

Formed and Transformed

NOTE: This was the storytelling of the morning. The sermon builds on this.

As I was sorting through the files in my desk, I ran across a folder containing the sheets of paper we used 8 years ago as part of our Twelve Scriptures project. The goal was to identify 12 scriptures important in worship and in the life of Salina Mennonite Church.

At the beginning of 2015, we identified, read, and discussed verses and stories that have influenced us personally and as a congregation. The initial list included more than 100 suggestions. At the end of March, we narrowed the list to 19 scriptures. The assignment during the next few weeks was to reflect on them and suggest any additions. We then added 3 more to the list bringing the total number of options to 22.

During our worship service April 12, we used colored dots to indicate our top 3 choices. We kept these 5 questions in mind throughout the process: (1) What scriptures are written on the heart of Salina Mennonite Church? (2) Which ones have been important in worship and in the life of the congregation? (3) Which ones have shaped or guided the congregation? (4) Which scriptures describe us? (5) Which scriptures challenge us?

I tallied the results using a weighted system of points based on the color of dots. We finalized our list on the first Sunday of August. If you would compare the 12 passages that received the most points with our final list, you would notice that one the top passages – Hebrews 13:1-2 – dropped off the list and an alternate from near the bottom of the list – Colossians 3:17 – leapt onto the list. During our discussion, we decided if we expanded the Colossians passage, it would encompass the theme of the Hebrews passage plus include other themes we considered important.

Let's review the top 12 scriptures, remembering why we chose each one:

- ❖ **Numbers 6:24-26 – The Lord bless you and keep you** – We need to remember that God blesses us. We want to others to feel blessed as well.
- ❖ **Deuteronomy 6:4-9 – The great commandment** – We acknowledge that God is Lord of their lives. We want to love God with all that we are. We try to incorporate these things into every area of our lives. (There was some question about keeping this one on the list since it reappears in another one on the list. We kept it because it's the foundation of the Old Testament story. Using both passages demonstrates how the Old and New Testaments are tied together.)
- ❖ **Psalms 23 – The Lord is my shepherd** – We draw comfort and strength from the knowledge that God loves and cares for everyone as a shepherd cares for his sheep
- ❖ **Psalms 100 – Make a joyful noise to the Lord** – We worship God and give God thanks and praise. We gather together to do this.
- ❖ **Micah 6:6-8 – What God requires** – Worship must be lived out through action. God asks us to do justice, love kindness, and walk with God.

The next three come from the Sermon on the Mount. We considered choosing all of Matthew 5-7 as one passage but decided to highlight 3 passages.

- ❖ **Matthew 5:1-12 – The Beatitudes** – God calls us to work for right relationships and restorative justice.
- ❖ **Matthew 6:9-13 – The Lord's Prayer** – This prayer has been part of our worship since the congregation began meeting together. It reminds us to honor God, seek God's will and help it to happen, be thankful for God's provision, forgive and be forgiven, rely on God, and join in God's activities of grace and deliverance.
- ❖ **Matthew 7:1-5 – Do not judge** – We must work more on improving themselves than on judging and criticizing others.

The next one is also from Matthew. We debated whether to use this one or a similar passage from Mar.

- ❖ **Matthew 22:34-40 – The two greatest commandments** – Jesus quoted from Deuteronomy as he taught his followers to not only love God with all their being, but also love their neighbor as themselves. He taught them to recognize that all the teachings of the entire Bible, the history, the law, the prophets, the gospels, the letters, can be summarized in these two commandments.
- ❖ **1 Corinthians 12 – One body with many members** – We want to keep in mind that each one of us has gifts to offer to the church and to the world. We all lack something that someone else has. We need to honor each other and work together.
- ❖ **Colossians 3:1-17 – Do everything in the name of Jesus** – We want to set our minds on godly things and rid our lives of ungodly things. We want to practice compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, patience, forgiveness, peace, thankfulness, and above all, love. We want to dwell in the Word of God, teach each other, and worship together. We want to do everything in the name of Christ.
- ❖ **James 2:14-26 – Faith without works is dead** – We must live out our faith with our actions.

In 2015, we decided that these scriptures provide a backdrop for how we are being and what we are doing as congregation. They are important in worship and in the life of the congregation. They shape, guide, and challenge us. They form and transform us. We hoped they would describe us.

How have we done? I don't think we can say we've completely lived up to any of them. But, we continue to work on them. I wonder If we repeated the process now, would we end up with the same list? I wonder If you listed scriptures that are important for you personally, what would it include? My list includes some of the ones we chose for our congregation. What scriptures have formed and transformed you?

