

*John Docherty, 2013-10-13*

### **Why I am still thankful**

When we decided to use the theme of “Why I am still ...”, that Rachel so ably launched last week, I wasn’t at all sure which approach I would take. The idea for the series is that we explore some aspects of life as Mennonite Christians that may seem a bit out of step in our postmodern world. We want to give voice to different parts of our MFM community, and highlight some of those elements of our faith journeys that are relevant to us as individuals. And we hope that this may help us find some insight into what grounds us as individuals, and, by extension, as a broader community.

The introductory part of the theme, the “Why I am still” part, contains a couple of assumptions. First, the word “why” implies that whoever is speaking has a rational, well thought out, explanation of whatever is to follow. We’ve asked ourselves the question “Why do I believe this?”, or “why do I do this?”, and we have an answer worth sharing.

A second assumption is contained in the word “still”. The implication here is that I have held this particular conviction or attitude for some time, and that it remains a part of who I am. The notion of “still” can also carry the subtle inference that one is “still” in this position in the face of evidence or prevailing attitudes that might call it into question, or that might beg a justification of some kind :

“Do you mean to tell me you *still* believe *that*?!”

There is, after all, a perfectly legitimate set of questions that any one of us might be asked to answer; questions coming from our friends, neighbours, family, workmates.

“Why do you still go to church?”

“Why do you still pray?”

“Why are you still Mennonite?”

“Why are you still committed to a peacemaking position?”

“Why do you still believe in God?”

Answering any one of those questions may require some time, or it may not.

If you're asked why you still go to church, you may have a very simple, uncomplicated response.

If you're asked why you're a pacifist, you *might* have a fairly uncomplicated response, but I suspect any ensuing discussion would demand a more fully fleshed-out explanation of your position.

If you're asked why you still believe in God, I suspect your answer, even if simple, will already be a little convoluted. And I'm willing to bet that if someone has been bold enough to put the question to you, they're not going to be satisfied with a pat answer.

The questions themselves are quite legitimate. We *should* be able to explain why we do what we do, why we think the way we do, why we believe what we do.

But we don't always have clear answers for some of these kinds of questions.

Mel mentioned last week that I hadn't yet declared myself on which "Why I am still ..." theme I'd be choosing. Everybody laughed. Let me just state that not everything I do has a comical side. Though that may not be immediately obvious, given some of my antics.

The fact that I hadn't yet declared myself was because I still wasn't sure where I wanted to go with this whole thing. I had any number of options open to me, and I was still batting them around in my head.

I was already scheduled to speak today, this Thanksgiving Sunday, so the obvious choice - the one I eventually took - was to use this opportunity to speak to "Why I am still thankful."

Will it surprise anyone to hear that I've struggled with this as a topic as well?

It's not that I've struggled with the idea of thankfulness, or that I'm not sure I'm thankful. I *am* thankful. I have very much to be thankful *for*.

One possible way of approaching this notion of thankfulness in an attempt to answer "Why I am still thankful" could be to simply list all those things I'm

thankful for. And we do tend to do that at Thanksgiving – we go around the table and ask everyone to name something they're thankful for.

In my case the list is an easy one :

Family, friends, meaningful work, reasonably good health, ruggedly handsome good looks, etc.

But, of course, any such list can sometimes be too easily offset by things for which I am *not* particularly thankful:

Family, friends, work, ...

No, seriously ...

I'm not particularly thankful to have family members who have died at far too young an age; that there are things out of my control that have affected my work; that I have my own set of aches and pains that come with age; that not everyone recognizes my ruggedly handsome good looks for what they are; that I *am* a little on the short side, etc.

And that's just *me* and *my* balance sheet of personal assets and liabilities. All of us have our own list of positives and negatives.

Even if the list of things I'm thankful for far outweighs the things I'm *not* thankful for, I may still be left with something of a dilemma.

If, for example, my list of positive things includes things that have been to my advantage in my life, but that I really can't take any credit for, things like :

I'm white.

I'm male.

I've been able to go to school, and that to a fairly advanced level.

I grew up at a time and in a place where the fact that I am straight was definitely to my advantage.

I live in a time and a place where I can have access to adequate health care, regardless of my ability to pay for it.

I do have reasonably good health, and have enjoyed a life free of the limitations of physical or mental disabilities.

I have been spared the horrors of war, famine, disaster.

I have those ruggedly handsome good looks I referred to earlier.

If I list all of those ‘positives’, I have to ask myself : “What of those who, through no fault of their own, cannot list these as things to be thankful for? Or, worse, those for whom that inability to claim any one of these items has been a liability in their lives?”

Those non-whites who have suffered discrimination because of their colour?

Women who have been relegated to second-class status because of their sex?

Children who can’t go to school, or who can’t continue past a very basic level?

People whose sexual orientation has forced them into closets, or brought alienation or harassment or worse?

People who don’t have access to adequate health care?

People who are limited by physical or mental disabilities, regardless of what other abilities they may have?

People who have *not* been spared the horrors of war, famine, disaster?

People who don’t have ruggedly handsome good looks, and who are shunned for their disfigurement, their ugliness, their socially uncomfortable presence?

