

John 3:1-17
June 7, '09
Trinity Sunday

“PROFOUNDLY SIMPLE – SIMPLY PROFOUND”

A FUN QUESTION TO ASK PEOPLE IN “GETTING-TO-KNOW-YOU” GATHERINGS IS, “WHAT WAS THE MOST EMBARRASSING MOMENT OF YOUR LIFE?”

ACTUALLY, THE QUESTION SHOULD REALLY BE – “WHAT WAS THE MOST EMBARRASSING MOMENT OF YOUR LIFE THAT YOU’D BE WILLING TO SHARE?”

I SUPPOSE FOR ME IT WOULD BE A SUNDAY IN SEMINARY WHEN I WAS SERVING AS SUPPLY PREACHER.

IT WAS MY FIRST VISIT TO THIS PARTICULAR CHURCH.

A WOMAN WALKED IN AS I WAS WAITING TO ENTER THE SANCTUARY AND INTRODUCED HERSELF BY FIRST & LAST NAME.

I SPOKE TO HER FOR JUST A MOMENT & SHE WENT IN TO SIT DOWN.

A MINUTE OR TWO LATER A MAN WALKED IN & INTRODUCED *HIMSELF* – ONCE AGAIN, FIRST & LAST NAME.

HEARING THE SAME LAST NAME, I BLURTED OUT, “*OH, I THINK I JUST MET YOUR MOTHER.*”

“*NO, THAT WOULD BE MY WIFE.*”

OKAY, HOW YOU BACKPEDAL OUT OF THAT ONE?!

TO MAKE MATTERS WORSE, JUST A FEW MONTHS LATER, I ENDED UP BECOMING THE STUDENT PASTOR OF THAT CHURCH & BOTH HUSBAND & WIFE WERE VERY ACTIVE MEMBERS OF THE CHURCH.

I TRUST HE HAD ENOUGH SENSE TO NEVER MENTION TO HIS WIFE THE IDIOTIC REMARK THE STUDENT PASTOR HAD MADE ON HIS FIRST SUNDAY THERE!

IN READING THIS PASSAGE FROM JOHN’S GOSPEL, ANOTHER EMBARRASSING MOMENT COMES TO MIND BUT IT ENDED UP ONLY BEING EMBARRASSING TO ME BECAUSE NO ONE ELSE WAS AWARE OF WHAT HAPPENED.

SOME OF YOU KNOW THAT I’M NOT MUCH FOR SPONTANEITY.

LAST SUNDAY, AS I LISTENED TO CHUCK RAMSEY PREACHING, IT FELT LIKE I HEARD TWO ENTIRELY DIFFERENT SERMONS FROM ONE WORSHIP SERVICE TO THE NEXT.

HE ALLOWED THE HOLY SPIRIT TO GUIDE & DIRECT HIM WITH WHAT HE SAID.

THOSE WHO SERVE AS LITURGIST IN WORSHIP KNOW THAT’S NOT THE CASE WITH ME.

NOT THAT I DON’T ALLOW THE SPIRIT TO GUIDE & DIRECT ME.

IT’S JUST THAT I LIKE THAT GUIDANCE & DIRECTION TO COME AT LEAST A FEW DAYS BEFORE SUNDAY WORSHIP!

IF YOU WERE TO LISTEN TO A RECORDING OF THE SERMON FROM THE 8:00 SERVICE AND THE 10:30 SERVICE, THEY WOULD ALWAYS BE VIRTUALLY IDENTICAL.

I DO THAT WITH NEARLY EVERY SERVICE I CONDUCT – INCLUDING SERVICES OF WITNESS TO THE RESURRECTION.

IN A FUNERAL SERVICE, I ALWAYS KNOW WHAT I’M GOING TO SAY & WHAT PASSAGES OF SCRIPTURE I’LL READ.

IN ONE SERVICE, THOUGH, A FAMILY MEMBER REQUESTED I USE JOHN 3:16.

I ASSURED THEM I WOULD & I INCORPORATED IT INTO MY SERMON FOR THE SERVICE.

HOWEVER, WHEN I GOT TO THAT PLACE IN THE SERVICE, ALL I HAD WRITTEN DOWN WAS “JOHN 3:16.”

YOU KNOW WHAT’S COMING, DON’T YOU?

I WENT BLANK.

NOW, OF THE MORE THAN 31,000 VERSES IN THE BIBLE – OF THE NEARLY 900 VERSES IN JOHN’S GOSPEL – WOULDN’T JOHN 3:16 BE THE ONE THAT I WOULDN’T HAVE TO WRITE OUT TO REMEMBER IT?!

