

Sermon for Trinity Episcopal, Lumberton - August 8, 2021

In the Name of God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

You and I live in a pluralistic world. And in perhaps the most pluralistic country in that world. Nowadays it is widely frowned upon to declare that your way of doing things is any better than anyone else's. Especially your way of believing.

I'm not talking about style of worship. I think that declaring one style as better than another is silly. Measure them by their fruits, I say. If that person's style yields the Fruits of the Spirit, then good on 'em.

No, I'm really trying to get at the reality that it's no longer fashionable to say that Christianity is "better" than any other religion. And so the work of evangelism suffers because, well, we don't really have anything other people need. We may have a flavor of religion they'll like better, but it's really just a matter of taste, or preference. We don't have anything significantly better to offer anyone, so why do evangelism?

Because we do. Have something fundamentally different and better. I'll get to that in a bit, but first, why have we lost the ability to preach the Gospel in a way people might actually want to hear it?

Well, largely because we turned Christianity into a gateway to heaven. The world is littered with tracts that ask, "Do you know where you're going when you die?" or, in some form or other, "If

you don't believe like me, you'll spend eternity in hell!" And frankly, I'm glad the world is finally turning its back on that message. It was never the message of Jesus.

But in rejecting that false gospel, much of the church, especially our side of the church, has also turned away from anything that sounds remotely like it. We've thrown the baby out with the bathwater. We don't want to sound like "Them" so we don't really evangelize at all. We don't have a "message," other than "everyone is accepted here," which is nice, but heck, my Rotary Club in Westbury was just as accepting. We're more than a safe space. We're meant to transform the very fabric of Creation by our message.

Okay. So if what happened to our message? What's at the core of it that we've lost track of?

The Cross. The Cross.

And when we lose sight of that Truth, that Reality, we start to turn Jesus into either another rule-giver (believe in me or burn!) or just another nice guy who taught a lot of nice stuff. We cannot understand Him, or His message, or the nature of the One He called Father, or for that matter the nature of the Reality the Father created, except as we view it through the Cross.

And that's what Jesus is talking about in our Gospel reading for today. (See? I really did read the texts for this week!)

The Jews are grumbling about Jesus and His claims that He is the One who came down from heaven. And he replies, “Don’t grumble among yourselves. No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him. (or her, obviously)”

I’ve spent a lot of time pondering that response this week and I finally realized what Jesus is talking about. It’s almost like He’s saying, “Don’t worry if you don’t get it. God hasn’t called you to me.” (Unlike the ones who do get it.)

No, that’s not it.

What Jesus is saying is that you can’t understand what it means that He has come down from heaven *until* God draws you to Him. And up to this point, *no one* has been drawn to Him. Not in that way. That is. “Don’t worry, nobody gets it yet, and no one will until the Father who sent me draws them to me.”

And *no one* has yet been drawn to Jesus because He has not yet been “lifted up.” That, THAT is what draws us to Him. He said it this way in John 12, “And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself.” And He said this in reference to the manner in which He was to die.

The Cross.

And don’t get all hung up on the fact that one place Jesus says His Father will draw us to Him, while in another He says He’ll draw us to Himself. For Him there is no distinction. In John 5:19 He says, “Truly, truly, I say to you, the Son can do nothing of his

own accord, but only what he sees the Father doing. For whatever the Father does, that the Son does likewise.”

So that which makes sense of Jesus, of the Father, of, well, everything, is the Cross.

And that's what you and I have to offer the world that no other religion, and even a lot of other Christians have. The revelation of the Heart of the Father through the Cross. Jesus, hanging from that tree, showing us Who God Is, Who it is that created all that is, and Who it is that is re-creating it all through His forgiveness.

Because that's what's at the heart of Creation. That's the fabric that binds all of Creation together, that creates a gravitational pull that keeps all that is in orbit around itself. A forgiving heart.

And before we go any farther, I need to be clear about this forgiveness. It is **not** just “Oh, it's okay, don't worry about it.” This forgiveness is costly, brutally costly. This is the forgiveness of one who has been truly wronged, woefully hurt, and who still chooses to lay aside any right to recompense for the sake of relationship.

Many other religions speak of love. They speak of peace. They speak of order, and all those are good things, but none of them, not **one** of them speaks of a Creator who imbues Creation with Justice and then bears the weight of Judgement in order to restore us to relationship. Not **one** of them suffers in utter innocence in order to demonstrate the depth of that love.

And, I believe, because Christianity has lost sight, to one extent or another, of that Truth, the world around us is crumbling. The web, the glue, the mortar, the gravity that binds is missing. Because we have lost the ability to lead others to the foot of the Cross and encounter love, rather than their own sin, we have also lost our message, our anointing.

But it is not too late. It is never too late for God. If we can, if we will hold fast to that Center. If we will keep our eyes fixed on His as He hangs from the Cross and reveals His Father's heart, we can still be the agents of reconciliation and restoration we were meant to be. As we lead others to see Him in His Glory on the Cross, the world will be transformed. One heart at a time.

Jesus. On the Cross.

The still point of a turning world.

Our savior. The world's savior.

Our Message. Our Gospel.