

Grace, Peace, and Mercy are yours through our Triune God, Amen.

When I asked Suella about any themes arising from you all as a congregation, any sort of focus or place of interest, she told me about “re-remembering.” This focus is not only remembering in terms of recollection, but also with the hyphen, “re-remembering.” In trying to pick a lectionary text for today, I was happy to find that our Hebrews passage has the word, and in its context, it is: “I will remember their sins and lawless deeds no more.”

As good, progressive, liberal people as some of us may identify, we don’t like phrases like “lawless deeds” and certainly not “sin.” I worshiped with a congregation for a while that replaced sin in every scripture and song that was used in the worship service. Their replacements sometimes fit, and sometimes felt unsettling. How, exactly, are we viewing sin?

And I know why this is, and many of you may know as well. I grew up in a very strict evangelical household where the lines between sin and purity were thick and either side was either black or white. Tithing sanctified you, withholding was sin. Skirts sanctified you, pants were sin. A marriage to an opposite sex partner with lots and lots of babies sanctified you, anything other than that was sin. In certain Christian circles today, there are televangelists, church leaders, and revivalists who will have no problem telling you what sins and lawless deeds you have committed by simply being born and turning oxygen into carbon dioxide.

Now, I’m not particularly interested in shaming anyone, drawing lines in the sand and pointing out sins. Nor am I particularly interested in removing the word sin from this sermon, or from my walk in the Christian life. What I am interested in, is the concept of remembering no more.

Speaking of uncomfortable words, the word “perfection” is used a lot. Many of us can admit that we are not a perfect people. In fact, we get into trouble when we think of ourselves as needing to operate in perfection. Some of this is rooted in Dutch Anabaptism and this concept of being the “pure, perfect church.” We must be without spot or wrinkle. How many times have we cried in a bathroom at work, cried while venting to a spiritual director, or found ourselves clenching our fists in anger when we didn’t do something right, when we messed up? That is not sin, it’s being human. But we can treat it as if somehow, we’re not deserving of love from ourselves and maybe from God.

None of us are without spot or wrinkle, but that is not sin, as I said. In the movie that I can’t actually recommend without giving huge caveats to cinematography and script, the Radicals, Michael and Margaretha Sattler become weavers after they flee the cloistered life. They discover that one differently dyed thread ruins the cloth. Well, that’d be debatable. Anyway, they make the huge leap and say so it is with the church, that the church needs to be without spot or wrinkle so that the whole cloth isn’t ruined.

This concept haunts us to this day. Perfection, perfection, perfection. Do it right the first time, and you don’t have to go back a second time. We tell ourselves that we are the “bad thread” in the cloth. If a dyed cloth is actually a good metaphor for our lives, we may feel balled up in the back of the closet, covered in coffee, baby spit-up, and pizza sauce.

And isn’t that our issue as Mennonites? We need to appear as if we live simply, shop local as much as we can, compost, have 2-3 children who are killing it in school or about to get married and behave themselves every moment of every day, and give to all the right organizations. This list is limited, and it could go on. Also, it’s very regional, as not all Mennonite communities are a monolith.

This is our Mennonite version of Instagram, right? Putting up all the pictures of the perfect life, vacations, children being cute, a shot of me in my new office because I just got promoted, a picture of a perfectly baked loaf of bread. It's easy to look at the surface. Talk about being without spot or wrinkle.

I'm reminded of a friend of mine who talked about a mental breakdown she had the night before a church potluck. Her children were having behavioral issues, she was having her own personal dark night of the soul, she was tired, she felt isolated...but the next morning there was a potluck. She forgot to make something. She had, she felt, to make something. She noted that her potlucks were full of nutritious food made from scratch or huge comfort food casseroles that remind folks of their childhood. Clearly these potlucks were special.

So, the morning of, she took a box of Kraft macaroni and cheese, made it, cut up some hot dogs, mixed it in, and brought it to the potluck. She said it was all she had energy for. She felt miserable. She wondered if people would judge her and think she should be making "good food" (whatever "good" means) for her children and for the church.

But by the end of the potluck, that huge pot of instant Mac n Cheese was all gone. No one turned up their nose at it, even though it stood out among the array of salads and corn casserole. Even as she explained it, I thought "Oh good, someone else does that when they run out of dinner options at home."

But Joanne, what does this have to do with sin and lawless deeds? Well, as I said, I'm not interested in making a checklist of sin and not sin. I do not think imperfection is sin in the slightest. I do know that I see sin as that which keeps us from God's perfect love and perfect grace and perfect mercy. We don't need to rob a bank or gossip, or God forbid

bring processed food to a potluck to keep us from love and mercy. We do it to ourselves. We spend time beating ourselves up when we think we're not good enough, not perfect enough, to win over Christ, who is perfect and somehow, we think, demands perfection. Our internalized need for perfection is skewed. That has been put on us since birth. It's the myth of perfection that keeps us from God, a myth we've been told as long as we've been alive.

We get down on ourselves when our children have trouble with the law. What might we have done differently? We punish ourselves for gaining weight because we're told that it's some sort of moral failing. We complain to our friends or to our partner and then say, "Sorry. I'm just so ungrateful." When struggling with a particularly pernicious bout of depression, I sought the help of my pastor. They said, "Oh, I don't know, practice gratefulness?" And don't get me wrong, gratefulness is good. Does it cure depression? Probably not. Does it keep us from needing to vent when we've been wronged or had our boundaries violated? Also, probably not. We're not perfect, and we've been told that that's bad. In fact, it's a huge tenant of white supremacy culture.

