support or funds if their agenda isn’t met.

Countless numbers of our siblings have run from the church because instead of love and respect – agape and philo - they have received scorn and harsh judgement and even dehumanization.

Many of our children leave the church because, instead of experiencing love and welcome and safety as they are asking the big necessary questions and exploring their talents and gifts - they experience derisive looks and the bad end of blatant favoritism.

Even way back almost 500 years ago in the Netherlands, things weren’t great in our churches. Dirk Philips and Menno Simons tried so hard to make a church that was pure and good and holy, but in doing so ended up excommunicating and using the ban far too often – pushing people out of their places in the family of God. At the same time as this was happening, another movement – known as the Waterlanders – was swinging in the opposite direction as a response. While the Waterlanders “emphasized unity and peace and love, and compassion replaced the ban, their spiritual laxness, vague doctrine, and social permissiveness increased the divide between the two groups (Waltner 68).

While both factions were eventually absorbed by more moderate Anabaptist and Mennonite groups, echoes of their disputes still resonate within the broader Mennonite Church today. Is it any wonder there’s so much conflict from within MCUSA? And that’s just from the Dutch Anabaptists – we could go on and on with all the denominations in the world – all have their own history of sibling rivalry.

Being rebirthed as part of the family of God means that we’ve got to pay the love that we have and are receiving forward. Being rebirthed as part of the family of God means that we’ve got to do your spiritual discipline chores daily. It means that we’ve got to drink long from that goodness of God. We’ve got to take off the dirty clothing that repels love and put on the clean pure clothing of agape and philo – provided by the ONE who washes all our clothes and makes them purer than snow.