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Revisionist Christians

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Jeremiah 29:11-14; Philippians 4:1-13

God of generosity, we pray you would fill our hearts with your Spirit this morning. As your Word is made known to us here, at this moment in time, may it be what our ears need to hear, and cause us to stir with action. In Christ's name we pray. Amen.

Some of you may have noticed that we are now podcasting our Sunday sermons. They're available on our website, through itunes, which makes Westminster very cool and hip. Thanks to David Shinn's work to make it happen and our communications team, and of course the wonderful human beings in the sound booth up there who record every Sunday morning. Podcasts are a relatively new phenomenon in the media world, though they have their roots in thoughtful radio broadcasts of the past. Podcasts are longform audio recordings- usually stories, interviews, or news segments- that can be streamed or downloaded on your computer or smartphone, and they have revived a form of journalism that was probably thought to be left behind.

One podcast series that is currently topping the charts is called Revisionist History. It has sort of an academic-sounding name, but it's written and hosted by New York Times bestselling author, Malcolm Gladwell. Revisionist History is Malcolm Gladwell's [quote] 'journey through the

overlooked and the misunderstood. Every episode re-examines something from the distant or recent past – an event, a story, a person, an idea – and asks whether we got it right the first time.’

As I was browsing the episodes a few weeks ago, one in particular caught my attention- not surprisingly it had a rather churchy-sounding title. It was called “Generous Orthodoxy.” This term is actually not original to Gladwell, but was first coined by a theologian named Hans Frei. So, I was intrigued and, lucky for me, the story he ended up telling has deep theological connections.

In this particular episode, Gladwell interviews a man named Chester Menger. Menger is a 96 year old who has lived his entire life in the Mennonite community, and until recently had been a well-known retired clergy. Menger became famous in the Mennonite world, in the last few years, for a challenging letter he wrote to the church after he married his gay son and subsequently had his ordination renounced. As you listen to the story you become not only enthralled by the stance he took, but also the love this man continues to have for his church.

For Mennonites, community and reconciliation are two essential tenants. The word community, for them, is not just a term they use to describe a religious group, they live it out in grand gestures of support for one another- especially when someone in the community is in need or has been harmed. It’s for this very reason that when Menger’s son came to him and told him he was gay, albeit after a bit of time, he came to wholeheartedly accept the fact- and not just from a personal perspective, but a theological one, too... His church, however, did not. And for Menger, the excommunication of his son from the church flew in the face of everything Mennonites stood for- community and reconciliation. I can only imagine trying to stay in a church that rejects your child, but, according to Menger leaving also would have flown in the face of what he believed in. So, he

decided to write a letter- really a statement of faith- to the church he loved. He writes,

“I am profoundly reluctant to write this letter because I know there are those it will wound deeply. But I have also come to the conviction that I can no longer hide the light the Lord has lit within me, under a bushel. I want to share with you what the Lord has been telling me and my dear life companion.... We invite the church to courageously stake out new territory, much as the early church did. We invite the church to embrace the missional opportunity to extend the church’s blessing of marriage to our homosexual children who desire to live in accountable, covenanted ways. We know that while many of us hear different things from the Scriptures, God’s deepest desire, as made known in Jesus Christ, is “to seek and to save that which was lost.”

The letter quotes the Apostle Paul a number of times, and in the interview with Gladwell, Menger notes one verse in particular from Romans, chapter one: “For I am not ashamed of the gospel; it is the power of God for salvation to everyone.”

The story is remarkable, and told so well. I found myself envious of this man’s ability to love his son *and* the church who didn’t love his son, simultaneously, a generous orthodoxy on his part, to be sure. Menger was able to maintain respect and reverence for tradition, while also seeing the need to reform and revise with abundant grace and hope for the future. I wondered if I could be so open and willing. The truth is, Menger made it seem easy, as though holding these two things in the balance was exactly what his faith and church had prepared him his whole life to do. Was he worried, that after spending over 70 years as an ordained minister in the church he loved, he would have his ordination taken from him in one fell swoop?... No. He laughed when Gladwell asked him.

“Rejoice in the Lord, always, again I will say rejoice,” this is what the Apostle Paul writes in the letter to the Philippians. In it I also discovered a sense of awe for what Paul, the author, was able to do- exactly what it seemed he had been preparing his whole life for. It’s Paul’s charge to the Philippians, and comes at the end, written to them, we think, while Paul is in prison. Much like Chester Menger, Paul maintains strength, purpose, humility, and lack of fear for the future- proclaiming his faith even after being arrested and jailed for it; preaching the abundance of the Gospel even from a place of scarcity.

Paul, as you may remember, was formerly Saul of Tarsus, who was traveling one day on the road to Damascus, doing his duty to persecute early Christians when suddenly he saw Jesus in a great light and was struck blind. Three days later Ananias restored his sight and from thereafter his life was dedicated to spreading the good news of the Gospel. Paul knew from his own experience what it meant to be a follower of Jesus; he had been made new. He respected the Jewish traditions from which he had come, but knew the message of Jesus was for everyone, and that certain things had to be left behind, or change, in order to welcome all people. As Paul writes, “Let your gentleness be known to *everyone*. The Lord is near.” Paul not only knew the Gospel was for everyone, but because he was in the trenches with these early Christians he also knew they had to make the church their own, to adapt if it was going to survive. He tells the Philippians, don’t worry, guard your hearts with Christ, keep on doing what is right. He is not more prescriptive than that.

The good news of the Gospel is that every day is a chance to be transformed, to make things new again- a chance to adapt. The old life has gone away, Paul says, and a new life has begun.

