



Lakeside Sermons

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

JUNE 14, 2015
THE THIRD SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST

A Stained Glass Life Genesis 1:1-5; John 1:1-9

The gift of a poet is the ability to paint a picture or tell a story through a minimum of carefully chosen words. Although we do not think of it as a poem, the shortest verse in scripture, John 11:35, has that effect. “Jesus wept.” Immediately we conjure up an image of Jesus standing in the road just outside of the little town of Bethany. His friend Lazarus is dead. Sisters Martha and Mary stand in front of him, faces wet with tears. Friends and mourners huddle around, wondering what Jesus will do and why he did not come sooner. In Jesus’ face we see the pain of loss that is his as well as the weariness that comes with the burden of being the Son of God. Yes, he could have come sooner. Yes, he could have done something to prevent Lazarus’ death. Yes, he delayed on purpose. And, yes, he will make it all right. At this moment, however, his heart is broken because his friend is dead, Mary and Martha are devastated, and the reality of his humanity is almost more than he can bear. All of these things plus our own experiences of grief flash before our mind’s eye when we read or hear the verse, “Jesus wept.”

A more contemporary example of the poet’s conjuring power is William Carlos Williams’s poem, “The Red Wheelbarrow.”

so much depends
upon

a red wheel
barrow

glazed with rain
water

beside the white
chickens¹

¹William Carlos Williams, “The Red Wheelbarrow,” Copyright © 1962 by William Carlos Williams.

My earliest recollection of that poem is accompanied by the scene of a farm yard with a silo and barn in the near background. Chickens run freely, hunting for food, and a red wheelbarrow, haphazardly abandoned, perhaps when a sudden shower popped up, glistens in the soon returned sunshine. I did not grow up on a farm, but I have always thought farm life to be a good and wholesome life. This poem speaks to me of simplicity, innocence, and interdependence. It tells me a story I want to live, but the wonder of the poem is that it likely paints a very different picture for you.

The writers of the book of Genesis and the Gospel of John were poets. At least they had what we often refer to as “a poet’s soul.” Hebrew is itself a poetic language and does not always confine itself to a single reading. That first line in the Bible can be read, “In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth,” suggesting a starting point in time. Or, it can be translated, “In beginning, God created . . .” indicating God’s action of creation—“This is how God began to create.” These sacred words can also be interpreted as a proclamation, “In the beginning: God!” In other words, God was at the start of it all. The poet continues to describe the earth as a dark void. God had little to work with other than a deep, watery chaos, like a primordial soup which God stirred with the breath of his Spirit. Then God said, “Light,” and light happened. It was as if the director of the greatest epic ever had commanded everyone’s attention by ordering, “Lights! Camera! Action!” Creation was underway.

The poetic soul who wrote the Gospel of John apparently liked the way Genesis began for he borrowed the image and wrote, “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God” (John 1:1). Once again we are transported back to that formless void when God began speaking the world into existence only now we know that God uttered, not a spoken word, but the Living Word, Christ himself. Moreover, we discover that this Living Word is the true light that comes into our world. In both stories there is a dark emptiness, God speaks, and light is born. What a marvelous picture: the birth of Light which is the key to all of life itself.

In a meditation a few years ago, Tom McGrath shared this story:

My friend Sheryl Chen is a Trappistine nun. These are the women who live in cloister and gather for monastic prayer seven times a day. She told me this story, a kind of parable, and it remains a source of hope in my life.

Sheryl was living at Santa Rita Abbey in the high desert of southern Arizona near the Mexican border. The nuns' day begins early, with 4 a.m. prayer. One December morning, just before prayer was to begin, Sheryl stepped out into the crisp night air to do one of her chores. In the stillness of the cold, clear night, she looked into the sky and one bright star among thousands caught her eye, and she wondered.

Being one of the brightest people I know, Sheryl quickly calculated the distance of that star and how long it would take its light to reach that very spot of hillside where she stood.

And being one of the holiest people I know, Sheryl began to reflect on how much like God's love that starlight was: traveling through space and time to greet her that Advent morning, right there, right then.²

God's love is light for us, "traveling through space and time" to greet us. Certainly Jesus, "the Light of the world," came across time and space to convey God's love to all of God's creation. Light is a reminder that God loves us. Life is a gift of love to us for without light, life could not exist. The light of the sun provides energy for photosynthesis to occur and for all of the other building blocks of life to fall into place. The Light of Christ is the source and meaning of all of life.

There are two basic kinds of light: emitted light and reflected light. Emitted light is the light which comes from the sun or another star or from fire or the various sources of light which humans have created. Emitted light is only part of the story, however. Without something to reflect the light, we might not see anything but the source of the light. When we go into a dark room and switch on a light, the walls, ceiling, floor, and objects in the room reflect the light coming from a bulb and we see the objects in the room as well as the various colors, sizes, and shapes that they are. That is why space is dark. There are vast expanses in which there are very few objects to reflect the light of stars such as our sun. Objects reflect light and reveal our world as it is.

²Tom McGrath, "Reflection: Hope," *30 Good Minutes The Chicago Sunday Evening Club*; available online at: <http://www.csec.org/reflections/hope.htm>.

Christ is the Light of the world and we are the ones who reflect that light. As the Gospel writer said, John the Baptist was not the light but was a witness, a reflector of the light. The vast darkness in the world could not swallow up the light of Christ because John reflected that light back in to the world. Today the light shines on us and we are called to reflect it into the darkness of the world.

