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Interview

## Daniel Kaiser: “Try to be an authentic Christian”

Daniel Kaiser, head of the cultural section of the north-German public radio station NDR 90.3, received the 2021 Menno Simons Sermon Prize from the Center of Peace Church Theology (University of Hamburg).

Image

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*His award-winning sermon was delivered on Palm Sunday, 5 April 2020, in the service of the Mennonite Church Hamburg-Altona, during the time of the first COVID-19 lockdown. Entitled "The Anointing in Bethany," the sermon retells the incident in which a woman enters the "men's circle" of the disciples and anoints Jesus with expensive oil. Scandalous, because the proceeds from the sale of this oil could have helped many poor people. Kaiser places this story in the context of the coronavirus pandemic.*

**A year later, as we listen to your award-winning sermon again, have your answers to the questions: “What is needed here? Who needs what” changed?**

**Kaiser:** In Germany the coronavirus situation is still a hardship for many people. We are dealing with a lot of restrictions. People die. We are struggling with progress in vaccination. And as I write this, I must stay inside the house, because we have a curfew after 9 pm, which is something we never had before in Hamburg since World War II. The resistance against those rules is growing.

When I delivered the sermon, the situation of course was different. The virus was fresh. People were afraid. They asked: What is the right thing to do? Should we join the Swedish way, live our lives and risk the lives of the older people? Isn't the economy more important than very old people who probably would have died sooner or later? What's with the people who suffer from these circumstances? What can we do?

I understood the story of the anointing of Jesus as a story showing we should care for each other—and not look at the cost. The anointing is what Jesus needed in that moment. It was the

only good thing that happened to him in those days. So the story works as an empowerment for us: Where is our bottle we can crack open in order to help someone?

The situation might be different today. But the impulse for doing the things that are necessary now is still right. The core of the sermon still works. The sound, or the references from daily life, I might describe differently today, of course.

### **Were you surprised to receive the Menno Simons Sermon Prize? What does it mean to you and your church?**

**Kaiser:** The prize was a really huge surprise. I didn't submit my sermon to the jury, so the decision came completely out of the blue for me.

I studied Protestant theology 25 years ago, because I wanted to become a Lutheran pastor. But because the church in North Germany didn't have enough free positions at that time, they urged the students to think about alternatives. So I did. I started a career in German radio. Today I am cultural editor in the public radio NDR in Hamburg and one of the hosts of the popular literature podcast "eat.READ.sleep." But I have always had a "preaching heart" and accept all invitations from congregations. I am a huge fan of Luther's concept of "Priestertum aller Gläubigen" (priesthood of all believers). You needn't be a pastor or a priest to preach. Sometimes people understand sermons by laypeople maybe as even more authentic. I think: If you want to tell about God's love, just do it. So I feel that this is also a prize for all the laypeople in the church: You can do it. You have a mission to tell the Gospel, too. Just do it.

### **What is your advice to journalists who are also Christians?**

**Kaiser:** My job is based in a rather secular environment. I remember a colleague's surprised look when he noticed a Bible on my desk. In my radio programs, I never preach. When I report about Christian topics or issues from the world of faith, it is my top priority to be neutral. But when I am asked to prepare a commentary, for example, about the situation of the homeless people in Hamburg in wintertime or about the fact that Angela Merkel recently openly apologized for a mistake she made in the fight against the pandemic, I definitely try to pronounce a Christian position. That is how I understand Martin Luther's thoughts about vocation: Be a Christian in your job! Do Christian things! Let people feel and understand the priorities that faith has given you!

When my radio station, NDR, started to stream my Sunday services in the time of the coronavirus, it was highly unusual that an editor of public radio was preaching every Sunday, because the NDR provides airtime for churches but usually never sends preachers of its own. And I understood this as a sign of deep trust that I gained the years before. That's my advice: Try to be an authentic Christian your colleagues and clients can trust.

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