Some of you know this about me, but the best, or maybe, most helpful part of worship, in my opinion, is the prayer of confession and assurance of pardon. It always feels like such a relief each week to bring before God all that keeps us from being fully who we are, as a world, as a community, and as individuals. We approach a God who has already forgiven us, we offer up all the ways we fall short, and then we are assured of that forgiveness, again. We hear it from the pulpit and we say it to one another—you, y'all, all of us are forgiven. Alleluia. Amen. It feels like the worship equivalent of Revisionist History, our own generous orthodoxy.

Hans Frei originally said, "Orthodoxy without generosity leads to blindness; generosity without orthodoxy is shallow and empty." God has been so generous with us, why would we limit how the church can revise and rethink and retell its story? Tradition is important, yes, orthodoxy makes meaning for us, it is part of our history and foundation, but it's not all we are. Paul knew that, our reformer forebears knew it, and now as we stand at the precipice of a new era in our life together at Westminster we must know it, too. We are Revisionist Christians. Generous. Open. Adaptable. Transforming. People who examine what God is doing in the world and try to follow; as Chester Menger would say, "to seek and save that which is lost."

At Westminster I think we do understand what it means to be Revisionist Christians. This congregation is in constant motion, "keeping on," as Paul charges the Philippians. And we are guided by Paul's admonition to them, "whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is *just*... think about these things." *But* there will always be opportunities to revise. And we know that's true because *we believe in a God* who is active. As the prophet Jeremiah writes, "I know the plans I have for you, says the Lord." Yes, God has plans for us, and it is reassuring to hear in that often referred to verse. But do you remember what comes after it? God says, "when *you* call upon me, and pray to me... if you seek *me* with all your heart." Revisionist Christians seek out God's plans, they seek the lost, they seek to be

generous, and open to the future, even as they remember what they are revising from. To be sure, revising doesn't mean forgetting. It means appreciating, analyzing, lifting out that which was forgotten or left behind, and pulling it into the future in truth. We must revise with hope, as Menger said, not hiding our light under a bushel.

One of our good friends recently wrote about and shed light on her experience regarding last week's verdict in the trial following the death of Philando Castile. She is the Director for Diversity and Inclusion at one of the largest corporations in Minnesota. She is black, and her husband is white. Needless to say she lives and breathes the complex reality of being black every day, but she also does it for a living. And she was reflecting on people asking her the question, "how are you?" over the course of the last few days. She wrote about not being able or willing to answer that question. "'How are you,' she says, 'is an invasion. If I tell you how I am, what will you do with it? If all you will do is listen, comfort me, and tell me that you are sorry, then you don't deserve to know how I am. But if you will act, if you will *leverage your privilege*, if you will *give voice to the injustice*, and *resignation in your own circles that have rendered me and others speechless*, then maybe...maybe then words can form."

I wonder if you have read similar words this week and thought about how to do this; how to leverage your privilege and give voice to injustice. For me it begins, at least, by coming here, and confessing how far I have fallen short. And when I do that I'm reminded I can't do it alone- none of us can. We need this community to help us remember that being Christian means being Revisionist Christians. We gather here to tell the truth about what has been lost, and say that black lives matter. And then we make plans to dialogue and act, and stand in solidarity... And God promises to be with us in it, and we make promises in return, and week by week we come back, re-promising, revising, reforming, seeking again and again the plans God has for a future for all people... every one... I trust God is working to make

all things new. And, what is always true is that, thankfully, God is revising us. We are being made new, each and every one of us.

I can only hope to have the same kind of faith or joyful determination as Chester Menger or the Apostle Paul- the kind that is willing to change in such profound ways. But, what I do know is that this community has changed me. Westminster has revised me and my call. And that means now I, too, hold in the balance not only a love for us, but a deep love for the world outside. And I have a call to not only to be changed by you, but by whoever is beyond our doors, and whatever they need. We are God's people, and we exist to be revised; for our own sake, and for the sake of others. My hope and prayer is that it will be your call, too, to let the light that is lit within you shine.

Thanks be to God. Amen.

Pastoral Prayer ~10:00 am Worship

Kelley Jepsen

Let us pray:

Creator God: You have created us to be your servants and to serve as Christ to one another. We rejoice in the reminder that we are not alone in this journey. You are with us, just as we know that you are with us this morning, listening to our prayers.

Loving God: open our hearts and minds to your children outside of the church doors. On this Pride weekend, remind us to love, support, and advocate for our neighbors of all sexual orientations, gender identities and expressions. Help us to create safe spaces for all people to flourish into the human beings you call them to be.

God of Healing: we ask for your presence in our community. Be with those who are hurting: physically, emotionally, or spiritually. Those whose bodies or minds are not cooperating with their spirit, and those who are ill or facing surgeries. We pray especially for those who are experiencing loss this morning. Surround all who are grieving with your presence, O Lord, and remind them of your promise of salvation. Bring together their communities of love and support in this time of grief.

God of Righteousness, hear the cries of our community. Dispel the biases and racism that prevent us from living in harmony. We know your commandment to love our neighbor as ourself, yet we fall short. Grant us your grace as we continue to work towards justice and peace. Remind us of our shared creation, that we are all made in your image O God. That we are to be Christ to one another, lifting up and not tearing down.

The world cries to you, O God. Walk with the refugees as they are forced to flee from their homes and lives to dangerous and unknown lands. We pray especially for those in Africa, the Middle East and Turkey. Protect them on their journey toward new lives and safer communities.

God, Three in One, Holy Mystery. Be with us, we pray. Remind us to hold on to whatever is true. Whatever is honorable, just, pure, pleasing, commendable, and that which is worthy of praise. Help us keep on doing the things that we have learned and seen in you - daring to serve as Christ to one another. In all we do, help us to feel your peace, O God, wherever we go, serving you and praying the prayer which your Son taught us to pray, saying Our Father...