

Sermon Text: John 1:1-5 and Matthew 28:16-20

Now, I do welcome, I see that we have some visitors here today, and perhaps some inactive members, and I want to warn those of you who are excited about some new things happening at Main Street that when you yell out in the middle of a hymn, “Praise God!” we may have Episcopalians among us. You may frighten them. Be careful. Now, do not clench the spirit. If that is what you feel, and you are overflowing with joy, then so be it.

I know many of you remember the old series, “All In the Family,” with Archie Bunker and his agnostic son-in-law, Meathead. There was a time when strangers used to tell me years ago that I looked like Meathead. That was a long time ago. I think they meant it as a compliment. I’m not sure. There was an argument in one of the episodes I remember where the son-in-law says, “Archie, if there is a God, why is there so much suffering in the world?” He replied, “I’ll tell you why.” Then he yells out of the room, “Edith, if there is a God, why is there so much suffering in the world?” There was an awkward silence. Archie yells, “Edith, you get in here and help me. I’m having to defend God all by myself.”

God does not need our defending. God needs defending only if you make God the author of sin and separation and strife. If you lay the desire for self-love and self-aggrandizement and greed and lust and abuse of others, if you lay that at God’s feet, then perhaps God would need defending. From the beginning, the Biblical narrative speaks of God’s plan for intimacy and relationship, men and women and families and siblings and all of us together with God, but what happens – self-will, disobedience and rejection of the rules that were meant to protect us, and then lies and then blaming and then murder. Every bit of this happens before you get through four chapters of Genesis. God, above all things, wants us to know him and to love him and to know and compassionately care for each other. Imagine! Not even four chapters! Sin and self-will and lies and blaming and murder and self-imposed banishment. You may try to make a case against God for the state of the world, but the only possible case that I can see is to find God guilty of giving us free will to choose love, to choose obedience, to choose trust in our creator or to reject it. Yes, that is God’s fault if we dare call it a fault. We are free to accept or reject relationship.

I have read that the central disease of our time is simply an echo of Adam and Eve’s rejection of God and self-banishment. The central disease of our time is disconnection. Emotional and spiritual disease comes from a lack of belonging. If you get nothing else from the Book of Genesis, get this. God wants us to belong, but we are isolated. We are broken off from God and we are broken off from each other, even though deep in our hearts we want nothing more than to be connected. The liars among us pretend that they need neither God nor people, but they are fooling no one, and foolishness in a Scriptural sense has a very specific meaning. Finish this saying for me from the Proverbs. Finish it. The fool says in his heart, the fool says in his heart there is no God. Imagine somebody tuning into our radio broadcast at that point, and the Main Street congregation says, “There is no God.” No. It is the fool who pretends not to understand that we have met the enemy, and it is us. Not God. God wants relationship. We want to belong to some group. We want people. We want connection, but what we have is isolation and sometimes the artificial relationships on the

Reverend James D. Dennis, Jr.

March 19, 2006

Internet and casual acquaintances that do not know our hearts and are not really our people. Who are our people? Where do we belong?

I saw a New Yorker cartoon depict two sophisticated matrons, sipping drinks at an outdoor café, and one says to the other, “I envy you. I wish I were close enough to my family to be estranged.” You’ll laugh later if you didn’t now.

If we have given up on having people to belong to and with, and if we have given up on God, then we become the ultimate fool, and we pretend that we are God, and we say, ‘my’ will be done. Now, Scripture knew this first. From the Gospel of Luke we hear the parable of the fool who thinks he needs bigger barns for his new riches, that through his cleverness he has accumulated, and he forgets that the night that his new barns are finished is the night that he is to die. Jesus asks, “Then whose will these riches be?” Jesus elsewhere in the Gospel asks, “Even if you owned the entire world could you exchange that for your immortal soul?” Well, could you? You do have a soul, and it was made to be in relationship with God, the God who has come to us with the protective laws of the Ten Commandments, which bespeak love of God and love of neighbor, who came to us in the prophets to encourage justice and righteousness and compassionate treatment for the poor, and of course, the people did not want to hear that and so they killed the prophets. Finally, God sent His Son, the best, the most of Himself that we could fathom in the flesh, and Jesus, God in flesh, offered forgiveness for our selfishness in sin, for our disconnection and lies, and blaming, and He offered love, and we killed Him, too, on a cross. Not because Jesus had a death wish, but because God in Jesus Christ wanted to show us just how far this world had fallen from His intentions and just how far God will go to bring us back into His arms.

