

Sermon "Living in the Light"

(John 3:14-21 Preached to MPC on March 11th, 2018)

"For God so loved the world, that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish, but have eternal life." John 3:16—this verse about Jesus as the Son of God is probably the most beloved verse in the Bible. In the national football championship between Florida and Oklahoma in 2009, Quarterback Tim Tebow scripted that verse in his eye blacks and ever since then—it isn't uncommon at football games for people caught in the eye of a television camera to hold up a card on which they have written in Magic Marker—John 3:16. That says it all, doesn't it! Everyone knows John 3:16:

But John 3:16 is just one verse, and we owe it to ourselves to see it in context. In the earlier verses preceding John 3:16, Jesus is talking to Nicodemus. He uses an Old Testament story to explain the necessity of the cross—and the new life that the cross makes available to us.

And then there is the part that comes after John 3:16. After saying that God loved the world and sent his Son to give eternal life, Jesus goes on to say: "For God didn't send his Son into the world to judge the world, but that the world should be saved through him" Of course, we know God didn't send Jesus to condemn—but sent him to save us! But then Jesus continues: "He who believes in him is not judged. He who doesn't believe has been judged already, because he has not believed in the name of the one and only Son of God" (v. 18).

That's harder for us to appreciate. We like it when Jesus tells us that he loves the world and came to save everyone. But we don't like it when he says that some are condemned because of their failure to believe in Him. We prefer not to think about it. We prefer Jesus shrink-wrapped, like the meat at the supermarket. When we go to the market we want to enjoy what's in the pretty shrink-wrapped packages but aren't truly interested in how they got there.

I had a female cousin who worked as a butcher in the meat section of the Foodland out in Hawaii Kai shopping center. When we lived out there in the 90's, I happen to see her one day shopping there and she gave me a quick tour of her work place. On the wall in her meat department was the drawing of a cow with its various parts labeled. This simple drawing shows where you get the different cuts of meat such as round steaks, t-

bones, rib-eye, and the choice cuts like the filet mignon.

I haven't seen one of those drawings for many years. At some point the people who run supermarkets learned that we don't really want to see the physical anatomy of a cow as it relates to the packages on the meat counter. We don't want to think about it. We just want to buy meat in the pretty packages and take it home to fix dinner.

And so it is with Jesus. We want to know that he came to save the world, but we aren't interested in hearing the rest of the story--the part about judging--the part about condemnation. But Jesus is as clear about the condemned part as he was about the saved part. If you will forgive me for mixing my metaphors, I will explain it in the context of the wild west—Jesus is saying, "You can lead a horse to water, but you can't make him drink."

Not many of us have horses, except Miss Diana, so we might never have seen a horse refuse to drink. However, many of us do have children, and know the experience. Have you ever known exactly what your child needed, and made it available to them and tried to persuade the child to take it—only to have the child stubbornly refuse? If you've been a parent more than thirty minutes, you know exactly what I am talking about!

Jesus says that he came to save the world, but some people don't want to be saved. He said that they love darkness rather than the light because their deeds are evil. They don't want to come to the light lest their evil deeds be exposed.

Again, we prefer not to think about people like that—but we must admit that they exist. There are people in this world who prefer darkness to light—people who prefer evil to good. If you don't believe that, talk to a police officer. If you can find an experienced police officer who feels free to talk, he or she can tell stories that will curl your hair—stories about people who have a streak of evil a mile wide running through them.

But you don't have to talk to a police officer. All you need to do is to watch the daily news on TV or google CNN on the internet. The stories are there—all you must do is to read them—many are horrific stories about evil people—people who love darkness rather than light, because their deeds are truly evil. And Jesus tells us that these people are condemned. They are condemned because they will not come to the light.

While we would prefer to believe that all people are good, down deep inside we understand that that isn't true. While we would like to think that Jesus has saved everyone, we see all around us evidence that he hasn't. While we would like to believe that God would overlook the sins even of the unrepentant, there is also something in our hearts that cries out for accountability—for justice and for the truth!

The book entitled, "Among the Heroes", tells the story of the people aboard Flight 93, the airliner that crashed into a Pennsylvania field on 9/11. That flight, of course, had been hijacked, and would have crashed into the White House or the Capitol Building that day, had it not been for the heroic efforts of the passengers and crew to gain control of the aircraft. There's a story in that book that speaks to the rightness of accountability—the rightness of some being saved and others being condemned.

That story has to do with Tom Burnett, one of the passengers. You see, Tom was a big bear of a man—bright—successful—married with three young daughters. I wish I had met and known—I am sure I would have liked him. He was one of several passengers who tried to regain control of the plane after it became clear that the hijackers were on a suicide mission. Tom and his cohort of passengers on board, were not fully successful of course—the plane crashed, and everyone on board was killed. But they were partially successful—they prevented the hijackers from ramming the plane right into the White House or the Capitol Building.