Two examples of how we reflect light come to mind. Last Friday evening, eight year old Clara Danforth of Nashville hosted a “Run for Cancer” to benefit the Pediatric Brain Tumor Foundation. Our local paper reported that Clara had been praying for a couple of family friends who have cancer and decided to do something to help them.³ She called her community to come together and share money and support for children who struggle with one of the deadliest forms of cancer there is. She brought light into what might otherwise be a very dark future for other people.

Yet, all of our actions do not necessarily reflect the light of Christ’s love into the world. I am certain most of you have seen the video of the fight which occurred in a WalMart in Beach Grove, Indiana. Two women fight after one of them apparently stood up for a store employee who was being verbally abused by the other woman. That kind of action is commendable. The willingness of both women to engage in a no-holds-barred fight in a public setting, however, is not. The disturbing part of the video, however, is the action of the young boy as he tries to defend his mother. I don’t downplay his desire to help his mother. I would have likely done the same at that age. Nevertheless, the mother urges her son to get into the fight using very inappropriate language. And when other adults (who, by the way, do nothing to stop the fight) tell the boy to stop hitting and kicking the other woman, the little boy responds with defiance and arrogance. On a local radio program, the mother later reported that her son “is raised perfectly right.” She insisted that he is a good student and attends a Christian school.

From my perspective, the True Light of life stopped being reflected as soon as the two women taunted each other to fight. This young boy would have learned much from his mother had she asked the woman not to speak unkindly to the Walmart employee and then walked away when the woman threatened a fight. Knowing how to defend oneself is important, but a lack of

³Lindell John Kay, “Eight-year-old Girl Plans Cancer Run,” *The Rocky Mount Telegram* (June 10, 2015).

self-control can be dangerous. In this sad incident, much more destructive heat was shed than life-enhancing light.

Another poet with whose work I have become familiar is a fellow named Marcus Hummon. You may not recognize the name, but you know some of his music. He wrote "God Bless the Broken Road," which was performed by Rascal Flatts, "Ready to Run" by The Dixie Chicks, "Born to Fly" by Sara Evans, and "One of These Days" by Tim McGraw. He has also written an opera and several musicals. One of his musicals, titled *Francis of Guernica*, explores the work of Pablo Picasso as he painted his massive picture of Guernica, a small village used for target practice during the Spanish Civil War. The musical includes the following lyrics:

It's a picture made of broken things,
Of fallen feathers from an Angel's wings.
Shattered pieces of my past
Are held together like stained glass.
When all is said and done,
What else have I but a stained glass love?
And were it not for you,
How could this love come shining through?
Hold the pieces in your hand
And think of how glass is made from sand.
Sand together becomes clay,
And clay is flesh when God breathes our way.⁴

Hummon's character, Francis, suggests that our lives are a picture of broken things put back together like stained glass through which love shines. For me, he ties together both of our scripture passages when he says,

"And think of how glass is made from sand.
Sand together becomes clay,
And clay is flesh when God breathes our way."

The bits and pieces of our lives, the good, the bad, the indifferent, are like shards of colored glass which form a stained glass "window" through which the light of God's love shines to enable other people to see God. Through us, the Light of God's love is refracted in various ways based on our

⁴Marc Hummon, "Stained Glass Love," BMI Music Publishing, 2000.

personalities, our interests, our experience, and our faith. In that sense, we are like a stained glass window through which the light of Christ shines.

Our calling is to live in such a way that the light of God's love shines through us in an illuminating way, bringing color and beauty to a world which so often lacks those gifts. Our calling is to bring light to life not to shut out the light of God's redemptive love. Our calling is to focus the light of God's love in positive ways because "so much depends" on our doing so. We become poets, speaking God's love to the world. We live a "stained glass life" through which others see Christ, the Light of the World. Amen.

June 14, 2015

Prayer of Thanksgiving and Intercession

Creator God, who brought light out of darkness and order out of chaos, hear us now as we pray. Just as you fulfilled your promise to send a savior who would offer mercy to dispel the darkness within and around us, you have continued to reveal yourself in order to light our path to your grace and to remain with us through all the journeys of our lives. For many generations, you have been faithful and gracious to a faithless and disobedient people, and we praise you. In our limitations, you have shown us unlimited mercy. In our sin, you have shown us perfect love. In our sorrow you have given joy, and in our hopelessness, you have offered peace and hope. We thank you, O God, for these and every good gift which comes from your generous hand.

Holy God, in this week when we will focus on nurturing and teaching our children, we thank you that you came to us as a child who learned and grew as you lived among us. We thank you for the gift of our children, for their laughter and love, for their curiosity and enthusiasm, for the ways they inspire and challenge us. Forgive us when we fail to protect and guide them, when we neglect their needs, or when we take their gifts for granted. Help us to be grateful for all that you have given to us through them, and as we teach them this week, help us to be reminded what it means that we have been called to allow Jesus to work through us: to act with courage and wisdom, to accept the salvation you offer, to live lives of faithful witness, and to love others as you have loved us.

Because of your faithfulness and love toward us, O God, we bring our prayers before you with confidence that you will hear and respond. For those who are sick, we pray for your healing. For those who mourn or are lonely, we pray for your comfort. For those whose lives are disrupted by violence or unrest, we pray for your peace. We pray for those in our own nation who face devastation because of natural disasters or human tragedies. We pray for hope for those who live in poverty and despair in our own city. Teach us to be a people of compassion and to answer your call to respond to these needs out of our own abundance. Teach us to be merciful because we have been shown great mercy. Teach us to follow your call wherever it may lead. And on this special day of remembrance and celebration for the life of Fred Turnage, teach us to live as he and so many others of the saints who have gone before us, as shining examples of your goodness and grace, reflecting through our lives the light of Christ which fills and guides us. In the name of our Lord Jesus and by the power of your Holy Spirit we offer our prayers this day. Amen.

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