The Apostle Paul says that we were bought with a price. Now, the term bought is not otherwise used in any of Paul’s letters. It is a special word, and the imagery comes from the slave market. Our lives, our souls, our minds did belong to sin and death, and had no way out, but we were redeemed. We were purchased, and so no longer owe our allegiance to sin nor our souls to death. We are free. We are free to show our gratitude to the one who set us free! We do not belong to ourselves. We never did. We sinned and we were destined only for death, and now through Jesus Christ, we belong to God. What we could not do, God did for us in Jesus Christ. The walls have come down. We can come home like the Prodigal Son to God, the same God, who can and will give us the spiritual power to really give a rip about other people instead of just pretending to.

Theologian Stanley Hauerwas reminds us that our salvation comes only when we cease trying to interpret Jesus’ story in the light of our own history, and instead interpret ourselves in the light of His. You see, if we are looking only within ourselves for what we can get only from beyond ourselves, then we remain empty and isolated, and we never see the big picture because we are distracted by a measly self-portrait. Going within, we tend to simply rationalize our sin. Jesus freed us from that. We are free to follow God.

From John we hear that if we confess our sins, God is faithful and just and will forgive our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness. Now we can start living!

There is an MIT research psychologist named Steven Pinker, and he says that much of the modern worldview and intelligentsia is a naïve Utopian outlook and it dominates much of intellectual life. According to Pinker, the new science of human nature really does vindicate some version of what he calls the tragic vision of human nature, what Christians used to call the fallen human nature, enmeshed in sin, that is universal and pervasive and intractable. Pinker’s research indicates that there is no evidence that we are made aggressive and violent by common wisdom of simple discrimination or poverty, for example. On the contrary, he says the evidence is aggressive and violent by our egotism no matter whom we are, our group identity no matter what it is, our ethnocentricity no matter what ethnic group. There is something about us that makes us selfish and aggressive and violent. It isolates us. It is sin. From that we need a savior.

If you read the Old Testament you see the precursor, the preview of the Savior, who is Jesus Christ, who is to come. You see it all the way back in the prophet Isaiah 53 where we find the suffering servant, whose ordeal unto death saves the people. Also, in the Exodus, the escape from Egypt where the Passover lamb, the blood above the doors, saved them from death just before they were saved and freed from slavery.

However you understand it, with seminary jargon or with tears in your heart, understand this. Jesus Christ’s death and resurrection gained for you hope and new life and life eternal, and Christians are those who live a life of gratitude for what God has already done in Jesus Christ. We don’t live by rules. We live a life of gratitude; gratitude for what God has already done for us in Jesus Christ. It is grace. It is a free gift.

William Barclay wrote that the more a Christian thinks of his experience of faith, the more he is convinced he has nothing to do with it. It is all of God. We did nothing to bring about the cross. That is God’s work. We heard the story of this wondrous love. We did not make the story. We only received it. The love woke within our hearts. The conviction of sin came, and with it the experience of forgiveness and salvation. We did not achieve that. It is all of God.

In our Wednesday night study on Acts, and you are all invited to come, we see the earliest Christians were mostly Jews who saw that whatever salvation is granted, is granted by the authority of Jesus the Messiah. Yeshuah HaMashiach, God’s anointed one. The Christ who died for the sins of the world. Yet, some pretend to be their own God and to need no one and pretend that sin does not even exist, which is another way of saying that God does not exist. It has always been thus. To the Corinthians who were steeped in the philosophy of the day, the Apostle Paul wrote that the word of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved, it is the power of God. In the Colossians we heard earlier, God was in Christ making peace by the blood of his cross. I suppose that my question in all of this today for you here and in the radio audiences is can you believe that? Can you believe that? That God was in Christ making peace by the blood of His cross? There are so many stories that you can build a life upon. Can you believe and build your life upon this one?

Reverend James D. Dennis, Jr.

March 19, 2006

For the brochures, which we are having printed, and if you wish to contribute to that special project, it is still open and titled “Brochure” on your check, short commercial, we interviewed all the different age groups and categories of life, where you are and stages in our congregation, and we found out that everybody had one big story that kind of defined their generation. For some, it was Pearl Harbor. For some, the Kennedy assassination. More recently, the 911. What master story is fashioning our children’s lives? What single event helps them interpret reality? Is it the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ or is it for some, the teenager’s, Curt Kobain’s suicide or earlier than that, Lady Di’s death, or Monica Lewinsky or the war in Iraq? What defines reality for them? We are those who base everything from Creation on down on a narrative. It’s a narrative of a God who wants to love us and wants us to love one another. This story is peppered by our rejection until God finally does for us what we could never do, takes our place, our judgment, our death, our sin upon Himself upon the cross. Does it sound foolish? To much of the world, it does, and it did from the very beginning, but Paul says, “The word of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but it is to those who are being saved, the power of God.”