If I allow myself to ask myself these questions, then I am forced to also ask myself : “Why *am* I still thankful? I haven’t done anything to merit any of this. Why me, and not them?”

And the more disturbing question behind this one, is “Why am I still thankful to God ... for something that seems so patently unfair?”

If my thankfulness is not just a simple sigh of relief that I have somehow lucked out on a number of fronts, but rather a sigh of thanks to the One responsible for my good fortune, how do I reconcile my happiness with the unhappiness of others?

And specifically, how do I reconcile my happiness if it sometimes comes at the cost of someone else's happiness?

Is it fair of me to be thankful for my good health while my friend Hugh dies of illness at an early age, leaving behind his wife and young children?

Is it fair of me to be thankful that I didn't break my ankle slipping on a patch of ice when my own daughter *did* break *her* ankle?

Is it fair of me to be thankful that I have been relatively privileged throughout my life when others haven't?

Is it fair of me to be thankful that I've been spared the horrors of man's inhumanity to man, when I know so many people who haven't been spared?

Is it fair?

No, I suppose by almost any measure it's not fair. There ought to be some kind of cosmic Judge who metes out fairness and justice in equal portions. Who makes sure that we all get our fair share of happiness and good fortune. Who examines our situation from all angles and distributes what we need to navigate this life. Who protects us when we need protection, and who sees to it that we don't get anything more thrown at us than we can handle.

Of course, that's God's job description – isn't it? To help us through this life, helping when help is needed, maybe nudging gently when some direction is unclear, buffering the more painful parts of life.

Isn't God the one to whom we give thanks when things go well, after all? Isn't God the one who gets the credit? Who, then, gets the blame when things *don't* go well?

Of course, sometimes we can blame ourselves for stupid decisions with predictable outcomes. If I choose to lie out on a sunny beach for hours on end, I know from experience what to expect. Actually, in my case, I only have to lie on that sunny beach for minutes on end before I start to look like I've been grilled on a BBQ.

Sometimes we can legitimately blame others for what happens to us.

But sometimes the ball falls squarely in God's court.

We can't blame ourselves or others for our accidents of birth. We can't always accept responsibility for some illness or accidents. We're not always to blame when tragedy hits.

Is God sometimes to blame for "allowing" things to happen to us? Is "blame" the right word to use here? Is God responsible for everything that happens to us, and therefore responsible, not only for the positive things, but also for the negative things – the pain and suffering we sometimes experience.

Of course we're fond of saying that this all-powerful, all-loving, all-knowing, all-present God moves in mysterious ways. It's a bit of a paraphrase of Romans 8:28 – "...all things work together for good for those who love God ..."

I've never really liked that statement about God moving in mysterious ways, because it sounds a little bit like a clichéd cop-out. It can sound a little like a willful blindness to what may seem like a common-sense appreciation of reality : from our human perspective, some things are simply not fair, and no self-respecting, all-powerful, all-loving God would allow them to happen. Certainly no God with *my* set of values would allow them to happen.

And yet, though I don't care for the phrase about mysterious ways itself, I can't argue with the logic of it. Neither can I argue against the Romans promise that all things work for the good. We can't be expected to understand why some things happen, or what the ultimate result of it all will be. We have only, at best, a limited sense of what constitutes the ultimate good, and how our present circumstances are part of God's working things out.

And so, as people of faith, we need to acknowledge that God *is* in control. And we need to trust that things are playing out as they should, as hard and as incomprehensible as that might be.

In preparing for this message, I found it interesting to discover that the word translated in the OT as "thanks", can be interchangeably translated as "praise", and that either translation should carry the nuance of "to confess", or "to acknowledge".

In other words, when the psalmist, for example, says something like "I will tell of your name to my brothers and sisters; in the midst of the congregation I will praise

you” (Psalm 22:22), that could be translated as something like “... in the midst of the congregation I will acknowledge you, I will give you your due, I will recognize you for who you are and what you have done ...”

So ... are we expected to be happy about everything that happens to us? I don't think so. Even Jesus wasn't happy at the prospect of being flogged, spit on, nailed to a cross, jabbed in the side with a lance. We're told that in the garden of Gethsemane he prayed that if there were any other way of fulfilling his mission he was open to suggestions. He was so anguished about what was about to happen that he sweat blood. This is not a picture of a man calmly accepting his lot because “God works in mysterious ways.” This is a picture of a man suffering, struggling, and ultimately crying out on the cross “My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?”

It's a very passionate cry. A very human cry.

But it's also a cry that echoes the first lines of psalm 22

<sup>1</sup> My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Why are you so far from helping me, from the words of my groaning?

<sup>2</sup> O my God, I cry by day, but you do not answer; and by night, but find no rest.

<sup>3</sup> Yet you are holy, enthroned on the praises of Israel.

<sup>4</sup> In you our ancestors trusted; they trusted, and you delivered them.

<sup>5</sup> To you they cried, and were saved; in you they trusted, and were not put to shame.

<sup>6</sup> But I am a worm, and not human; scorned by others, and despised by the people.

