

Sermon Text: John 3:1-18

I was reminded this week of a story of a mother, who had an eight-year-old boy, who just did not talk. She took him to specialist after specialist, and the boy was intelligent and he was healthy, and the doctors said, “We can’t find anything wrong with him. We don’t understand.” Finally, one of the specialists said, “Why don’t you take him to church?” The mother said, “Well, we don’t go to church that much, but I’ll try anything.” She took the boy to church. Off to church they went, and when the organist began to play the prelude, the boy turned to his mother and said, “Mom, I have lots of things to say to you.” The mother was stunned. She phoned the doctor and said, “How did you know that going to church was going to help?” The doctor said, “That’s easy. Everyone talks during the prelude.”

Some even talk during the sermon. Now, according to the publication from the annual conference this last week, for one more year, I will be your preacher. Now, for some of you that brings a smile. For some of you that brings a frown, and for others a yawn of indifference. No one has ever asked me how I feel. You know I work and sweat and pray and research and often I do actually think of particular individuals and particular Scripture sermon, and I hope with my meager efforts and God’s Holy Spirit I can meet people’s needs. Then, I see them counting how many boards there are in the ceiling of this sanctuary. Ed Munnerlyn said he knows because he’s done it. I see others who are fascinated by their watches, and I see yet a third category who breathe loudly, huhhhh, as if sermons, no matter how feverishly birthed, are simply commercials for God to be endured and nothing more.

Someone once wrote a letter to the great evangelist Billy Sunday, and the letter was, “Dear Sir, I noticed that preachers spend a great deal of time on their sermons and a great deal of time preparing them. I have been to church regularly for 30 years, during that time I estimate that I have heard about 3,000 sermons, but to my consternation, I have discovered that I cannot remember a single one of them. I wonder if maybe a preacher’s time might be better spent doing something else. Now, the board counters and the watch starers and the loud breathers might amen this and ask for a benediction, but Billy Sunday had a good reply. He said, “My Dear Sir, I have been married for about 30 years, and during that time I have eaten more than 30,000 meals, most of which were prepared by my wife, and suddenly I have discovered that I can’t precisely remember the menu of a single meal, and yet I received nourishment from every single one of them. I have the distinct impression that without them I would have starved to death a long time ago.”

Why did Jesus bother preaching and teaching and standing firm in the face of opposition and power? You know, each of the Gospel writers remembers His stories and even His great sermons in ever so slightly different ways. You’ll see that if you compare the four Gospels. When you think of it, those little bitty differences of memory preserved in our four Gospels instead of fixed by some grand conspiracy sort of give the lie to the Da Vinci Code nonsense, doesn’t it? We retain ever so slightly different versions of Jesus’ teaching. When even His closest followers don’t remember His sermons precisely, why

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did Jesus bother teaching and preaching and standing firm in the face of power and opposition? What did it get Him?

Students of history know that some other religious readers gained armies and harems and earthly power from their preaching. What did Jesus get? Death! Death on a cross! A death that He could have cleverly avoided at any time by simply backing down, saying I didn't mean it, and slipping into the crowd forgotten. He could have saved His skin. He did not preach though for gain. He did not preach for power or for popularity as some have and as some still do. Why did He preach? Were He to come to the Main Street pulpit today, part of His unchanging message would include that there is not one good person here, not one! That is part of His message. He certainly did not come to preach pleasing words to good people to make them feel even 'gooder'. I looked in the Thesaurus. I couldn't come up with a better word.

He came, He said, for sinners, somehow to save them, and to offer them something they needed and something God wanted them to have. In fact, if you read the Gospels with only a medium amount of care, you will find that Jesus spoke harshly, harshly of those who thought themselves always right and always righteous. He spoke of those who thought themselves always right and righteous as anti-God, anti-good, and not only dangerous, but evil. You just take any study Bible, and look up Pharisees, and see for yourself. Think what great evil has been done through the years by those who were convinced that their end goal was so high and so holy that any means necessary was justified. Think of Stalin! Think of Hitler! Think of Mao! Think of Osama bin Laden and others closer to home, who seek to destroy and to defame and to reframe their own agendas as the highest truth, and anyone who disagrees is either an agent of Hell or worthy of death.

In politics, candidates of all stripes do this routinely and cynically. Jesus studiously avoided political power, and studiously avoided popularity. He didn't schmooze with the elite. Jesus, it seems, was concerned with those people who know that they do not know it all, that they just didn't know it all. Something was missing, and they needed some help. Jesus it seems was enamored of those who loved God and had a perception of God's holiness and their own sinfulness, and they lay down, burdened by their guilt, and they cried out for mercy. These are the people Jesus preached to and connected with and came for. Those who have caught a glimpse of God's holiness and in that divine light looked inward and found sin and guilt and selfishness and despair, to these Jesus said, "Fear not, my little children, it is God's good pleasure to give you the kingdom of God."

You see, I have said all of these things to make Jesus' words impact and implant into the soft spot that I hope that I have created so that you can maybe hear them in a new way. God so loved the world, the world, that He gave His son that whoever believes in Him should not perish, but have eternal life. In the second verse there, God sent the Son into the world, not to condemn the world, not to condemn the world, but that the world might be saved through Him. God is holy, and we are not. You see so many people then and now actually believed that they were good, or at least, good enough or more or less holy

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or more or less most of the time or doggone a whole lot more holy than the guy next to me or God ought to feel good about me because I suffered through that preacher's boring sermons, and for that alone, I ought to get into Heaven. We do think that way, but that's not it.

