



Lakeside Sermons

Lakeside Baptist Church • Rocky Mount, North Carolina
Jody C. Wright, Senior Minister

MAY 31, 2015
TRINITY SUNDAY

How Can We Save the World? John 3:1-17; Romans 8:12-17

Have you ever felt like you were in the middle of that Abbott and Costello skit, “Who’s on First?” It is their classic comedy sketch about a baseball team whose players all have odd nicknames like Who, What, and I Don’t Know. The two actors are speaking the same language, but they are definitely not communicating!

Nicodemus must have felt that way. Jesus was using familiar words like born, wind, and Spirit, but said that a person needs to be “born from above” and “born of the Spirit.” He spoke of the Spirit being like the wind which you feel but do not know where it comes from or where it goes. He talked about the Son of Man being lifted up, a remedy for the ills of the world just as the bronze serpent Moses made had been a remedy for anyone who had been bitten by a snake. Jesus spoke their common language, but none of it made any sense to Nicodemus. To him, Jesus was talking in riddles and going in circles. He might as well have been talking about baseball (which wouldn’t be invented for eighteen more centuries) because Nicodemus didn’t understand anything he was saying.

Keep in mind that Nicodemus was a bright and inquisitive fellow. He was a Pharisee and well schooled in the Torah, the Law of the Jews, but he was also a free-thinker. Nicodemus did not simply accept the majority opinion or the prevailing attitude. He wanted to learn new things and was willing to go looking for answers to perplexing questions. That is why he sought out Jesus at night. He was curious about this teacher from Galilee, but his fellow Pharisees had made up their minds that he was a fraud and made so much noise that Nicodemus could hardly sort out his own thoughts. So he went to Jesus when they could talk privately and he could ask serious questions.

But that is not what happened, at least not like I think Nicodemus hoped it would. He offered a weak compliment to Jesus, acknowledging that Jesus had to have some connection with God in order to do the things he was doing. However, Jesus practically ignored his words and started off on a riff about seeing the kingdom of God after being born from above, being born of water and the Spirit, and blowing in the wind. He might as well have said,

“Nicodemus, Who’s on first, What’s on second, I Don’t Know’s on third, and Tomorrow’s the pitcher!” Nicodemus was clueless about what Jesus was saying.

We don’t know how that conversation continued or ended. Jesus says a few more things about his coming to save the world and John stops reporting. There is no indication that the light finally came on for Nicodemus, whether they parted ways in frustration or agreement, or how the encounter ended. John jumps to the next story about Jesus and the disciples and Nicodemus fades into the night.

Yet, somehow Nicodemus did come to understand Jesus. We know that later on when the Sanhedrin was discussing Jesus and what they should do about him, Nicodemus advocated for them to give Jesus a chance to explain himself. When Jesus died, it was Nicodemus who helped Joseph of Arimathea carry his body to the tomb and prepare it for burial by wrapping it in linen and spices. If Jesus’ words did not compute with Nicodemus, why did he change his opinion about him and become a follower of Christ?

Ron Adams, a Mennonite pastor in Wisconsin, suggests that it was love that changed Nicodemus’ opinion and his heart. Adams tells that when he was a teenager his family was falling apart. His parents were on the precipice of divorce and he and his siblings were scrambling to hold together the pieces of their life. It happened that the Gospel singer Andraé Crouch and his musicians were performing in a nearby town and his father wanted the family to attend. The last thing Ron Adams wanted to do was attend a Christian music concert because he had given up on his faith. He figured that it had not saved his parents’ marriage and had nothing to offer him. He agreed to go to the concert with the rest of the family but he was determined not to enjoy it. As he said, he sat in the concert with his arms folded in defiance and a wall built around his heart. Nothing about the evening would make any difference to him.

Then the music started and Jesus danced into his heart. Ron Adams could not understand all of the complexities involved in marriage and faith and divorce, he could not fathom that God would allow pain and suffering to shred his life, but he could feel that in the midst of it all God loved him. That night Jesus loved Ron Adams and Ron Adams loved Jesus back.¹

¹Ron Adams, “Living By the Word: May 31, Trinity Sunday,” *The Christian Century* (May 27, 2015): 20.

It sounds simplistic, I know. How nice it would be if we could take all of our problems to a gospel concert or a classical recital and Jesus would waltz right in and make it all right. That is not what happened to Ron Adams. As far as I know, his parents still split up, but Ron was able to hold his life together. As far as I know, Nicodemus did not get the answers he wanted the night he went looking for Jesus; yet, at some point he experienced the life-changing love of Christ and it made all the difference.

Jesus offered Nicodemus a few important points that night. He said that in order to see the kingdom of God, we have to be born from above, that is, we have to be born of the Spirit. From what I know, that means that we allow God through the Holy Spirit to change our perspective, to be our eyes as we look on the world. The Spirit sees life from a perspective that is often different from ours. When Jesus looked on the world, he did so most often with compassion. And if he did not respond to what he saw with compassion, it was most often with indignation over injustice.

Jesus told Nicodemus that he was born into the world out of God's compassion for humanity. He came, he said, to save us and not to condemn us. He came that the world might be saved through him.