WELL, I JUST WENT ON WITH THE SERVICE & WHEN IT FINALLY CAME TO ME, I USED IT & I DON’T THINK ANYONE HAD A CLUE THAT I COULDN’T REMEMBER THE MOST FAMILIAR VERSE IN THE ENTIRE BIBLE!

MOST OF YOU PROBABLY HAVEN’T COMMITTED TO MEMORY AS MANY PASSAGES OF SCRIPTURE AS OUR CHILDREN HAVE BECAUSE THEY LEARN PASSAGES EVERY YEAR WITH OUR MEMORY WORK CONTEST.

BUT THIS VERSE YOU KNOW, DON’T YOU?

EVEN IF YOU DON’T KNOW WHERE IT’S FOUND OR THE CONTEXT THAT SURROUNDS IT, YOU KNOW THESE WORDS.

“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.”

THESE WORDS ARE SO PROFOUNDLY SIMPLE & YET SIMPLY PROFOUND.

THAT’S WHY THIS VERSE IS THE MOST WELL-KNOWN IN ALL OF SCRIPTURE.

MARTIN LUTHER CALLS IT “THE GOSPEL IN MINIATURE.”

I THINK IT’S APPROPRIATE TO FOCUS ON THIS PASSAGE ON TRINITY SUNDAY.

IT’S APPROPRIATE FOR A COUPLE OF REASONS.

FIRST OF ALL, THIS PASSAGE IS ONE OF THE MOST IMPORTANT PASSAGES IN THE BIBLE IN TERMS OF THE MANNER IN WHICH IT COMMUNICATES OUR UNDERSTANDING OF GOD AS FATHER, SON & HOLY SPIRIT.

THROUGHOUT THESE VERSES WE SEE ALL THREE PERSONS OF THE TRINITY ACTIVELY INVOLVED IN BRINGING ABOUT SALVATION.

SECONDLY, THE DOCTRINE OF THE TRINITY – LIKE THIS PASSAGE – IS BOTH PROFOUNDLY SIMPLE & SIMPLY PROFOUND.

YOU TRY TO UNDERSTAND GOD AS THREE PERSONS BUT ONLY ONE GOD & IT MAKES YOUR HEAD SPIN!

I THINK ONE OF THE PROBLEMS WITH OUR REASONING IS THAT WE TRY TO TURN IT INTO A MATHEMATICAL FORMULA.

THAT'S NOT INCORRECT, BUT THE TYPE OF MATH WE USE IS.

WE THINK OF IT AS ADDITION – $1 + 1 + 1 = 3$, NOT ONE.

IT DOESN'T ADD UP.

THERE'S OUR PROBLEM.

IT'S NOT ADDITION, BUT MULTIPLICATION – $1 \times 1 \times 1 = 1$.

IT IS PROFOUNDLY SIMPLE, YET SIMPLY PROFOUND.

AUGUSTINE, ONE OF THE GREATEST OF ALL THEOLOGICAL MINDS, WROTE 15 BOOKS ON THE TRINITY – 15 BOOKS THAT TOOK HIM 10 YEARS TO WRITE.

EARLY ON IN HIS MASSIVE TREATISE, AUGUSTINE MADE 7 STATEMENTS ABOUT GOD:

THE FATHER IS GOD.

THE SON IS GOD.

THE HOLY SPIRIT IS GOD.

THE SON IS NOT THE FATHER.

THE FATHER IS NOT THE HOLY SPIRIT.

THE HOLY SPIRIT IS NOT THE SON.

AND THEN, AFTER THESE 6 STATEMENTS, AUGUSTINE ADDS ONE MORE – THERE IS ONLY ONE GOD.

IT IS PROFOUNDLY SIMPLE, YET SIMPLY PROFOUND.

AFTER ALL IS SAID ABOUT THE TRINITY, THOUGH, PERHAPS THE BEST WE CAN DO IS FOLLOW THE ADVICE OF SOMEONE WHO SAID, "*WE UNDERSTAND THE TRINITY THE MOST WHEN WE REALIZE WE DO NOT UNDERSTAND.*"

WE DON'T HAVE TO.

NOR ARE WE MEANT TO.

ONE OF MY FAVORITE ANSWERS TO THE UNANSWERABLE QUESTIONS OF FAITH HAS ALWAYS BEEN – "*IF GOD WAS SMALL ENOUGH FOR OUR MINDS, GOD WOULDN'T BE BIG ENOUGH FOR OUR NEEDS.*"

THAT DOESN'T MEAN, THOUGH, THAT WE STOP TRYING TO UNDERSTAND MORE THAN WE DO NOW.

