

Introduction:

When is the last time you've been given really good news? What do you want to do when you get good news? You want to share it with others! You share it with others so that they can share in your joy.

In our Scripture for today, Paul tries to persuade followers of Jesus to be evangelistic in sharing that good news by laying out the logic of it all. Basically, if this good news of salvation requires that a person call on the name of the Lord, then that person has to somehow hear about God in order to call on Him, and if this person needs to hear about God to call on Him, then somebody has to share with them about God.

This makes sense, and yet the church continually struggles to be persuaded that sharing the Good News is as important as Jesus said. So this morning we are going to consider what Paul's commission means to us today by answering three questions: What is the Good News, what is the Mennonite Good News, and who carries the Good News and why?

Questions to Consider:**1) What is the Good News?**

The Good News, according to Paul in Romans 10:13 is this: "Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved." And in Isaiah 52, which Paul is quoting in Romans 10, the prophet says that the Good news is this: How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of the messenger who announces peace, who brings good news, who announces salvation, who

says to Zion, *"Your God reigns."* The Good News then, according to Isaiah and Paul, is that God reigns in now and in eternity. And the reconciled eternity that God promises through Jesus Christ has already begun.

Now if you remember, during the time of Isaiah's ministry the people of Israel had been taken into captivity by the much larger Babylonian government. Even though this was a punishment for their sins, they may have felt that God had abandoned them. The Good News was that they had not been abandoned. God still reigned, even during their darkest hours.

And then Paul writing to the church in Rome was addressing a people in conflict. The Gentile Christians and Jewish Christians were trying to figure out how to live together in community in spite of their significant differences. The Good News then was that anyone, regardless of their background, could become a part of the people of God if they would only call on the name of the Lord Jesus.

Last weekend, I had the opportunity to attend a conference put on by Mennonite Mission Network called SENT that was held in Denver, Colorado. April 20th of this year was the 20th anniversary of the shootings at Columbine high school; it seemed like the memory of this event hung in the air over Denver, as Columbine is in Littleton, a suburb of Denver, and the church we were meeting at was only 15 minutes away from the school. During the worship service on Sunday, two parents of a student who was at the Columbine Jr. High feeder school

that day and whose best friend was killed at Columbine reflected on their experience that day. And what struck me about their testimony was how, in 20 years, so few things have changed as a response to this tragic event. Sure back then being on 'lockdown' was a foreign concept to students and parents, and now we have regular lockdown drills and ALICE training for teachers. Since Columbine, we've learned the right responses when these crises occur, but even as we continue to witness these things happening, even in our own community, we are no closer to solving the problem of school shootings than we were 20 years ago. So I ask then, what is the Good News in this reality? What does it mean for us, in a country riddled with gun violence, 20 years out from Columbine, that "God reigns?"

What is the Good News today, to us, in our context? What is the good news to your family member fighting cancer, or to your neighbor struggling to pay rent, or to your co-worker having a hard time paying medical bills, or the person down the street with a child in the middle of an opioid addiction? What is the Good News for the lonely, the broken-hearted, the physically, mentally, and emotionally hurt, the directionless, hopeless, and helpless?

So the Good News, according to Isaiah and Paul, is that God reigns and all that would call upon Him as Lord and Savior can experience that reign now and forever. The second question we will then consider is 'what is the Mennonite Good news?'

2) What is the Mennonite Good News?

This might seem like a weird question, but hear me out. I took part in a few different versions of this conversation over the weekend: Does the Mennonite tradition inhibit the good news being shared with our neighbors? What even makes a Mennonite? Is it really 4 part harmony, or having a last name that can trace all the way back to Menno Simons himself, or knowing the rules to Dutch Blitz, or attending a Mennonite high school or College? Or is it the centrality of community, the focus on Jesus as the center of our faith, and our peace witness? If it's the first, then I think it's probably time we start reconsidering our priorities because otherwise we are creating pretty formidable barriers for our neighbors to hear this good news.

Leonard Dow, a former Mennonite pastor in Philadelphia and now an Everence rep, shared a story from his many years in ministry. Leonard is African-American, was a pastor of an urban church, had grown up Mennonite and attended a Mennonite college and seminary, but was accused more than once by other Lancaster Mennonite Conference pastors of not being "Mennonite enough." He reckoned that part of this was because "Dow" was not a Mennonite last name and also because he was black and couldn't trace back his roots to European Mennonites living in Switzerland and Germany in the 16th century. Leonard liked to play pranks on his fellow pastors, so at their annual conference gathering, he decided instead of writing his own name on his name badge, he would write his friend's name, who was a traditional Mennonite with a

traditional Mennonite name. We'll say this friend's name was John Yoder. Upon entering the conference area, Leonard could tell right away that pastors were very confused. They couldn't figure out where he fit into the Yoder family tree. He said during breaks there was a table of "Yoders" who sat together and talked about family history, and they were furiously looking through their family tree books and calling relatives to find out where this "John Yoder" fit in. Finally he walked up to the table and said "What's up my fellow Yoders!" One of them awkwardly asked who he "belonged to," meaning what's his family connection. Leonard finally let the cat out of the bag and told them his real name, and that this was his friend's name. They collectively let out a sigh of relief and then shared they had been trying to figure out where he fit in the Yoder line. They all laughed a bit and then Leonard walked away.

It's a funny story, but it reveals a troubling truth; that for some people in the Mennonite Church, to be "in" means having the right family name, the right history, and right traditions. I don't think those pastors meant any harm in their confusion and curiosity; but unfortunately when our "good news" gets reduced down to these things, harm can be done.

