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BEING AUTHENTICALLY CHRISTIAN

Isaiah 40: 1-8; Matthew 3: 1-9

What does it mean to be an authentic Christian? Even though John the Baptist lived some 2000 years ago and confronted people with a message in a world very different than ours, his message is as powerfully relevant for us here today. But to understand his message, we need to translate it into modern terms.

To help with such translation, let me enlist the services of a philosopher of more recent times. His name is Soren Kierkegaard. Kierkegaard lived in the 1850s, in Denmark. Now, Denmark in 1850 was not Canada in 2017. Yet Kierkegaard's insight into human nature and the truth of the gospel for his time and place has powerful resonance for our time and place here and now. Kierkegaard's insight also brings out the message of John the Baptist in a powerful way.

Kierkegaard lived in a time and place in Europe where everybody was Christian by birth. Every citizen had to be baptized Christian to be a citizen. How, then, could anyone make a choice for it? How could anyone claim that they were a Christian by choice, not by birth? And if there was no genuine choice in becoming a Christian, how could calling oneself a Christian mean anything authentic?

Well, our world here in urban Canada in 2017, is quite different. Perhaps a generation or two ago, most Canadians would be European in background, and most would have considered themselves Christian. Today, however, whatever the background of people, being a Christian is an option, as is going to church or observing anything religious. In fact, even claiming to be religious doesn't necessarily mean being Christian and neither does it mean belonging to a church.

But the question as to what makes us authentically Christian is still as relevant as ever. In fact, given the multiplicity of religious options and non-religious options in our society today, it may be more urgent than ever for us to understand in clear terms what it means for us to call ourselves Christians in a way that means something. How does calling myself a Christian describe something about me as a person that is fundamental to me?

Let's get some help from Kierkegaard and our gospel reading. In one of his books entitled "Stages on Life's way," Kierkegaard distinguishes three kinds of people.

1) First, there is what he calls the aesthetic person. Today, we would call such a person a narcissist. This is a person who lives for themselves, indulging in all available pleasures, focussing as much as possible on his or her own desires, concerns, needs and goals.

What a life it is to have no concern or worry about anything or anyone other than yourself. What a life it is to be so totally focussed on your pleasures and your needs.

Even though there may be a little bit of the narcissist in many of us, it functions differently for us at various stages of life. When we're young, we're discovering ourselves in all kinds of ways and being absorbed with our wants, our needs, our friends and our lives becomes instinctual. As we get older we take on different responsibilities and this forces us to look past ourselves to the needs and well-being of those around us. But even as we age and take on greater responsibilities for others, focussing on ourselves, our wants and needs, what we expect of others or how we are let down by others, can become a major preoccupation of life.

And so, as much as we may be critical of the narcissist in others, there is a part of us drawn in that direction, too, no? How wonderful to be able to live for our own pleasure oblivious to anything or anyone else. What a dream to be able to afford such pleasure guilt-free, and to have the health and freedom to enjoy it fully. But somehow, we also know that there's more to life and unless we make some serious commitments to this more, commitments that entail sacrifices to really be commitments... unless we make such commitments, we will miss out on something much greater than just pleasure. Life is about much more than just living the moment, focussed on ourselves, what we want and what we need, period, no?

2) This brings us to the second kind of person Kierkegaard describes. This person is what he calls the ethical person. This is a person who is focussed on doing the right thing because it's the right thing to do. This is a person who does things with a purpose. He is a good mechanic and does it with honesty and integrity because he is contributing something larger to society. She is a good teacher because she is contributing to helping children grow into happy, healthy and positively contributing persons in society. He is a good public administrator because the hospital or university he is employed by has an important contribution to make to the overall well-being and advancement of his society. She is a good lawyer because advocating for others, giving them the best chance to address their concerns, and maintaining a standard of law in society is so essential in a world that can easily be governed by the powerful over the powerless. He is a good sales representative because offering good customer service is about building trust and good will among his clients and satisfaction in what it is they are purchasing. She is a good neighbour because she is kind and considerate, and she offers her neighbour hope that there is goodness in this world. I can go on and on, but I think we all get the picture.

But is the ethical kind of person the highest kind of person we are called to be as Christians? Certainly, we would all agree here that the ethical person is a huge improvement on the narcissist. To think about the wider good of society and about the

welfare of others is much more important than just living for yourself and your pleasures and needs.