<sup>7</sup> All who see me mock at me; they make mouths at me, they shake their heads;

<sup>8</sup> ‘Commit your cause to the Lord; let him deliver - let him rescue the one in whom he delights!’

<sup>9</sup> Yet it was you who took me from the womb; you kept me safe on my mother's breast.

<sup>10</sup> On you I was cast from my birth, and since my mother bore me you have been my God.

<sup>11</sup> Do not be far from me, for trouble is near and there is no one to help.

<sup>12</sup> Many bulls encircle me, strong bulls of Bashan surround me;

<sup>13</sup> they open wide their mouths at me, like a ravening and roaring lion.

<sup>14</sup> I am poured out like water, and all my bones are out of joint; my heart is like wax; it is melted within my breast;

<sup>15</sup> my mouth is dried up like a potsherd, and my tongue sticks to my jaws; you lay

me in the dust of death.

<sup>16</sup> For dogs are all around me; a company of evildoers encircles me. My hands and feet have shrivelled;

<sup>17</sup> I can count all my bones. They stare and gloat over me;

<sup>18</sup> they divide my clothes among themselves, and for my clothing they cast lots.

<sup>19</sup> But you, O Lord, do not be far away! O my help, come quickly to my aid!

<sup>20</sup> Deliver my soul from the sword, my life from the power of the dog!

<sup>21</sup> Save me from the mouth of the lion! From the horns of the wild oxen you have rescued me.

<sup>22</sup> I will tell of your name to my brothers and sisters; in the midst of the congregation I will praise you:

<sup>23</sup> You who fear the Lord, praise him! All you offspring of Jacob, glorify him; stand in awe of him, all you offspring of Israel!

<sup>24</sup> For he did not despise or abhor the affliction of the afflicted; he did not hide his face from me, but heard when I cried to him.

<sup>25</sup> From you comes my praise in the great congregation; my vows I will pay before those who fear him.

<sup>26</sup> The poor shall eat and be satisfied; those who seek him shall praise the Lord. May your hearts live for ever!

<sup>27</sup> All the ends of the earth shall remember and turn to the Lord; and all the families of the nations shall worship before him.

<sup>28</sup> For dominion belongs to the Lord, and he rules over the nations.

<sup>29</sup> To him, indeed, shall all who sleep in the earth bow down; before him shall bow all who go down to the dust, and I shall live for him.

<sup>30</sup> Posterity will serve him; future generations will be told about the Lord,

<sup>31</sup> and proclaim his deliverance to a people yet unborn, saying that he has done it.

What has started as a cry of despair, ends as a shout of praise.

When I was in my 3<sup>rd</sup> or 4<sup>th</sup> year of my Bachelor's degree, I was invited to come on 100 Huntley Street. A friend of ours was working for them at the time, and they were toying with the idea of having people come on who would act as biblical characters and be interviewed in that role. I was approached as a kind of guinea pig to test the idea. The idea was that I would come on in costume and David Mainse would interview me as if I were King David.

I did the interview. Let me tell you right away that they never tried it with anybody else.

I don't remember much of that interview, but I do remember that Mainse asked me something like "When you wrote Psalm 22, did you have a vision of Jesus on the cross?"

Well, as a fairly young Christian, with only a limited familiarity with the Bible at that point, my mind was racing.

"Psalm 22 ... psalm 22 – which one's that? Is it 'The Lord's my Shepherd' one? No, that's 23. Is it the one about my help coming from the hills? No, that's 121. Which one is it??"

I do remember giving him some sort of, I hoped, vague enough answer about the inspiration of the Holy Spirit to satisfy him and hide my ignorance. I momentarily considered laughing and telling him I wasn't about to sort out all the church's questions about divine inspiration and prophecy – that there had to be *some* mystery to the whole thing.

I wish I'd been sure about the psalm. And I wish I'd had the life experience then that I've since acquired. I wish I'd been asked that question after having worked with refugees for some 24 years.

I might have answered that while that psalm might well have been a peek at what was in store for Jesus (and it certainly seems to be prophetic), it is also a cry of the heart from a man in his own place of suffering, and it doesn't need to be prophetic to be worth having.

Just as Jesus' cry from the cross is his own cry of the heart from a man in *his* own place of suffering.

"My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"

So ... why am I still thankful?

Why do I still assume that God is somehow responsible for the things in my life, and why am I thankful for *that*?

Let me confess that some of my thankfulness really is nothing more than a sigh of relief that I've avoided truly serious pain and loss. It's not so much a grateful

acknowledgement of God's blessing as it is a wiping of the brow and a muttering under my breath of "whew ... that was close ..."

But some of it ... some of it ... really is a heartfelt gratitude that God is there. That God is in control. That, whether I understand how it works or not, God cares about me, and about those around me.

Whatever else Jesus' death on the cross may mean in theological terms, in terms of salvation and atonement, that cry from the cross is part of what allows me to remain thankful today.

I'm grateful that, like the psalmist, and like Jesus, I am free to sometimes cry out "My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?"

But I am also free, like the psalmist, to trust that, in spite of what might be happening around me, in spite of apparent evidence to the contrary, God has *not* abandoned me.

And God has not abandoned those around me who are in their own place of suffering.