We need a lot of saving, don't we? Terrorism and war in the Middle East, genocide, homicide, and slavery in Africa, earthquakes in Nepal, floods in Texas, riots in Jefferson and Baltimore, scandals, tragedies, illnesses, and our own foibles beg for saving. Why not give up on faith when it does not deliver like we need for it to? Why not take all of the terrible things that happen in life as evidence that God is absent at best or uncaring at worst? We don't give up on God because Jesus came to demonstrate to us that no matter what happens, God loves us and will save us from the ills of the world.

While we may not understand everything that John reports in the third chapter of his gospel, we do understand verses sixteen and seventeen: "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. 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." If we accept God's love and become God's followers, then we also take on the ministry Jesus began which is to save the world. But how can we save the world?

We save the world in the same way Jesus did: we love. We love the people around us. We love the people who appear to be unlovable. We love

to the point of intervening when love is not being demonstrated. We love enough to intercede for justice for all people.

We often talk about love glibly and casually as if it is easy to love another person. If you have ever really loved someone else, and I think all of you have and do, you know that it is a tough assignment. The people we naturally love can be the most challenging people in the world at times, just ask any parent or child or husband or wife or partner or sibling. We have good reason to love those people, so we work at it. And it sometimes takes a lot of work.

Then there are the people we don't have to love except that Jesus tells us to. Most often the difficulty with loving those people lies, not with them, but with us. I learned that lesson in a very poignant way last week.

Some of you knew Rev. Horace Ward. Horace probably worshiped with us every two or three months. He retired as a pastor some time ago but he continued his passion as a prison chaplain, a ministry that spanned several decades. Because we support the Tar River Prison Ministry, Horace would visit us and worship with us to demonstrate his support of Lakeside.

Horace was theologically conservative, at least about some of those things that we preachers like to argue about. I knew that he and I did not see eye to eye on some theological matters and the ways they play out in life, but we agreed that prison ministry is important so we had a nice, cordial relationship. Nevertheless, on numerous occasions, when I intended to address some controversial matter in a sermon, it seemed that Horace was always in the congregation. I always assumed that he would be at odds with my opinion, though he never said a negative word to me about my sermons or this congregation. He was always gracious and appreciative when he was at Lakeside. I had an opinion that he was narrowminded about some things, though he never indicated his position on particular matters one way or another. Primarily because of my presuppositions, I never took the time to get to know Horace as a friend.

Horace died a week ago today. At his funeral, one person after another filled in the gaps about Horace's life. I learned how generous and insightful he was, how studious and inquisitive he could be. I discovered that he did all manner of kind things for his friends and an abundance of gracious acts for strangers. I was shocked to find out that in an early pastorate, Horace noticed that the neighborhood around his church was changing. It was in the

late sixties or early seventies. Concerned that the church serve its neighborhood, Horace hired an African American Associate Pastor. Six months later, he switched roles and became the Associate while the other minister assumed the duties of Pastor. Insightful, courageous, progressive, loving—I am not surprised that prison ministry was his passion. Only someone who loves unconditionally can minister to people who have wronged or harmed someone else. Horace knew there was good inside each person, and he sought to love it into the open.

My point is that I did not learn to love Horace as a brother in Christ until he had died because I thought he might be narrow minded. Yet, he loved me throughout the years as he did everyone he met. In order to love, we have to look with the eyes of Christ. To see the kingdom of God, we must be born from above. Horace was. I hope to be.

We save the world by accepting the love of God which is freely offered to us in Jesus Christ. We save the world by allowing God to change the way we look at the world and the people in it. We save the world by being open to one another and to the Spirit of God that is within each of us. We save the world through acts of kindness, generosity, and transformation. We do not always have to understand why we do what we do as long as the motivation is love. Who's on first? Yes. And I will love him as Christ loves me. Amen.

May 31, 2015

Prayer of thanksgiving and Intercession

O God, who has claimed us as your own children and called us to live as brothers and sisters to one another, who is as close as our own heartbeat yet remains a mystery far beyond our comprehension, who has called us as partners in your work of loving and redeeming the world, we come to worship you each week bringing a myriad of experiences and emotions, joys and worries, thoughts and questions that make us who we are. We know that you have created us in your image and continue to speak to us through the people and circumstances of our lives as you mold us into the image of Christ. Our life of faith is guided by your call to discipleship and service, where we are challenged to live humbly and give sacrificially after the example of Christ who gave himself for us and for the world you love. We are energized by the possibilities that come our way, perplexed by the troubles, saddened by the losses, astounded by the blessings. In all things, Loving God, we are grateful for the good gifts which are ours daily, recognizing that they come from your generous hand.

And we recognize, too, O God, our Creator, Redeemer and Friend, that one of the extraordinary gifts we receive is the opportunity to serve others. The problems in our world, across our community, throughout the Body of Christ, and within our own families are enormous. We often feel inadequate or depleted in the face of them, and it seems easier to abandon our responsibilities out of apathy or skepticism or fear. But in your infinite compassion and mercy, O God, you have blessed us that we might be a blessing to others. Grant us the grace to meet these challenges with creativity and courage. Empower us to work as healers in the midst of suffering. Equip us to become messengers of peace where there is violence. Teach us to demonstrate love where there is hatred. Help us to live generously where we find need. In all the circumstances that we face, in all of the ways that you call us, may we shine your light and life into the dark and dying places of our world. We pray in the name of the One who came that we might have abundant and joyful life and before whom every knee should bend in reverence and praise, even Jesus the Christ, and we pray by the power of the Holy Spirit who dwells within and among us. Amen.

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