Sermon for Lent IV—Year B 2012

The Bridge

This morning I’d like to share one of my favorite American folktales entitled: *Old Joe and the Carpenter*

Old Joe lived way out in the countryside, and he had one good neighbor. They’d been friends all their lives long. It seemed that they had grown old together. And now that their spouses were dead and buried and their children raised and living lives of their own in other places, all they had left were their farms . . . and each other.

But for the first time in their long relationship, they’d had an argument. And it was a silly argument. It was over a stray calf that neither one really needed. It seemed as though the calf was found on Joe’s neighbor’s land and so he claimed it as his own. But Old Joe, said, “No, no, now that calf has the same markings as my favorite cow, and I recognize it as being mine.”

Well, they were both a bit stubborn, so the upshot of it all was they just stopped talking to each other. This went on for a very long week. It seemed that a dark cloud had settled over Old Joe until there came a knock on his door. He wasn’t expecting anybody that morning, and as he opened the door, he saw standing before him a young man who had a box of wooden tools on his shoulder. He had a kind voice and rather dark, deep eyes, and he said, “I’m just a carpenter, and I’m looking for a bit of work. Maybe you have some small jobs here and there that I can help with.”

Old Joe wasn’t the kind of guy to take someone on just right off, so he brought this young man into the kitchen, sat him down, and gave him some stew that he had on the back of the stove. There was some homemade bread that Old Joe had baked that very morning and some fresh churned butter, and homemade jam.
While they were sitting and eating and talking, 
Joe decided that he liked this young fellow, 
and he said, “You know, I think I do have a job for you. 
Look right there through my kitchen window. 
See that farm over there across the way? 
That’s my neighbor’s place. 
And you see that creek running right down there 
between our property line? 
That creek wasn’t there last week! 
My neighbor did that to spite me! 
He took his plow up there with a tractor, 
and he dug a big old furrow from the upper pond 
and then he flooded it.”

“Well, young man, I want you to do me one better. 
Since he wants us divided that way, 
you go out there and build me a fence—a big, tall fence— 
so I won’t even have to see his place no more!”

And the carpenter said, 
“Well, if you have the lumber and the nails, 
I got my tools, and I’ll be able to do a job that you’ll like.”

Old Joe had to go on to town to get some supplies, 
so he hitched up his wagon and showed the carpenter 
where everything was in the barn . . .
and that carpenter, well he carried everything 
he needed down to the side of the creek 
and he started to work.

And, oh, his work, it went smooth and fast. 
He did his measuring and his sawing and his nailing . . . and it was about sunset when 
Old Joe returned 
and the carpenter had just finished his work.

But when Old Joe pulled up in his wagon, 
his eyes opened wide and his mouth fell open . . .
because there wasn’t a fence there at all.

It was a bridge! 
A bridge that went from one side of the creek to the other! 
It had handrails and all—a fine piece of work—
and his neighbor was just starting to cross the other side of that bridge with his hand 
stick out, and he was saying, 
“Joe, you’re quite a fellow to build this bridge! 
I’da never been able to do that.
I’m so glad we’re going to be friends again!”
And then Old Joe put his arms around his neighbor
and he said, “Oh, that calf is yours.
I’ve known it all the time.
I just want to be your friend, too.”

About that time, the carpenter started putting his tools
in the box and then hoisted it up onto his shoulder,
and he started to walk away.
And Joe said, “No, now wait, come on back, young fellow.
I want you to stay on. I got lots of projects for you.”

The carpenter just smiled and said, “I’d like to stay on, Joe,
but you see, I can’t. I got more bridges to build.”
So he walked on.

For me this folk tale is a story theologically rich.
Every time I read or tell this story,
at least a half-dozen sermons suggest themselves to me.
But this morning,
I’m thinking about how this story
teaches healing and reconciliation,
shows us grace and faith through
gifts that are given without consulting us first.

The text of this morning’s Gospel story is only a part
of the conversation between Jesus and Nicodemus.
Do know or remember this story?

Nicodemus was a Pharisee,
a member of a group of pious religious critics who
critiqued not just Jesus but of just about everybody.
Nicodemus has come under the cover of darkness
(a detail that we should not overlook—
especially with regard to what Jesus says
about those who do evil hating the light
and refusing to allow their deeds to be clearly seen).