After the plane crashed and at the funeral service that were held for these heroes, Tom's little daughters were terribly affected by his death. They wouldn't let their mother out of their sight. If she went to the mailbox, they wanted to go with her. When they went to the park, they would ask, "Do you think any bad people are here?" At school, they would break down and start crying. One of the little girls asked her mother, "Are the bad people in heaven with Dad? If they're in heaven, are they going to hurt him again?"

Listen to that question again, "Are the bad people in heaven with Dad? If they're in heaven, are they going to hurt him again?" I don't relate that story as a way of pronouncing judgment on the hijackers—that is God's concern, not mine or ours. I relate it as a way of reminding us that there is something very right about Jesus pronouncing judgment on people who love the darkness because their deeds are evil—who hate the light—who refuse to come to the light lest their evil deeds be exposed. There is something very right about our not having to spend eternity in their presence.

John 3:16 gives us the grand statement and promise of scripture that God's love for the world was so great, God sent Jesus to die on a cross as a gift of His unconditional love—a gift of grace and forgiveness so great, God promised that whosoever believes in Jesus, will not perish but have eternal life. Those who do not Jesus says in v. 18 have already been judged—there will be separation of sheep and goats on the day of judgment—but the righteous, those in Christ, will not be spending eternity with those who have refused to come into the light—those who have rejected God's gift of grace and choose to live lives of darkness and evil separated from God.

In our fourth week of our Lenten Study by Max Lucado "He Chose the Nails"—this week's discussion is "He Chose to Love Us Forever." God's great love for the world and his promise of love never expires or goes away. Max expresses the beauty of God's love in a theological statement from this week's study. He says, "The cross is the universal symbol of Christianity and the design couldn't be simpler—one beam represents the width of God's love and the other reflects the height of his holiness."

Max continues by stating the cross as a gift from God provides two kinds of sanctification to us. Sanctification for the sake of being brief and reform is the process of becoming holy—Christ's work in us to be continuously transformed by God through the Holy Spirit. Lucado mentions two kinds of sanctification: one is *Positional sanctification*: Christ's work for us as a gift not because of who we are or what we do—it is a gift because of who we know. The other is *Progressive Sanctification*. That is Christ's work in us or continuously being shaped and transformed by the power God's Spirit to do good works in response to God's grace.

In his letter to the church of Ephesus, the Apostle Paul used the imagery of light to help those readers understand what living out their salvation in this way requires of them: He says in Ephesians 5:8-10, "For once you were darkness, but now in the Lord you are light. Live as children of light—for the fruit of the light is found in all that is good and right and true. Try to find out what is pleasing to the Lord!"

Friends in practical terms for us, the influential Christian author and Pastor Dallas Wilard describes some of the characteristics of living as children of light: He says, "Whenever they are found to be in the wrong, they will never defend it—neither to themselves or to others, much less to God. They are thankful to be found out. They do

not feel they are missing out on something good by not sinning. They are not disappointed and do not feel deprived. They are mainly governed by the pull of the good. Their energy is not invested in NOT doing what is wrong but doing what is good. Life in the path of rightness becomes easy and joyous."

So, what would I like for you to take home with you from this sermon? For one thing, I would like you to remember once again the beautiful verse that you already know: "For God so loved the world, that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish, but have eternal life." That is the promise that God loves the whole world—all of us—you and me. That, indeed, is Good News!

And then I would like to dispel the notion that "Everyone is beautiful in their own way." That's a lovely sentiment, but it isn't true. There are people who are not lovely—because they love the darkness—because their deeds and actions are evil and destructive.

And then, I would like to challenge you to live your life in the light of Christ—especially during this season of Lent, to examine yourself to find the dark corners where you are trying to hide from Christ—so that you might open your heart fully to receive the light of Christ. If you do that, it will change your life. It won't always be an easy experience, but once you are on the other side, living fully in the light of Christ, you will be glad.

And finally, I would like to challenge you to be a bearer of Christ's light—to your family—to your co-workers—to your friends and neighbors—to the clerk in the store or supermarket—No, I am not calling you to buttonhole people and to ask, "Do you know Jesus?" I'm suggesting something quite different—that you open yourself so fully to the light of Christ that you become a beacon of light—a beacon of faith—a beacon of integrity.

Friends, let Christ change the way you think about people—the way that you relate to them. Let Christ change your language—the way you speak to your spouse and your children—the way you speak to people. Let Christ change the way you make decisions, so that you are always trying to do the right thing rather than the easy thing. Christ shining through you will have a great effect. Henri Nouwen put it this way: "The great mystery of the Christian life is that while we ourselves are overwhelmed by our own weaknesses and limitations, we can still be so transparent that the Spirit of God, our

divine counselor, can shine through us and bring light to others." Let's come into the light and live as God's people of light. May it be so in your life and mine. Amen!