

***Bringing Truth to Light***  
**A Sermon on John 3:14-21**  
**Fourth Sunday in Lent**  
**March 11, 2018**

**Introduction**

Today I would like to talk about truth. Our culture seems to have broken down into tribalism. Each political tribe has its own truth. Evangelical and mainline Christians in effect have become two separate tribes. We have very different understandings of God and Jesus and humanity. There don't seem to any common beliefs that bring people together.

The Gospel of John would not seem to be a good place to look for truth that brings people together. Non-believers and the interfaith community may be offended by the assertion that everyone who believes in Jesus is saved and everyone who doesn't believe is condemned.

I think that is a surface level reading of the text that does not fairly reflect the original meaning of the text. Today I would like to look at what the Gospel of John has to say about truth and whether it can help us bridge the partisan divide and bring people together.

**First Move: Committing Openly to Jesus**

Today's text takes place immediately after a conversation between Jesus and Nicodemus about spiritual rebirth, being born again or born from above. Nicodemus has faded from the picture. Jesus is speaking to a broader audience; he is speaking to Jewish followers of Jesus, people who are drawn to Jesus but are unwilling to commit. They need to go beyond half belief to full confession.

They are symbolized by Nicodemus, who comes to Jesus at night. He is afraid or unwilling to come to Jesus openly during the day. He probably represents a group of Judeans in the synagogues when the Gospel of John was written. They were impressed by Jesus but were unwilling to commit fully to Jesus and be baptized.

John's community is in the midst of a family feud. They are followers of Christ who are still in the synagogue. They consider themselves to be righteous Jews. They are feuding with another groups of Jews about the direction that Judaism should take after the destruction of the Temple in 70 C.E.

Scholars believe that the discourse in today's text more likely comes from John than from the historical Jesus. It reflects the understanding of the early followers of Christ as they tried to make sense of the cross. They conflated the traditional images of Messiah with Son of Man and Son of God.

John refers to Jesus as the Son of Man. The Son of Man is an eschatological title. It first appears in the Book of Daniel, Chapter 7, when Daniel has a vision of one like a Son of Man coming with the clouds of heaven. God, or the Ancient of Days, will sit in judgment of the four great beasts that have ruled the world. An angel explains to Daniel that the four great beasts represent four great empires that had oppressed Israel: Babylon, the Medes, Persia and Greece. The Ancient of Days hands over an eternal kingship to the Son of Man to rule over the people of the earth as a fully human being instead of as a beast.

The Son of Man also appears in 1 Enoch and 4 Ezra, two books that were written in the intertestamental period, after the books in the Old Testament were written and before the New Testament. They describe the Son of Man as a supernatural being who comes from heaven to judge all people and rule the world as a human being.

John is telling his community that the time for judgment has come. Jesus, like the Son of Man, comes from heaven. He is the light that comes into the world to save righteous people and bring judgment on the unrighteous.

## **Second Move: Bringing Light into the Cosmos**

Jesus' discourse is filled with words with double meanings. He begins his discourse: "Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the wilderness, in the same way it is necessary for the Son of Man to be lifted up, in order that everyone who believes in him might have eternal life."

Jesus is referring to today's Old Testament reading, Numbers 21:4-9. The people are grumbling against Moses in the wilderness. God sends poisonous snakes among the people to punish them. The people realize they have sinned and Moses prays for them. God relents and tells Moses to lift a serpent up on a stick. Then the people who were bitten can look on it and be healed. God saves the people by lifting up the image of a bronze snake in the wilderness.

Jesus also is lifted up. The Greek word for *lifted up* has a double meaning; it also means *exalted*. In the Gospel of John, Jesus is exalted when he is lifted up on the cross. Whoever looks on the cross and sees Jesus as the son of God is saved.

Believing in Jesus in the Gospel of John is more than an intellectual proposition that you believe that Jesus is the son of God. It means trusting in Jesus and having a personal relationship with the crucified Christ and his way of life.

