

Sermons at First Church

A Ministry of the Word
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First Presbyterian Church
Clarksburg, WV

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John 3:1-21

Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him. (John 3:17 N.R.S.V.)

Not to Condemn the World But to Save It

I am a child of God. I believe in Jesus Christ as my Lord and Savior. And I believe he has the power to change my life and your life.

Nicodemus was a pharisee, a respected teacher of the law, an influential member of society. He comes to Jesus in the dark of the night. For some reason he didn't want to be seen with Jesus. Maybe he was one of those teachers who publically pretend to know everything. Maybe he was embarrassed to admit that there was something he could still learn. We all know a teacher to two like that. Oh, not you, and not me either, but those other people.

It is rather ironic that Nicodemus comes to Jesus in the darkness so that he can be enlightened. Nicodemus was not really a bad sort. He at least gets points for coming to Jesus. Yet, if Nicodemus was looking for a simple rational explanation, he didn't get it.

Nicodemus asks about the kingdom of God and who Jesus is. Jesus answers seemingly in riddles. First he says that a person cannot enter the kingdom of heaven without being born again, or born from above. When Nicodemus protests that a person cannot be born twice, Jesus says the Spirit of God is like the wind. You can't see the wind, but you know it is there from the effect that it has on the trees.

Poor Nicodemus stammers, "How can these things be?" So Jesus reaches back in the history of Israel and talks about a mysterious thing that happened to Israelites when they journeyed through the wilderness. Several of them had been bitten by poisonous snakes. Some had even died. God had Moses make a bronze serpent and put it on a pole. Whenever someone who had been bitten by a snake looked upon the bronze serpent, he or she would be healed. (Numbers 21:4-9)

Then Jesus adds, that is the way it is with me. I too will be lifted up and all who look on me will have eternal life. Scripture does not record what Nicodemus said at that point, but I'm quite sure he was totally confused. Jesus might as well have said, "Ice cream doesn't have bones, or submarines don't use screen doors."

Often we modern Christians get caught in the same trap as Nicodemus. We want to know how Jesus' death on the cross nearly 2,000 years ago could work to forgive our sins and grant us eternal life. The only answer that we can give is that it is a mystery. We don't know, how it works, only that it does.

Somehow in the grace of God the terrible serpent which was the very symbol of evil and death when lifted up became the means of healing and life. Somehow the cruel and terrible instrument of execution, the cross, the very symbol of shame and guilt, pain and death becomes, by the grace of God, the instrument of our salvation.

Some things can't be explained they can only be experienced. In the words of the old hymn, "You ask me how I know he lives. He lives within my heart."

Every once in a while God reminds me that my task as a preacher is not to explain Jesus Christ so that he makes sense to people, but rather to lead us all in worshipping Christ. My hope today is not that you will leave here knowing more about Christ, but that you will leave here having experienced Christ for yourself.

Our text for today contains one of the most loved and well known of Bible verses. John 3:16, "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life."

That verse is followed by another very powerful verse, one that is too often ignored. "Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him."

It is a sad thing that many unchurched people believe that the purpose of the Christian Church is to judge and condemn people. People have heard too many times some self-righteous person say, "I'm all right, you are going to hell." There are times when the church has acted that way, but that is not our true calling. Christ came not to condemn the world but to save it.

It is worth noting that the longest conversation that the Bible records between Jesus and any other single person is when he is talking to the Samaritan woman in John chapter 4. In every society there are hot button issues. Today adultery is less a hot button issue than say homosexual behavior. But in Bible times this woman was a complete outcast. She was first of all a Samaritan, and the Jews had nothing to do with the Samaritans - strike one. She was a woman, and Jewish males did not talk to strange women in the street- strike two. She was adulterous, something that in many places would have resulted in her being stoned to death. In the eyes of that society she had three strike against her, there is no way Jesus should have talked to her. Yet that is what he did.

Jesus came not to condemn the world but to save it.