That being said, we need to ask the question, what is the Good News that we as Mennonites carry? Is it the same good news that every other denomination carries, or do we have something unique and special? I would say while most, if not all Christian churches profess the same Good News of salvation through Jesus Christ, I do believe that Mennonites have unique

and important Good News to bring to the world around them that is especially needed in our culture today. We are living in a time of intense conflict over beliefs and ideals in the United States, where people who disagree with one another no longer know how to talk to each other or to even make compromises to work out those disagreements and line up on either side of some invisible line with their respective “teams” in order to ‘win the day’ and demonize anyone who disagrees with them. Sadly, the church has gotten drawn into this conflict and in many cases is just as bad as politicians, celebrities, and other public figures at treating the “other side” like garbage.

Mennonites hold a peace stance because of our belief that Jesus sought to bring peace and reconciliation to the brokenness to the world. And we can offer Good News that there is a different way to handle the conflict all around us. We don’t have to stand with either “side” in the conflict but can stand in the gap as the peacemaking representatives of Jesus Christ. Now if that isn’t good news, then I don’t know what is, because I don’t know about you, but I’m tired of the fighting and the way we are treating each other in this country. And if there is a different way of doing things then I am all for it.

Karla Minter, the Mennonite Mission Network church relations representative for Ohio Conference, reflecting on the state of the Mennonite Church in the United States as she’s seen in her travels, said “Things are dying, but new life is happening. How are we preparing ourselves to join in the work of this new life?”

Did you know that wildfires are necessary to keep forests healthy and for new life to grow? They help to clear out dead underbrush and keep the trees evenly spaced apart so that they don't crowd out and kill each other by stealing nutrients. The amazing thing is that God designed trees in such a way that once they grow to a certain size they can withstand damage from a naturally occurring forest fire. And in the midst of the ashes and apparent destruction, life will continue and new, healthy growth will happen. One of the reasons why we are having such terribly destructive wildfires in California and the west now is because we tried so hard to prevent forest fires that brush built up, trees starting growing too close together, and the whole thing became a tinder box for the massive fires we see today. Because we wanted so much to preserve life and prevent death, even necessary death, we've made the situation worse. Death is a part of the natural order of things in the world. So in the church too, it may be necessary for certain things to die so that new life can grow.

3) Who carries the Good News and why?

As I said earlier, I took part in the SENT conference last weekend. It was a gathering of church planters, missional church leaders, and anybody interested in the radical movement of God in our world today. There were conference ministers and representatives from Mennonite Mission Network and MCUSA. There were people from small house churches of 12 people, people re-planting small and dying Mennonite churches, and people leading larger congregations in the process of planting other churches. There were pastors

from Indonesian churches in Philadelphia, Hispanic churches in many places including Indiana, and African churches in California. We came from all over, including Utah, and New Mexico, and Florida, and North Carolina, and New York, and Mexico and Iowa. There were college students, seminary students, men and women, young and old. We worshiped in Spanish and English. As I stood out on the lawn beside Beloved Community Mennonite Church, a 3 year old church plant which met in a United Church of Christ owned building that also housed a Messianic Jewish congregation and a non-denominational congregation, I heard the myriad of languages, the laughter, and the passionate sharing of what God was doing in neighborhoods around the country. And I thought to myself, 'this is the Kingdom of Heaven come to Earth.'

Another thing that really struck me as I talked with different people about their ministries was how very ordinary it all was. Let me explain because I'm not trying to put down any of the wonderful people I met over the weekend. But these were folks just like you and me; many had grown up in traditional, legacy, Mennonite Churches. Many of them were bi-vocational, meaning they worked part or full time to support the work of the church. Many met in homes, or rented spaces. Some had gone to seminary, others had not. As for the Beloved Community Mennonite Church, the music wasn't particularly 'contemporary,' there was almost no technology to speak of, and the service was pretty loosely structured. Because it was a shared space, the decorations were pretty neutral. The building was old, and in fact it was getting worked on during

the weekend. There was street parking only. The church size was 40 on a good day.

And yet, God was in that place and revival was happening. So what made these people special and what did they do different? They saw that there were people in their neighborhoods who needed to hear the good news but weren't engaging in the churches around them, or had been burned by the institutional church, or lived in an area without a spirit-filled church. And so they decided that they were going to answer God's call as set out in the great commission, "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations." Shane Claiborne would call these people 'ordinary radicals,' because their lives look a lot like ours, but they were willing to do something different, to step out of their comfort zones, for the sake of the Good News. Their feet are beautiful, not because they're special, but because they're willing to use them for God's work.

David Maldonado, a church planter in Goshen, Indiana, said "Jesus was always walking, and wherever he went people followed." What would it look like if we really walked like Jesus, with the same good news that Jesus carried? I would think that people couldn't help but follow because the world is in desperate need of some good news.

Conclusion:

Both Paul and Isaiah make the proclamation "how beautiful are the feet of those who bring Good News." How beautiful are those ordinary people, who answer God's radical call to share

the good news of his reign in the world around them. How beautiful are the churches who, tired of doing business as usual, step out in faith to be the gospel bearers and sharers that God has called them to be. How beautiful are the neighborhoods transformed by one or two faithful families that demonstrate Christ's love in their ordinary lives. How beautiful are lives that have been stuck in the muck and mire of our world that become transformed because we walked like Jesus. How beautiful.