The word is that the world was condemned already, and everyone in it, and no one is good, not one, not even one. The world has already gone each his or her own way and just making it up as we go along. You see, situation ethics is not a new concept when we make ourselves feel better when we know that we're doing wrong. It is as old as Scripture. Way back in the book of Judges, it says there was no king in Israel in those days, and so every man did what was right in his own eyes. Everybody did what they thought was right. Whatever they could rationalize, they did it! We have a king, King Jesus, and we say we live in God's kingdom and under God's rule. Can we do that, and still just make it up as we go along, and do what is right in our own eyes? Can we? Or does this faith of ours demand some fear and trembling and serious, disciplined decisions from time to time?

The word of the Gospel is good news. God so loved the world that He gave His only Son that whoever believes should not perish, but have eternal life. God sent the Son into the world not to condemn it, but that the world might be saved through Him. It is completely conditional upon the eyes-opened, realistic estimation of our human condition. We are sinners under condemnation with only God's grace to rely upon as a way out and up, into God's arms. It is good news that God's arms of grace are wide open. It is bad news that you must make a move toward those open arms. The verse after these verses completes the thought. It is a present blessing of salvation and forgiveness for those who run to God's arms, but it is also a warning that we remain under judgment if we reject the Savior God has sent. Verse 18 very simply said He who believes in Him is not condemned. He who does not believe is condemned already. Now what?

The Psalm that we often say, “This is the day which the Lord has made, let us rejoice and be glad in it.” It is better translated, “This is the day which the Lord has acted, let us rejoice and be glad in it.” God has done and is still doing something in Jesus Christ. His arms are still open, and the offer is still good. You think you don't need it. In Proverbs it says the fool says in his heart that there is no God. A fool is what the Bible calls an atheist. To reject God in Christ makes one a self-deluded fool, but take care, I am not judging you, and we must judge not. You take God up on the offer, and you are still, and I am still, a sinner. We are no better than a death row inmate, but the difference is this. You are a sinner saved by grace, judge not because grace alone is our hope. Jesus alone offers God's grace, not a system, not a philosophy, instead a trust that God was in Christ making peace by the blood of His cross.

The way into God's arms has always been repentance, and repentance in the Bible means a turning, a turning away from rebellion and self-centeredness and a turning toward God, the one who forgives, but this can't occur unless we are willing to admit to ourselves how we've hurt ourselves and how we hurt others and how we even hurt the heart of God by

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what we do and what we fail to do. Now, many of us don't want to take that step or we're back and forth over that same step. You know the Greek word “ego” simply means I. Does your I get in the way?

In the old Peanuts comic strip, Linus comes up to Charlie Brown, and says, “Charlie Brown, do you know what's the trouble with you? Do you want to know what's the trouble with you?” Charlie Brown says, “No, no.” They just stare at each other. Linus says, “The trouble with you, Charlie Brown, is that you don't want to know what the trouble with you is.”

That's the trouble with many of us. We feel threatened by the prospect of having to admit our imperfections, and if you think you're perfect and holy just as you are, ask your wife or ask your husband or ask your children. I won't say grandchildren because they mostly think grandparents are perfect.

I saw another cartoon where the husband and wife are lying in bed, and the husband in the cartoon just had this smug look on his face, and the wife, in the next frame, turned away from her husband, and she prayed out loud, “God, please give Mr. Perfect one tiny flaw.” That's a problem for many of us. We think we're Mr. or Mrs. Perfect. Repentance means admitting that we are flawed, that we are broken, and in some places, we are empty and undone. People who think they aren't are the Pharisees and the Biblically defined self-worshiping fools. They're the ones who gave Jesus so much trouble. God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world. Judgment is here already. We condemn ourselves by rejecting God's love and grace by pretending that we don't need it. God sent the Son for salvation, not for condemnation, and that is good news.

One theologian said it so beautifully. He said, “God loves you so much, and His forgiveness is so full that it is as if the past had never happened.” It is a new page, a new book of your life, a new start, a new possibility, so while you start by admitting that you have been wrong, you end up accepting forgiveness and the healing is real. Your trust in God makes the forgiveness real and immediate and complete, and you grow from there. There is no need to backtrack and feel old guilt and unearth and relive old sins. You are free when you accept this to move forward. Once you move into God's arms, you may move on.

There was a little girl one time who was misbehaving, and she was giving her mother a very hard time. Her mother told her to go sit in the corner. She went over in the corner, and she stood. She didn't sit, she just stood. The mother had to go over there, and force her to sit, and said, “Just wait til your father comes home.” The father came home, and found her sitting there with a scowl on her face in the corner, and he said, “What's going on? What's going on?” The little girl looked up and said, “Well, on the outside I am sitting in this corner, but on the inside, I am still standing.”

“Grace, Not Judgment”

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Some of us are doing that right now. In this very sanctuary, in our very best clothes, with our most peaceful expressions on our face, on the outside we look pretty good, but on the inside, that self-will, that ego, that I versus God is still going on. We're fighting God, and we're fighting what is good, and the people around us become the collateral damage.

My last story. Can I get an amen? All right. There is a famous old story of a rabbi who was getting ready for the Day of Atonement, and he was in deep depression. Now in the Jewish faith, the Day of Atonement is a day of repentance, and it's a day of restoration, but he was depressed. He was not happy. He was all down about it. He was standing in the doorway of his little house, and down the dusty road came a shoe cobbler pushing his cart filled with his tools. The cobbler came to the rabbi's house, and he saw him standing in the doorway, and he shouted in a very loud voice, “Do you have anything that needs mending?” The rabbi said it hit him like the very voice of God. Suddenly, he saw so clearly what the source of his problem was and his depression, and it's exactly what John is telling us. If we really want the light that this magnificent Gospel is offering through Jesus' teaching, if we really want it, then this is the question we must confront. There is no escaping it. Don't you have anything that needs mending? God came not to condemn. God came to mend. Don't we know? Don't we already know what is broken? Amen.