NOTE: This is the sermon.

A few days ago, people gathered at Thanksgiving tables around the nation. For many, this was with family. For others, with friends. For some, it was an intimate group of two or three. They gathered to eat and to fellowship – some as part of a well-loved tradition, others out of a sense of obligation. I know that there were also some who chose not to or were unable to participate in this annual celebration for a variety of reasons.

At best, these gatherings were a time of renewing and strengthening relationships, enjoying each other's company, and sharing good food – a feeding of the heart and mind as well as the body. At worst, these gatherings highlighted differences and strained relationships – a draining of energy and soul. After these gatherings, some left thinking “I can't wait to do this again” while others were wondering “Why do we keep doing this?”

I wonder what you think after a time of worship. Are you eager to do it again? Or do you wonder why you keep doing it? Just as there are many ways to celebrate a holiday, there are many ways to worship – personal or corporate, larger or smaller groups, different traditions and, in a way, different menus.

Typically, our worship on Sunday morning includes gathering, singing, praying, sharing, listening, speaking, telling stories, reading the word, offering, and blessing. We do these with the expectation and hope that they will form and transform our lives. We plan the elements of formation – the elements of the service we can control – and hope that this formation prepares us and enables us to be ready for transformation – the “aha” moments, the breakthroughs (large or small) we can't control.

The apostle Paul wrote about this in his letter to the churches in Rome. *I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, on the basis of God's mercy, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your reasonable act of worship. Do not be conformed to this age, but be transformed by the renewing of the mind, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect.*¹

¹ Romans 12:1-2, *New Revised Standard Version Updated Edition*

Being formed is learning how to be a follower of Christ. Formation comes through the everyday activities involved in becoming and being a Christian. We have a fair amount of control over how and when this happens. What we do makes a difference in who we are. What we read, watch, listen to, and sing. Who we are with. Where we are. Formation is an ongoing process.

Paul wrote about this in Colossians 3.² “Keep your orientation clear” is his advice. Keep seeking the things that are above. Keep setting your minds on things that are above. This doesn’t mean that followers of Jesus are to live with their heads in the clouds, thinking about heaven all the time. It does mean they are to follow the way of Christ and the things of God when setting the values, priorities, and direction for living in the here and now.”

Following God’s ways involves ridding yourself of those things that hinder healthy relationships with God, with others and within yourself. Vices on Paul’s list include illicit sex, impure actions, lustfulness, evil desire, greed, unrestrained rage, malice, abusive language, and dishonesty.

Following God’s ways involves strengthening those things that build healthy relationships with God, with others and within yourself. Virtues on Paul’s list include compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, patience, and – above all – love. All of these virtues are characteristics of God, and the primary characteristic of God is love. Love is what keeps the fellowship from flying apart. Love makes it possible for us to put up with one another, make allowances for each other’s faults. and forgive each other.

Following God’s ways involves forming a new community – one in which racial, social, and cultural barriers are broken down. All followers of Christ are part of the new community. All are chosen, holy, and beloved.

Worship forms us as the people of God. Worship also transforms us. Transformation happens when we experience a moment in which things fit together in a new way. Transformation comes through the radical breaks and surprising breakthroughs that happen as we follow Jesus. We have very little, if any, control over how and when this happens. Worship transforms us as the Spirit guides and leads us into new ways of thinking and behaving.

We don’t leave worship the same as when we came. Every planned element has the power to change us. Every unplanned working of the Spirit has the power to change us.

This is why we gather to worship – to respond to a loving God, to be shaped by scripture and song, to be united as a community, to be formed as followers of Jesus, and to be transformed by the Spirit. As we worship, we see God’s vision for the world more clearly and prepare to participate in it.

The goals of worship are summarized in Colossians 3:15-17. These verses talk about the internal life and experience of the congregation; the interaction of instruction, mutual care, and worship; and the scattered experience of the church as shaped by the way of Jesus – the one whose name Christians bear.

The peace of Christ must control your hearts—

a peace into which you were called in one body.

And be thankful people.

The word of Christ must live in you richly.

Teach and warn each other with all wisdom

by singing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs.

Sing to God with gratitude in your hearts.

Whatever you do, whether in speech or action,

do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus

and give thanks to God the Father through him.³

May it be so with us. Amen.

² This section draws from Ernest D. Martin, *Colossians & Philemon, Believers Church Bible Commentary*, Herald Press, 1993, pp. 133-180.

³ Colossians 3:15-17, *Common English Bible*