We are not to condemn others, and we are not to condemn ourselves either. We are often our

own worst enemy in this regard. Pastor Lee Stobel tells about doing a baptism service. He had asked the people who were being baptized that day to write down their sin on a piece of paper, bring that paper forward and pin it on the cross in the front of the church, then they were to come to the pastor and be baptized.

Pastor Strobel shares a letter that he received later from a woman who had been baptized that day. She wrote: "I remember my fear. In fact, it was the most fear I remember in my life. I wrote as tiny as I could on that piece of paper the word abortion. I was so scared someone would open the paper and read it and find out it was me. I wanted to get up and walk out of the church during the service, the guilt and fear were that strong."

She continued, "When my turn came, I walked toward the cross, and I pinned the paper there. I was directed to a pastor to be baptized. He looked me straight in the eyes, and I thought for sure that he was going to read this terrible secret I kept from everybody for so long. But instead, I felt like God was telling me, I love you. It's okay. You've been forgiven. I felt so much love for me, a terrible sinner. It the first time I ever really felt forgiveness and unconditional love. It was unbelievable, indescribable." (Dynamic Preaching * January, February, March 2015, pg. 67)

We are often our own harshest critic. So many of us go around burdened down with shame. We are afraid to let anyone know the real us. We fear rejection and condemnation. As one wise person put it, there is a lot at stake here.

He said, "I am afraid to tell you who I really am, because, if I tell you who I really am, you may not like who I am, and it's all that I have." (Dynamic Preaching pg. 68)

Some of you may be struggling with just this issue this morning. Hear the good news. God already knows the real you, and he loves you just as you are. He sent Jesus, not to judge you or condemn you, but to die for you. Believe it. It is true.

Let me push this then to the next step. When we truly accept the unconditional love of God for ourselves. We are able to see others in a new life. When we truly understand that we are forgiven and loved, God helps us to forgive and love others.

Pastor Ken Ramsey tells a wonderful story about a friend of his named Joel. Joel was a classmate of Ken's in seminary. Now both Ken and Joel were athletics and often ran in the park together. Joel was not only athletic, he was big. He had played football at his undergraduate school.

Ken was not a big guy, but he and Joel enjoyed jogging together in the park. One day as they were out running around the small lake in the park, Ken noticed that Joel was smiling. "What are you smiling about?," Ken asked.

Joel pointed to a little girl fishing with her dad. She was imitating every move the dad made. If he cast, she cast. If he fixed his hat, she fixed her hat. If he sat down, she sat down. "There is just something about a child imitating her father that makes my heart smile," Joel said.

Ken and Joel shared a class together in which they were in the same ministry assessment group. Now it just so happened that there was a particular individual in that group that seemed to have taken a instant to Joel. The students were tasked with helping to evaluate each other in positive encouraging ways. However, this one guy took every opportunity to belittle Joel's efforts. He was rude. He was obnoxious. He seemed determined to make Joel's life miserable.

One day things reached a boiling point and harsh words were exchanged. As they left the group, Joel growled, "That guy has pushed me too far. He makes me want to run him over like I used to do on the football field!"

Remember Joel was a big guy. "The veins in his thick neck were bulging," says Ken, "and it was enough to even make me shake in my shoes. I would not want to be on the receiving end of anything from him."

A couple of days passed and it was almost time for the next ministry assessment meeting. Everyone was wondering what was going to happen between Joel and his adversary. As they were jogging through the park, Ken asked Joel, "So have you decided how you are going to deal with that guy?"

"Yes, I have," Joel replied. There was a pause and Ken waited for him to continue.

"I have decided," Joel paused again . . . , "to forgive him."

Ken smiled.

"What are you smiling at?" Joel asked.

Ken replied, "There's just something about a child imitating his father that makes my heart smile."

Christ came into the world not to condemn us but to forgive us, to save us. These are powerful words, life changing words, wonderful words. When we treat ourselves and others the way Christ would do, it makes the heart of God smiles.

Amen.