NEARLY 50 YEARS AGO, J.B. PHILLIPS WROTE A CLASSIC LITTLE BOOK ENTITLED, YOUR GOD IS TOO SMALL.

WHAT PHILLIPS DOES IN THAT LITTLE BOOK IS ADDRESS THE VARIOUS UNDERSTANDINGS WE ALL HAVE OF GOD & HE THEN SUGGESTS THAT EACH ONE OF THEM IS CORRECT – CORRECT, BUT INCOMPLETE.

GOD IS BEYOND ALL OF OUR UNDERSTANDINGS OF WHO GOD IS.

AND ALL OF THIS TAKES US BACK TO NICODEMUS & HIS ENCOUNTER WITH JESUS.

WE REALLY HAVE TO GO BACK TO THE PREVIOUS CHAPTER TO GET A FULL UNDERSTANDING OF WHAT'S HAPPENING HERE.

IN THE CLOSING VERSES OF CHAPTER 2, WE READ THESE WORDS FROM JOHN - "*MANY BELIEVED IN HIS NAME BECAUSE THEY SAW THE SIGNS THAT HE WAS DOING.*"

NICODEMUS APPEARS TO BE ONE OF THOSE WHO BELIEVED PURELY BECAUSE OF THE MIRACLES THEY SAW JESUS PERFORM.

HE COMES TO JESUS BY NIGHT AND SAYS, "*RABBI, WE KNOW THAT YOU ARE A TEACHER COME FROM GOD, BECAUSE NO ONE CAN DO THESE MIRACLES WHICH YOU ARE DOING UNLESS GOD IS WITH HIM.*"

NOW CERTAINLY THERE'S NOTHING WRONG WITH THAT.

THERE'S NOTHING NEGATIVE HERE THAT NICODEMUS HAS SUGGESTED.

HE IS PROFESSING AN ELEMENT OF FAITH.

SO THE ISSUE IS NOT A MATTER OF CONVERSION FROM UNBELIEF TO BELIEF.

IT'S A MATTER OF CONVERSION FROM ONE KIND OF FAITH IN JESUS TO ANOTHER.

J. B. PHILLIPS WOULD SAY TO NICODEMUS, "*YOUR GOD IS TOO SMALL.*"

TO UNDERSTAND THE FULLNESS OF GOD, WE MUST BEGIN TO UNDERSTAND THAT WE EXPERIENCE GOD IN THREE WAYS – AS SOMEONE BEYOND US, SOMEONE BESIDE US & SOMEONE WITHIN US.

GOD AS FATHER, SON & HOLY SPIRIT.

WE BEGIN TO UNDERSTAND THE SCOPE OF GOD'S LOVE & IT OVERWHELMS US WITH ITS MAGNITUDE.

IN HER BOOK, TRAVELING MERCIES, ANNE LAMOTT TELLS OF A PERSONAL EXPERIENCE THAT HELPED HER TO GRASP THE EXTENT OF GOD'S LOVE.

WHILE WALKING ON THE BEACH WITH HER SON SAM, THEY SAW A MAN NEARBY, SEVERELY ABUSING HIS DOG.

ANNE'S SON WANTED HER TO INTERVENE, BUT SHE WAS FRIGHTENED BY THE MAN'S VIOLENCE.

EVENTUALLY ANOTHER PERSON ON THE BEACH YELLED AT THE MAN TO STOP, AND HE LAUGHED AT HER WHILE LEADING HIS POOR BEATEN DOG AWAY.

AFTER HE WAS GONE, ANNE FELT ASHAMED OF HER COWARDICE, BUT AS SHE AND SAM CONTINUED DOWN THE BEACH, SHE FOUND HERSELF PRAYING ONE WORD, OVER AND OVER.

"PLEASE," SHE SAID.

SHE DIDN'T KNOW WHAT SHE WAS ASKING FOR, BUT THE WORD "ASK" HAD SPECIAL MEANING FOR HER.

IN CHURCH THE PRECEDING WEEK A MEMBER SHARED WITH THE CONGREGATION HOW SHE AND HER HUSBAND HAD ADOPTED A SPECIAL NEEDS CHILD.

THEY'D GONE THROUGH AN AGENCY NAMED ASK – ADOPT SPECIAL KIDS.

A QUESTIONNAIRE ASKED POINTED QUESTIONS: "COULD YOU ADOPT AN ADDICTED BABY? A CHILD WITH A TERMINAL ILLNESS? WITH MILD RETARDATION? WITH MODERATE RETARDATION? WITH TENDENCIES TOWARDS VIOLENCE AGAINST OTHERS?"