John 3:16 is one of our best-known Bible verses. Martin Luther called it the gospel in miniature. But what does it mean? It's not that easy. John 3:16 has three words with double meanings. "For in this way God loved the *cosmos*, in that he gave the one and only son in order that everyone who believes in him might not *perish*, but might have *eternal life*."

*Cosmos* is nearly always translated as world, but its primary meaning in Greek is an adornment, a mark of beauty. It also means an orderly arrangement. The third meaning is the universe, the orderly universe, and that is what we think of today when we use the English word *cosmos*. The fourth meaning in Greek is humanity, the known inhabited world. The original Greek word suggests something bigger, the entire universe and the beautiful structure that God gives it. God doesn't just love humans; God loves the entire universe and the beauty of its structure. This verse has eschatological overtones. God gives his son to restore the beautiful structure of creation.

Perish is the second word that has a double meaning. The primary meaning of perish is as a synonym for die. It also means to die prematurely. Think of perishable foods. It is life that is cut short. This second meaning of premature death is lost. It is saying something more than God does not want us to die a physical death. God does not want us to be lost, for our lives to be cut short.

The third word that has a double meaning is *eternal life*. In the Gospel of John, eternal life is another way of saying the kingdom of God. Jesus says in the first few verses of John, Chapter 3, that no one can behold the kingdom of God unless they are born from above. Now he says that no one has eternal life unless they are born from above.

The Greek word for eternal is αἰώνιος. It is the root for the English word *eon*. It literally means of the age, as in an age of history. It can mean lasting for an entire age, a really long time, or it can emphasize the new age, the kingdom of God as a new age in history. In the Gospel of John, we enjoy eternal life right here and now when we are born from above.

God sends Jesus to the cosmos because God loves the cosmos. God's love for the world is what makes new life possible. Eternal life is life in all its fullness, spent in union with God.

The last five verses of the discourse say that God does not want to judge the cosmos, God wants to save it. Save can also mean rescue or heal.

Jesus says, “This is the judgment. That light has come into the cosmos.” Light is a symbol for God. In Dante’s *Paradiso*, there are ten circles of heaven. The tenth circle, where God lives, is pure light. God is too beautiful to behold. The highest heaven is a blinding light. That light comes into the cosmos, but men love the darkness rather than the light. Most translations say their deeds are evil, but the Greek word for evil also means worthless, useless, slight, insignificant. John is not necessarily dividing the world into good and evil. He could be saying that most people condemn themselves by leading trivial, insignificant lives instead of coming to the light and living with God.

### **Third Move: Reflecting the Light**

The last verse says, “The one who does what is true goes to the light.” What is true is what is eternal. It reflects the love that God has for the world. It makes it possible to tear down the walls that divide people.

Bill Tabbernee has spent a lifetime in ministry, trying to tear down walls. He was born in the Netherlands in 1944, a time of intense division. The Germans had conquered the Netherlands following a blitzkrieg in 1940. Bill’s father was arrested by the Nazis in 1944 and put in a German labor camp. The Germans took every able bodied man and made them slave laborers to work in German factories.

When Bill was less than one year old, there was a famine and widespread starvation in Holland. It was known as the Hunger Winter. Bill’s mother kept him alive by boiling sugar beets.

After his father was liberated, he wanted to leave the ruins behind and start all over. The family applied to emigrate to the United States, Canada and Australia. Australia was the first to approve their application. When Bill was 11, the family emigrated to Melbourne, Australia.

Bill’s mother was a Salvation Army officer. When the Germans were bombing the Netherlands in 1940, Bill’s father and his first wife were huddled in a building. Bill’s father tried to shield his wife with his body, but shrapnel from the bombs killed her. The funeral was performed by a female Salvation Army officer. She later married his father and became Bill’s mother.

Bill grew up in the Salvation Army. In Australia, the family belonged to Plymouth Brethren, a conservative denomination that practiced baptism by immersion. Bill was baptized in the Yarra River outside Melbourne when he was 15.

Bill joined the Churches of Christ in Australia when he was 21. The split between Disciples and Churches of Christ had not occurred there.