Nicodemus comes to this conversation with Jesus,
confident in his knowledge of himself and of Jesus,
only to have his certitudes and understandings
challenged in his encounter with him.
Throughout the conversation,
Nicodemus reveals that neither his credentials
—Pharisee, ruler of the Jews, teacher of Israel—
nor his self-professed knowledge
have brought him closer to understanding Jesus—
who he is or what his work is or will be.

Likewise, in our story about Old Joe and the Carpenter,
despite their conversation in the evening,
Old Joe has no real understanding of
who he has invited into his home
and the nature of the work of this carpenter
he decides to “hire.”
Old Joe is seeking an agent of revenge and judgment—
not, of course, of himself, but of his neighbor—
that “other one” over there.
And, you could say, to some degree, Nicodemus is seeking the same thing from Jesus.
Nicodemus and Old Joe have their eyes and minds
set on earthly things, set on their own agendas
and their self-justifying ways.
They are sure that their perspective and view of things is not only best but also the only
correct ones to hold.

But God (and the young carpenter)
have a far greater agenda and purpose in mind.

For God so loved the world . . .
John 3:16 is probably one of the best known
and best loved verses in the Bible.
Martin Luther said it was the “gospel in a nutshell.”
God’s extravagant love for the world
is a self-giving act of grace.
It is possible to read the whole of scripture,
from the creation stories in Genesis
to the visions of the New Jerusalem in Revelation
as God’s love story for the world.
It was, after all, love that stirred God’s heart
at the pleading of the slaves in Egypt,
and love that offered the freed Hebrew slaves both
the guidance of the law
and the security of the promised land.
Thereafter, whenever inequality or injustice
threatened the welfare of the poor,
the powerless and therefore the whole community,
God’s love raised up prophets
who declared God’s desire for compassion—
shown not only to “insiders”
but also to sojourners and foreigners—
“those other ones over there.”
Time and again, divine love is stronger
than well-deserved judgment.
And it was God’s love that sent Jesus, God’s Son,
to be incarnate in the world,
where he taught that love is not merely for those
who look and think and believe like us,
but even for our enemies and those who persecute us,
those who spitefully misuse us.

We need to keep in mind John 3:17—
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.

Judgment and eternal life are at the theological heart
of the Gospel of John and for John,
God’s judgment of the world arises
precisely out of God’s love for the world.
It is all an unexpected gift of God’s desire
for reconciliation—
The cross becomes God’s bridge between us and God,
but also between us and our estranged neighbors.
The two beams of the Cross that belong together—
one is named God, the other is people.
It is Jesus the Christ who brings about reconciliation
between God and people,
and reconciliation among all peoples.
To come to belief in this gift of grace,
that the God revealed in Jesus
is a God whose love knows no bounds
and who asks only that one receive the gift,
is to receive eternal life now—
That is, because our life is reshaped and redefined—
indeed we are re-born by the love of God in Jesus
For we are what he has made us,
created in Christ Jesus for good works,
which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life.

We can—like Old Joe and his neighbor
and even good old Nicodemus—
misunderstand the Gospel text if we think it is
only about otherworldly damnation or salvation
when we die.
This is about the God preparing our way of life—
and a way of life for us and for the world.
This is the crisis—and the mystery—for all who encounter Jesus, even we “believers.” This is so because grace and faith are always in danger of being turned into theological clichés—and the relationship between them is always in danger of being reduced to a formula. Grace can become “cheap grace.” This is a term Lutheran pastor Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote about in his book *Cost of Discipleship* during WWII. “Cheap grace” is the taken-for-granted assumption of God’s favor that merely blesses who we are and asks nothing in response. Faith can become confused with belief, reduced to rational assent to propositional truths.

Lent is the perfect time to consider our response to the crisis that Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection brings about. Lent is a perfect time to consider the nature of our obedience in light of the images of Jesus’ obedience.

What if we surrender to a rich awareness of the gospel in which the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God and the communion of the Holy Spirit becomes not only the bridge, the ground on which we walk but absolutely essential to who we are?

What if we were to understand today’s gospel not as a dualistic formula of who is in and who is out—that is, what if we hear today’s text as calling us to join in the creation of a community in which God’s love is regarded not as being in short supply, only open to those who have seen and confessed Jesus as the Christ, but rather as poured out upon the entire world?

This morning we are standing in the light of this vision of Jesus the Christ. As we leave here this morning, what bridges of reconciliation and healing does the Great Carpenter need to build in your life and what bridges of reconciliation and healing is sending you to build?