



The Westminster Pulpit

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“The Good Life” **Sermon on John 3:14-21**

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John 3:14-21

And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.

‘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. Those who believe in him are not condemned; but those who do not believe are condemned already, because they have not believed in the name of the only Son of God. And this is the judgment, that the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil. For all who do evil hate the light and do not come to the light, so that their deeds may not be exposed. But those who do what is true come to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that their deeds have been done in God.’

Much of what we do as the Body of Christ is to dabble in the art of persuasion. We have a vision for our congregation that as we live in these stormy days, we will NOT be about conforming to this world, but being transformed by the renewing of our minds in Christ Jesus. We will be ambassadors of reconciliation. We will be focused on loving God and loving our neighbor. Such a focus will make us shine like a city on a hill. We will be the light of the world. We are persuaded. How do we persuade ourselves because there are certainly storms ahead and it’s so easy to get off track? How do we set our eyes on the prize of that vision?

One way is to be about transformation, reconciliation, love, and light. Our Hands-on Mission Committee has asked us to try to add something new and extraordinary to our lives. To transform our lives by adding a new mission and ministry. It could be as simple as starting your day with prayer, or calling up a friend and saying, "I'm thankful for you." It could be adding a new ministry that puts you out into this world and catching the Spirit in the wind, and when the Spirit blows, who knows what's going to happen next? What can I do to persuade you to take up a new mission or ministry?

Persuasion. There is an art to it. I think the first step is to have the right answer and the desire to share it. That's not easy. If you don't believe me, just ask me.

Look, I have to climb up in this pulpit Sunday after Sunday and persuade you that I have the answer. I am not paid to get up here and say, "I don't know. What do you all think?"

And yet there are times in my life, in the church, when I have found myself needing to be persuaded by what you all think. For I am not alone in my beliefs. We do share in our confession... "I believe in God...." I believe in Jesus Christ. I believe in the Spirit. And in my life, your right answer of light and love has come at a time when I needed it. You won me over. We're about the art of persuasion.

It could be that it is becoming a lost art. Have you noticed that it is getting so much harder to persuade people? I mean, who reaches across the aisle these days? If you do that, you'll lose an arm. I heard just this past week a daughter lamenting that she lost her dad to politics. They don't talk on the phone anymore. Estranged. Far from the days when the pink balloon was tied to the mailbox. Far from the days of the daddy-daughter dates. Far from the day when daughter and daddy walked together, teary-eyed, down the aisle of the church. All of it sacrificed on the altar of the god of politics.

How can the church persuade people in this world that we have taken this all too far? That's politics. I wish that God would do what God did in that fun text that TJ read. Did you hear it?

The people of God complained against God and Moses in the wilderness and God sent poisonous serpents. Nothing like poisonous serpents to get your point across! It persuaded the people almost instantly to repent!

They came to Moses and said, "You know, we might have gotten this wrong." Moses prayed for the people. The persuasive prayer. "God, they're your people God. If we could have found some better people, that might have made this whole trip a little easier. But as it is God, these are your people. You made a covenant with your people, your children. I know they're a mess! Can you figure out a way to love them?" What was the persuasive prayer that made God tell Moses his plan with serpents?

"Make a poisonous serpent out of bronze and set in on a pole, and everyone who is bitten shall look at it and live." God has a great sense of humor. You have to look at the very thing that's killing you in order to be made well.

What would Moses have to put on a pole for you? What's killing you?

I suspect some would want to put their bronzed business card on the pole because, as it is, it's work, work, work.... It's killing them. They have no life, no family, just work.

What would Moses have to put on a pole for you? I have been in a room with people who are trying to persuade another who suffers from an addiction. "Can you see that it's killing you? Can you see it? Alcohol. Drugs. Can't you see it?" "No. I don't know what you're talking about." Family, friends, preacher, all gathered in a room. "How can we persuade you that you're heading down a road of no return?"

What's Moses got to fashion and put on a pole for you? Some bronze and bitterness mixture that is robbing your soul of life?

It is the most difficult thing in the world to give up the thing that is killing you.