Bill started studying at the University of Melbourne in 1966. He taught in public schools for three years, both in elementary school and in high school. He went to seminary because he wanted to be a chaplain in high school; most public schools in Australia had chaplains. He attended the College of the Bible, a Disciples seminary in a suburb of Melbourne. It is now known as Stirling Theological College.

Bill was ordained in 1970. He served as the minister of a church for 2½ years before he entered Yale Divinity School. He went to Yale on a World Council of Churches scholarship. That sowed some of the seeds of ecumenism and interfaith dialogue. Bill says that he also was inspired by E. L. Williams, the principal [what we would call the president] of the College of the Bible. Lyle Williams was passionate about Christian unity. He was one of the first to visit Russia on an ecumenical exchange. He was the principal of the seminary for 1944 to 1973. He was one of the three leading Disciples ecumenists of his day, along with Stephen England at Phillips and William Robinson in the U.K.

Bill studied the history of Christian thought at Yale under Jaroslav Pelikan and Roland Bainton. In his spare time, he served for 18 months as the minister of a congregation. His dissertation for his PhD was on the Montanists.

Bill went back to Melbourne and began teaching at College of the Bible. He was a lecturer in theology and history.

Bill served as the principal or president of the College of the Bible from 1981 to 1990. He served on the Faith and Order Commission of the World Council of Churches for 20 years, representing the Australia Disciples of Christ.

Bill came to Oklahoma in 1991 when he was called to be President of Phillips Theological Seminary, which then had campuses in Enid and Tulsa. He recognized that Tulsa had more potential for growth for the seminary than Enid and consolidated the campuses in Tulsa in 1999. Chester Cadieux, a member of Harvard Avenue Christian Church and the President of QuikTrip, donated the QuikTrip headquarters in Tulsa to Phillips to be used as a campus. Bill raised \$8 million to convert the office building into a seminary campus with a chapel and a library.

Bill has been the Executive Director of the Oklahoma Conference of Churches since 2010, bringing new life to the organization. His passion at the OCC has been in interfaith work. He started an InterFaith Youth Bus Tour that takes 200 high school students each fall to visit the houses of worship of three different religions.

I asked Bill, “What truth have you brought to light?” He said that Christian unity does not mean uniformity. Disagreement doesn’t mean disunity. Christian unity is dependent on unity of all humankind. Bill said that when he is preaching, he always tries to visualize a Jew or a Muslim sitting on the front pew during his sermon.

The truth is that each and every person in the world is a child of God, and God's love runs through each and every one of us. Love is the most powerful force in the cosmos. When we act in love, we recognize the divinity and the humanity in the people that we meet. We see the cosmos as a beautiful, ordered diversity.

From the interfaith work of pioneers like Bill Tabbernee, progressive Christians have come to recognize that we share a lot of values with Muslims and Jews, Sikhs and Buddhists. The bigger challenge today is recognizing the humanity in people whose values we disagree with. I would be more comfortable worshipping in Abby or Vered's synagogues than in First Baptist Church of Edmond. Abby and Vered and Kris Ladasau have preached here. I can't imagine asking Paul Blair to preach here.

In John's theology, the Paul Blairs of the world have turned away from Christ and live in the darkness. They bring judgment on themselves. They live in fear and judgment of other children of God. They may fervently believe that they are committed to Christ, but according to Thomas Aquinas, they are seeking an illusion rather than the good, they are committed to Southern culture and conservative ideology rather than to Christ. That does not relieve us of the responsibility to continue to reach out to them, to hear their concerns, whether or not we agree with their values. John is the most missionary of the gospels.

## **Conclusion**

The good news that the Gospel of John proclaims for us on this Fourth Sunday in Lent is that, for Christians, God's light shines through us when we fully commit to Christ, when going to church means more to us than reading the New York Times on Sunday morning, when confessing Christ means that we reflect the non-violent, non-judgmental love of Christ in everything we say and do, especially in our dealings with people we disagree with. That is the truth that God brings to light through our deeds.

People we disagree with are part of God's creation, too. We may think they are living in darkness. If they are, they will be consumed by fear and anxiety, bringing punishment on themselves. If we look hard enough, engage them without judgment and try to hear their concerns, we may see that God's light shines through them, too.