AS THE WOMAN RECITED THE LIST, SHE BEGAN TO CRY.

AND AT THAT POINT, THE PASTOR STOOD BESIDE HER, SAYING "GOD IS AN ADOPTIVE PARENT, TOO.

AND GOD CHOSE US ALL.

GOD SAYS, "SURE, I'LL TAKE THE KIDS WHO ARE ADDICTED OR TERMINAL.

I'LL PICK ALL THE RETARDED KIDS, AND OF COURSE THE SADISTS. THE SELFISH ONES, THE LIARS."

RECALLING THIS EVENT AS SHE WALKED ON THE BEACH, ANNE SUDDENLY REALIZED THAT, AS SHE WRITES, "THE MYSTERY OF GOD'S LOVE IS THAT GOD LOVES THE MAN WHO WAS BEING MEAN TO HIS DOG JUST AS MUCH AS HE LOVES BABIES ..

SO, OF COURSE, HE LOVES ORDINARY OLD ME, EVEN OR ESPECIALLY AT MY MOST SCARED AND PETTY AND MEAN AND OBSESSIVE.

GOD LOVES ME, CHOOSES ME."

IN OTHER WORDS, GOD LOVES US EVEN WHEN WE ARE A MESS, WHEN WE ARE GUILTY OF INAPPROPRIATE CONDUCT, WHEN WE ARE IN EMOTIONAL OR SPIRITUAL DISARRAY, WHEN WE ARE DISCOURAGED AND FULL OF DOUBT.

GOD LOVES US WHEN WE'RE ARROGANT AND RUDE.

GOD EVEN LOVES US WHEN WE DO HORRIBLY EMBARRASSING THINGS.

THAT'S WHAT WE READ IN THIS MOST FAMILIAR OF ALL 31,103 VERSES IN THE BIBLE – "FOR GOD SO LOVED THE WORLD..."

THE GREEK WORD THAT IS USED FOR "WORLD" HERE IS "KOSMOS."

NOTE THAT JESUS OR JOHN DOESN'T SAY, "FOR GOD SO LOVED THOSE IN THE CHURCH..." OR "FOR GOD SO LOVED THE PEOPLE OF THIS NATION OR THAT NATION..." OR "THIS RACE OR THAT RACE."

HE DOESN'T SAY, "GOD LOVES THE GOOD PEOPLE, THE SMART PEOPLE, THE NICE PEOPLE, THE RELIGIOUS PEOPLE, THE POWERFUL PEOPLE, THE INFLUENTIAL PEOPLE."

"FOR GOD SO LOVED THE KOSMOS...THE WORLD."

LET'S GO BACK TO SOMETHING IN THE STORY OF NICODEMUS THAT'S EASY TO OVERLOOK.

WE'RE TOLD THAT HE CAME TO JESUS "BY NIGHT."

OUR FIRST THOUGHT IS THAT HE DID SO BECAUSE HE WAS A PHARISEE & HAD TO VISIT JESUS SECRETLY – AT A TIME WHEN NO ONE ELSE WOULD SEE HIM.

THERE IS PROBABLY SOME TRUTH IN THAT & YET I THINK THERE'S ANOTHER REASON THAT JOHN POINTS IT OUT.

“NIGHT” IS NOT AN INDICATION OF A TIME OF DAY AS MUCH AS IT IS A STAGE OF LIFE.

NICODEMUS CAME TO JESUS IN THE NIGHT & DARKNESS OF HIS SOUL.

HE CAME WITH AN UNDERSTANDING OF GOD THAT WAS FAR TOO SMALL.

HE CAME, FOCUSING ON THE MIRACLES OF JESUS.

HE LEFT WITH HIS VISION ENLARGED & WITH A GREATER UNDERSTANDING OF THE MAGNITUDE OF GOD'S LOVE.

IF YOUR VISION OF GOD IS LIMITED, IF YOUR UNDERSTANDING OF THE MAGNITUDE OF GOD IS TRAPPED IN THE DARKNESS OF YOUR SOUL, I URGE YOU TO LOOK BEYOND THE DARKNESS & INTO THE LIGHT.

I URGE YOU TO EXPERIENCE GOD AS SOMEONE BEYOND YOU, SOMEONE BESIDE YOU & SOMEONE WITHIN YOU.....SOMEONE WHO LOVES YOU UNCONDITIONALLY.

IT IS PROFOUNDLY SIMPLE & SIMPLY PROFOUND. AMEN.

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