I’m going to be preaching in the next four weeks the very basics of the faith, as I understand it. Next week will be the Lord’s Prayer and then the cross and the tomb and the resurrection up to Easter. Now, I am not going to be preaching, “Be Nice.” I’m not ordained to preach be nice. The master narrative of the Scripture begins with sin, and then centers on God’s answer to our rejection. The master narrative of God’s word to us is centered on Christ as the answer. Only in Jesus Christ and Him crucified do we begin to understand the depth of our sin and the depth of God’s amazing grace. Do you know your sin in thought and word and deed, in what you do and in what you fail to do, and your Pharaohsaical fakery of pretending to be loving, but feeling hollow inside the whole time you do it? I’ve felt that. Then this is where you belong, and this is your story and it is our story. The cross-centered, Christ-centered story that helps us make sense of a life in a fragmented and disconnected and foolish world.

I chose the opening Scriptures from Genesis and the Gospel of John for a reason. Notice how they connect. In the beginning when God created the Heavens and the Earth, and there was light and there was darkness. In John, “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God, and the Word became flesh and dwelt among us.” In verse 5, “The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness cannot, the darkness has not overcome it.” Creation in Genesis, and then in the New Testament, new creation recognizes that there is darkness, there is evil, there is sin in the world, but the darkness will not win, cannot comprehend, and cannot overcome the light of God. If I belong to God, if I am not my own, then maybe it matters what I do. Do I owe God anything in particular? Listen to the Apostle Paul. He says, “Do you not know that your bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit who lives in you, whom you have received from God. You are not your own. You were bought with a price.” There it is again! “Therefore, honor God with your bodies.” I am not my own. You are not your own. Yes, God does have certain expectations from those who belong to Him. Just as the light was given in creation and new light in Jesus Christ, God expects to see some of that light reflected in our lives. As Jesus says in Matthew, “Let your light shine before others so that they may see your good works, and then give glory to your

Reverend James D. Dennis, Jr.

March 19, 2006

Father who is in Heaven.” You see, when we shine forth the light of Christ in our lives then other people praise God. We help other people believe and worship God by the way we live, or hinder them if we don’t. Jesus is the light of the world, and we reflect His light and draw others to God or we fail to. This is the answer of where we belong. This is the answer to the question of what our life is for. This is how we connect to God and to others. Here in the church where the Gospel message is heard and practiced is where we belong, belong body and soul – in faith and life and death and life beyond death. Our Savior Jesus Christ, Emmanuel, God with us, is here. Jesus came to seek out and save the lost, and He did so as one of us and as one with the Father. God is completely present even now. Peter reminds us that once we did not belong. Once we were outsiders, but it is through Jesus Christ that we have become insiders. Once we were nothing, now we are something. Once we were excluded, now we are included. Once we did not belong, and now we do belong. We belong to Christ. You belong, so shine like it so others will see and praise God for the change in your lives.

Now, I could stop here, but I won’t. There is a warning. There is a warning here. If I’m going to be honest, and preachers probably ought to be honest unless it’s appointment time, and then they might be careful. Here’s the warning. Caring for others can make you hurt. It should. So many people suffer. I am reminded of the sick feeling I got working on a mission trip in downtown Jamaica back in the 80’s, downtown Kingston, Jamaica. I refused to go on a day trip to Montego Bay because I could not stomach it. After seeing and smelling the poverty inland, I could not stomach that artificial, thin line of affluence along the coast that only tourists saw. I just couldn’t stomach it. I saw the same in miles of refugee camps outside Johannesburg, South Africa with small hovels four feet high made of Coca Cola signs, etc. and the smell of waste and smoke in the air. I’ve seen the destruction of faith against faith in Belfast, Northern Ireland. When you care as Christ cared, then you realize there are no political solutions to the state of this world. There are no economic solutions only a changed heart bent toward God and compassion upon others can heal this broken world. I’ll go so far as to say if you are always happy, you are not paying attention. This world is not what God intended. God’s Kingdom is coming in one bit of light at a time through those who follow and reflect the light of Christ, which cannot be put out, but there is much darkness.

The poet, W. H. Auden, said in his homage to Cleo, he expresses contempt for the happiness of a crowing rooster.” He writes, “A cock pronouncing himself, himself, though all his sons have been castrated and eaten.” Auden says, “I was glad I could be unhappy. The rooster manages to be so gleeful in the morning because his brain is the size of a pea.” With gleeful people walking around the streets of Johannesburg or stumbling merrily over the ruins of Belfast, I am glad that it is possible to be unhappy for the suffering of others. It gives me hope. If you want a Gospel that demands nothing of you and no concern for others then do not read God’s word because that is not what Jesus taught. Love cost Him. Our symbol is a cross. The gain of this faith, though it will cost you love and pain on behalf of others if you feel compassion, the gain is true connected life to God and connected life with compassion to others, growing from faith to faith, from love to love until the day we meet our scarred Savior face to face. Until that day, Amen.