And besides, what is good for society is good for us too. We find deeper fulfillment and joy when we can contribute to the good of others and to the good of our world. We are made for this. It's in our constitution as creatures made in the image of God. God created the world out of love and for love, we're told in scripture. And if we are made in God's image as we are also told, then living in and out of love as the defining purpose of our lives is living the way we're made to live. As much as the narcissist may feel they are living their bliss because they can indulge their desires, they will also experience great emptiness in life. And if they don't find a way to move beyond their lifestyle to a more ethical way of living, then this emptiness will lead to deeper unhappiness. Isn't this something we know deep down? We do.

3) But being ethical, according to Kierkegaard is not the highest form of life for us human beings. Why? Some of the most ethical people we know are also some of the most self-righteous, judgemental and patronizing people we know as well. This is what John the Baptist is dealing with in our gospel reading. The people he denounces most are not bad people. The Pharisees, are devout, religious people who are keen to follow moral rules. They are good citizens who work hard, give to charity, pay taxes, are honest and patriotic. But they have a hard edge to them as well. They see themselves as better than others. They look down on those they help with their charity as flawed and failed creatures who have made bad choices and are paying for it accordingly. What you sow you reap, no?

And they also believe in justice. Fair is fair, and right is right. An eye for an eye keeps everyone on the straight and narrow. This means punishment is an important part of society. Some people are beyond the pale of mercy, no? How many chances do we give to people before we're simply wasting our time, energy and money?

But John the Baptist undercuts their morality, their spirituality and the foundation of their ethics. He proclaims the gospel as a message of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. Repentance means that failure and flaw is not just out there in other people. Failure and flaw is in us, in me. And if I haven't failed as much as my neighbour, perhaps that's due to all the love, support and direction I've received in life. And if I haven't received as much love, support and direction as my neighbour and am still more responsible and just than he is, then thanks be to God for the fact that somehow, I've been given what I've needed to do what I've done and not fallen as hard as I could have.

Repentance is based on humility. "Thank you, God for saving me, for helping me, for lifting me up again and again when I have been down or could have been down. I need help, O God, because even if everything about me may seem so shiny on the outside, I know that inside I can be full of judgement, questioning, doubt, fear,

resentment, jealousy, hate, despair and many more things besides. I thank you that none of these things have undone me too badly. Thank you for your mercy and your forgiveness." Could you pray like this? Many of the religious people John encountered could not. It was beneath them. They were not like the rest of degenerate humanity. They had made themselves morally as they had made themselves materially. They deserved a pat on the back.

But you see, the highest form of humanity according to Kierkegaard and John the Baptist, is the kind of humanity that lives the spirit of repentance in humility. And out of this spirit grows a wealth of compassion, an energy of love that sees beauty in other people, even the most difficult. You see, genuine compassion can only grow out of the soil of genuine humility, genuine self-awareness. When we know how merciful and gracious God is with us, who are we to hold something over someone else?

Now this doesn't mean we don't have to set boundaries sometimes. It doesn't mean we don't have to protect ourselves and others from being used and abused. It doesn't mean we don't have to cry out at injustice wherever it is found. But condemnation, judgment, a sense of superiority, and an inner desire to put someone in their place is always a current that can run through us. We are always vulnerable to falling, and when we know this, we are less inclined to run others down.

To be authentically Christian, then, requires that we are more than just good people. It means more than just being good citizens, good neighbours, good colleagues and friends. It means more than following the rules and respecting what belongs to others. It's also about being humble and truthful before God. It's about adopting a spirit of repentance. And repentance is not about feeling bad about ourselves, but feeling grateful that we are loved in our brokenness and loved even in our lovelessness. A spirit of repentance is about feeling grateful that we are embraced as infinitely precious regardless of any shaming and blaming we may feel in ourselves toward others. Repentance love cleanses us of our pretensions of sanctity on the one hand, or our moral excuses on the other. Repentance love energizes us to be genuinely compassionate toward other sinners because we know we are sinners too.

Are you an authentic Christian?... You can be.... Let us pray: "Dear God, help me to believe that I am loved by you no matter how much I fail to be honest about my failings and my doubts. Help me to be less judgmental of others and more compassionate. Help me to recognize that coming closer to you, becoming more holy before you, is not about being more righteous, but experiencing your forgiving love; Amen."