I want to speak a bit to trauma, and how the church has played into this vicious cycle of victim blaming. I want to be clear that I am speaking in the interest of survivors here, not perpetrators. Intentionally or unintentionally, the theology of the church has led people into blaming themselves for things that have happened to them. You weren't _____ enough. You didn't pray enough. You didn't have enough faith. You need to open yourself up to be delivered from that, it's been years. Maybe for some of you, this harkens back to your childhood and how you were taught. I know that's how I was taught. People leave the church over this. I get why people leave the church over this.

The sin of trauma is that it makes us feel like we are bad, and if this, this, or this, happened, if we were good enough, this wouldn't have

happened. That is not your sin. That is a system of sin lying to you because perpetrators, institutions, and even the church hasn't wanted to take responsibility for their actions, for their sin, spreading the lie that "bad things happen when we sin." These sins and lawless deeds are not yours, even though I know like they can feel like they are yours. We can internalize them into ours.

All the things I have named, the not living the Instagram life, the inability to be performatively granola-y, having trauma happen to you that is not your fault, that's not your sin. That has kept you from loving yourself and allowing yourself to be loved by God and has likely been forced onto you. Remembering sins and lawless deeds no more has nothing to do with a rap sheet against you that's being chucked out by God because lucky for you, Jesus! In fact, when I read this, I wish I could put quotes around sins and lawless deeds, but I'm not sure that's being faithful to the Greek. God is not interested in remembering the rap sheet you have made for yourself; thanks to the messaging you've been given. God is not interested in the list of wrongs you've been told make something wrong with you. It's not even an issue. The invitation here is that God sees the pain, the suffering, and it makes God weep. But these condemnations against you, however they were put there? Not even an issue when it comes to being perfected by love.

There is a lot here that could be said about justice. Justice would be to change these systems, to combat the messaging we've been programmed. Justice says that should never have happened in the first place. Justice wants the perpetrators held accountable. And hear me, I am so incredibly all about that. That's another sermon for another time. What I'm talking about today is the personal. The feelings of shame and guilt that hit the heart of who we are as people that keep us from fully experiencing God in their perfect love. We also need to pay attention to the healing and the "re-remembering" of persons who feel broken by what has been deemed sin. God remembers pain, not the lie

that you're bad, and God is seeking to "re-member" you. If you feel broken, imperfect, somehow stained or not worthy of love, I'm sorry the message of society sin got to you. God doesn't see it that way, and God doesn't love you regardless, or in spite of, God loves you as you are, completely in their image, and God has only love for that.

In this text, the perfection is pointed to Jesus, the model of our faith. Jesus' way of being in the ancient world paved the way for us to think about how we might model ourselves, in this day and age, after him. Being like Jesus does not mean "be Jesus." The scripture says, "By his offering there is perfection for all sanctified." And it is God's love and desire for connection with us, and our desire for connection with them, that has us sanctified. Now, we could get into a whole discussion on atonement, whether or not we are sanctified through blood, but again, that's probably another sermon. It is my thought that we are sanctified through grace and love.

The whole long arc of the Bible tells this story, in a huge, ginormous memoir, of who we really are and who God really is. Who we really are is loved. God is constantly pursuing God's people, pulling us back into their arms and those arms are there whether or not we are close by or far away. The Bible tells the story of roadblocks, sins that enter and tell us the lie that those loving arms aren't for us, can't be for us, shouldn't be for us. There are people who perpetrate violence against God's people that cause us feeling disconnected from God. How much longing there is in this memoir of people wanting to be closer to God. There is so much garbage about people not taking responsibility for their actions and causing harm. The number of tears shed in the Bible could fill an ocean.

Are we responsible for sinful actions that cause others to not be able to access that perfect love? Absolutely. Do we need accountability? Absolutely. Does that need to be named as sin? Also, absolutely. If you

are preventing all for entering into God's dream for us, if you are intentionally misunderstanding the message of the Gospel for your own gain, if you have made it about you and your ego and not about the people God loves, that's sin. If you tell people that they are an abomination, or that they need to be some kind of warped idea of perfect in order to be "in line" or "compliant" with "the rules" of the Bible, that is sin. There's a need for repentance and metanoia. And that is offered to you. When you take responsibility for the hurt you caused, for the roadblocks you created, and all the personal profit you've gained off the backs of others who have trusted you and your words and your deeds, when you seek to give reparations, and truly apologize (not a fake apology)? There is room for you at God's table.

Friends, we have been made perfect by the life and death of Christ and the love of God. This perfection is not worldly perfection, it's not an Instagram post, it's not a trip to the farmer's market, it's not in your donation to MCC, it's not in your electric car, and it's not in your successful children. All those things are good, but they do not make you perfect. That is a false, worldly idea of perfection. And your trauma, what happened to you? It by no means keeps you from perfection. Perfection comes when we allow ourselves to be fully loved by God, as we are. Perfection comes when we allow God to tell us, my child, you are perfect, and I love you.

These sins, these roadblocks, these walls that have been built between you and God? God sees them, God weeps, and yet, they are not an issue when it comes to you and God. They are worthy of being noted, but not remembered in some sort of way to be held over you. If those roadblocks and sins of others have broken you, have pulled you apart, have caused you pain, God seeks to "re-member" you. God seeks to put you back together again and hold you and tell you that you are made perfect by love.

You are loved, you are perfect, and you are remembered. Amen.