In the Gospel of John, that strange text of Moses lifting up a serpent in the wilderness comes roaring back in the story about the Pharisee Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews who came to Jesus at night. Nicodemus just wants a conversation. "Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God; for no one can do these signs that you do apart from the presence of God."

Just a religious conversation. I've had a few of those. It kind of massages the brain a little bit. You know, how many angels can dance on the head of a pin? Good stuff.

But over and over and over again in John's Gospel, Jesus doesn't have time for that kind of talk. Doesn't have time for the preservation of the institution of faith. He doesn't immerse himself in the church politics. He has a desire to persuade.

He says things like... "No one can enter the kingdom of God without being born from above." What? He says things like, "No one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and the spirit." What? That tactic of persuasion that Jesus uses in John's Gospel is to come to earth with words from heaven, words that will raise us up into this conversation with God.

Just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him 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. Words from above. God so loved the world!

In these wilderness days, when it seems many folks have lost their religion, and some have come very close, do you have the vision to see the good life that was raised on a cross? Do you have a vision to see the things that led to his death? That's what is killing us. That in a world gone mad, he was persuaded not to fight back. He didn't advocate an eye-for-an-eye. He simply took the meanness and the hatred, and put it on a cross. On his way, on his truth, on his life. We do see how God lifts him up.

And we are always in need of persuasion to that fact as we are so easily distracted. Father and daughter can't even speak to each other on the phone. And we dare to think that we can settle the Middle East? When a father and a daughter can't even speak to each other on a phone because of politics. Darkness.

How are we to persuade?

I was persuaded, by the Hands-on Mission Committee to do some extraordinary thing during Lent. That is something out of the ordinary. So, I got in my car and went to Cockrill Elementary School to read to some children. I thought I'd start small.

I found the school, found the front door, got buzzed in and checked in at the front desk, and showed my driver's license, which they took and copied. And it occurred to me, walking down a quiet hallway that had a police officer behind a desk at the very end of the hall, how much the world had changed since I was a kid. What a dark and sad world. I found the classroom door, and it was locked. I knocked. "You probably need to knock a little louder," came a voice from behind. I did. And the door was opened by a familiar face that took me by surprise. It was church member Hillary Flynn - she's a teacher. She welcomed me in.

The first thing I noticed is that there are some children who, after the introduction, will come right to you and take your hand to hold. You are an immediate friend. What a wonderful welcome it was to have an instant friend. A little hand in mine. I think that's light. And love.

There was about a two or three-minute period of clearing the floor of blocks and toys. I helped a bit. Then I realized that the floor was being cleaned so that I could sit on the floor, which is really an extraordinary mission opportunity for me. The last time I sat on the ground was in 2007. I vowed I would never do that again. The ground is pretty low. But I got down there.

Now one thing I noticed when I sat on the ground, is that the children were at eye-level. They have not learned the ways of the world. When I was down on the floor, they came right up to my face. I don't do that to you. You don't do that to me. But the kids - they're right there. Literally, eye-to-eye. The first question I fielded, "Why is your hair white?" I said, "Have you met the members of my church?"

I didn't say that. I wanted to say that, but I was afraid the message would have been lost on them. I don't remember what I said. I was there to read a book.

I read three books that were about making friends and being friends, and how to transform a bully into a friend. The other book was about the Statue of Liberty, who one day got tired of looking at New York and New Jersey, so decided to break free to walk around the country. I read how the Statue of Liberty went to St. Louis and sat on the arch. The Statue of Liberty slept in a Kansas wheat field, skied the Rocky Mountains, lounged at the foot of the Golden Gate Bridge. And as I was reading the book, I realized the blessings of my life, that I had been to all those places. I wondered if those children would be as fortunate to have all those wonderful memories.

But the memory I want to share with you is that when the book is closed, those children will grab you by the neck and give you the best hug.

Jesus asks, "Do you want to be made well?" In a crazy world, full of meanness, do you want to be made well? Do you want to take a risk? It's pure and simple. It's eternal. It's the good life, and I am persuaded.