

May 31, 2015

*John 3:1-17: **“God For Us!”***

*Pilgrim Lutheran Church
2155 North Oakland Avenue
Decatur, Illinois 62526*

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

Charles Colson tells about having dinner with a media personality [he calls "Tom"] and trying to talk with him about Christianity. First he tells of his own conversion. "Obviously Jesus worked for you," his friend replied, but went on to tell him about someone he knew whose life had been turned around by New Age spirituality. "Crystals, channeling - it worked for her. Just like your Jesus." Then Colson tried to explain the difference between Christianity and New Age spirituality, but got nowhere. He raised the issue of death and the after life, but his friend did not believe in Heaven or Hell and was not particularly bothered by the prospect of dying. Colson started to explain what the Bible said, but his friend did not believe in the Bible or any other spiritual authority. Colson then relates:

As I fumbled with my fork, an idea popped to mind. "Have you seen Woody Allen's movie *Crimes and Misdemeanors*?" Yes, he had. It's about a doctor who hires a killer to murder his mistress. Afterward he is haunted by guilt. His Jewish father had taught him that God sees all, and will surely bring justice. But the doctor's crime is never discovered. Eventually he quells his conscience by deciding that in the "real world" there is no justice; that life is nothing but a Darwinian struggle where the ruthless come out on top. "When we do wrong, is that the only choice?" I asked Tom. "Either live tormented by guilt--or kill our conscience and live like beasts?" For the first time, Tom was thoughtful, picking at his food. I went on to Leo Tolstoy's *War and Peace*, where the central character, Pierre, wrestles with his conscience, crying out, "Why is it that I know what is right, but do what is wrong?"

After quoting from C. S. Lewis on the reality of the moral law [the difference between right and wrong] the friend was finally following him. Then Colson cited the epistle of Romans on the human inability to keep the law. His friend then paid close attention to the message of Christ's atoning work on the cross. Although the friend did not become a Christian, Colson relates that he felt that he had broken through at least some of his defenses.

I set this example in front of you this morning because it illustrates just how hard it has become to bear witness to the Triune God - the only God who saves us. It wasn't that long ago that you could generally talk to people about the historical Jesus, death and the after life, even the Bible as the Word of God, and you might find some common ground on which to build a witness. It still can happen, but what do you do when you come across someone who has completely discounted Jesus, is not bothered by death and the after life, and who believes that the Bible is a book of fables? The truth is that whether you have a common ground on which to build or not, there is only one way to begin the process of reaching someone. One must begin by trying to touch the conscience, the difference between right and wrong, accountability, guilt, and the truth that we are lost and need to be found. It doesn't guarantee a conversion, but there will never be a need for a Savior until there is a conscience that has been touched by the truth of the law which leads to an acknowledgment of condemnation and punishment.

Soon we will be reciting the *Athanasian Creed*. I would imagine that to someone like Colson's friend "Tom" most all of it would seem like a bunch of gobbledegook. Still the creed makes it very clear

when it says, “perish eternally,” and “they that have done evil, into everlasting fire” and again, “except a man believe faithfully and firmly, he cannot be saved.” And that really is a starting point. It is suppose to move us into an inward examination of ourselves and the horribly messed up world around us. It is all about the only God For Us. He is for us. We need to be saved. But if no one knows what it is that we are to be saved from, then everything else is indeed a bunch of gobbledegook.

To the sensitive ears of a culture of tolerance for anything and everything but the truth, these thoughts must be understood personally. This creed is about the only God who saves us from guilt and accountability. Peter reminds us of just how serious it is when he says to the rulers, elders and teachers of the law, “Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved (Acts 4:12).”

During the night, Nicodemus comes to visit Jesus. This Nicodemus is no ordinary man, but a Pharisee and a member of the Jewish ruling council. He knows that Jesus is a teacher from God on the basis of his miraculous signs, but he is confused as to his person and work. But Nicodemus is still entrenched in the false teaching that salvation is something that we must accomplish. Jesus cuts right through this immediately. He begins by saying, “I tell you the truth, unless a man is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God.” With this statement, Jesus begins by pointing out that God must disturb us and awaken a real view of what has become of us and this messed up creation. Jesus then talks about the Bronze Serpent that saved the Israelites from venomous snakes. The point is that one must be brought to the uncomfortable truth before the comfort of salvation.

The venomous snake of sin, death, and judgment must bring us into shock much like the Israelites in Exodus: “Then the LORD sent fiery serpents among the people, and they bit the people, so that many people of Israel died. And the people came to Moses and said, ‘We have sinned, for we have spoken against the LORD and against you. Pray to the LORD, that he take away the serpents from us.’ So Moses prayed for the people (Numbers 21:6-7).” Indeed, one must be brought to the discomfort that comes from a guilty conscience.

Since we have been bitten by the venomous snake of sin and death, we need the antidote. This antidote is not something that we can produce on our own. Being filled with venom, everything in us is touched by this deadly poison. Even what we reason is the best part of us is nothing but the venom of sin and death before God. As the people of Israel could not find a relief from having been bit in the wilderness, so we cannot find relief from sin, death, and the devil. Left to ourselves we are lost and condemned creatures. Unless someone intervenes and changes everything, we are hopelessly lost.

In our Gospel lesson, Jesus says, “Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the desert, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life.” Here we are reminded of how the Lord said to Moses (Numbers 21) in the wilderness, “Make a snake and put it up on a pole; anyone who is bitten can look at it and live.” So Moses made a bronze snake and put it up on a pole. Then, when anyone was bitten by a snake and looked at the bronze snake, he lived. Once again, we are brought to the thought that salvation is found in no one else but Christ.

Following the reference to the bronze snake, Jesus then says the well-known words of John 3:16, "For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life." It is at this point that we need to pause and behold the teaching of the Trinity. While we know and believe that there is one God, it is here that we see three distinct persons. The Father loved the world that he gave his Son. The Son came into this world to be our bronze snake and placed himself on the pole of a cross to endure our sin and death so that we might live. He lived a perfect life so that we might be counted acceptable. And whoever believes in him will not perish but have eternal life.

"For God so loved the world." God For Us! In a world full of sin, death, and the devil, we can see how love is unfulfilled in us. We are lonely all the time and miserable. The fact that people crave love indicates that there is something wrong with the world - something wrong with us and what we were meant to be. In the beginning, God made us in order to love us so that we might know love and love him and one another and exist in this love forever. We cease to exist, in the way in which God made us, when we no longer love God and one another, but turn inwardly to inordinately love ourselves. This is to die and to be alone, for when all we can love is ourselves - survival of the fittest - then we are truly alone and full of lovelessness, for we are disconnected from the one who is love and from one another.

The Father is eternal love, the Son is the eternal revelation of love, and the Spirit is perpetual movement of love. And this beautiful love of the Trinity has been given to us. "For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him will not perish but have eternal life." Our salvation then is of the Father, through the Son, in the Holy Spirit. God For Us! As the *Athanasian Creed* says: "This is the true Christian faith. Unless a man believe this firmly and faithfully, he cannot be saved."

Amen.

Pastor Brock Abbott

The opening of this sermon is a combination of the following:

Charles Colson, "Reaching the Pagan Mind," *Christianity Today*, 9 November 1992, p. 112.

Gene Edward Veith, *POSTMODERN TIMES A Christian Guide to Contemporary Thought and Culture*, (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1994), pg. 15.