

In the Shadow of Doubt, Get the Holy Out – John 3: 14-21
Sermon prepared and preached by Rev. Don Hammond
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For a short while in my life I was not in parish ministry. It was an in-between time for me, kind of a personal interim. I knew a man who owned a rather large recreation ranch and he asked me if I would be interested in becoming the General Manager of the ranch, and I accepted the job. The ranch was the most bizarre place you can imagine. Among the amenities of the ranch were RV hook-up spaces, tent campsites, restaurant, swimming pool, 40 horses, petting zoo, a fenced in pond with geese, and more. There are many stories to be shared about the ranch, but today I am going to tell you about the geese at the ranch. For those of you that have never been around geese, know that geese are nasty critters!

The guests of the ranch often included children and occasionally one of the children, while playing ball, would throw the ball to the inside of the fence where the geese were. I suspect many balls were intentionally thrown in, sometimes at the geese. No one would dare go in there and the ganders were of a mean variety, because anyone who walked by or even dared to draw close to the fence would find the gander charging at them and making threatening noises. The children always wanted their ball retrieved and often it was me who had to go inside the fence and get it.

When I would go in for a ball I knew a gander would be after me, and I grew to not like those animals. I learned to never turn my back on a gander because gander geese are very good at attacking from the back, which is where the popular phrase comes from. On one of my retrieval missions I bent over to pick-up the ball and I was not as careful as I needed to be and the goose got me. With the swiftness of an athlete I spun around and grabbed the goose by the neck and held him so he could no longer attack and since I already was not fond of that animal I decided that he needed a little “jail time.” I carried him to the goat pen and introduced him to the goats as a new roommate. The goat won't take

anything from a goose and have a way of mellowing them out. After about a week in the pen that old gander settled down. When I paroled him to the pond that old gander returned to his old ways and whenever he would see me anywhere close to the fence he would, with increased venom, lower his head and run toward me making the most awful noise. He remembered me as the one who threw him in the pen with the goats. That gander and I developed an increasing dislike of each other.

What was really strange about that gander was how he attempted to make himself more vicious in an attempt to intimidate and frighten me. Just inside the fence was a corrugated drainpipe. Whenever he saw me he would run to the drainpipe honking as he ran and rush to put his head inside the pipe and continue his honking. Of course he was a goose and he never figured out that it was funny because he was only making loud noise for his own ears that convinced him that he was far stronger, frightening and more powerful than he really was. His honks were nothing more than noises that only he could appreciate.

Today's gospel passage is perhaps the best known and most commonly quoted of all Jesus' words. I knew this passage by memory when I was a very young child. It is probably the first quote I ever learned. I am certain the same is true for many of you. It is John 3: 16, and I repeat it in the language I was required to learn as a child:

"For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son so whoever believeth in him shall not perish but have everlasting life."

Some people call it the Gospel in a nutshell. Some people like to display a "John 3:16" sign at ball games every time the camera is on them. It seems to have stopped and I wonder if the people doing that have been sent advertising bills. While watching an NCAA basketball game on Friday evening I noticed such a sign raised and that was followed by a quick snatch by a nearby security guard. A case can be made to claim that such displays are similar to the goose sticking its head in a corrugated pipe and making noise that only it can appreciate

That passage, with the magnificence and beauty of the words, has too often been disfigured into nothing more than noise, which is intended to frighten all those that are passing by and too make the bearer feel more powerful. It is often used to reduce God and Jesus into a package of “right beliefs” with the threat of eternal damnation to those who do not agree. Such noise appears to be nothing more, and a form of Christian terrorism with threats of destruction. John 3:16 is not intended to be the code that magically opens the doors to eternity, yet too often that is what it has been reduced to. The problem is that using that scripture in that way has probably turned more people away from Christianity than it has drawn into Christianity. Though it is known as the “nutshell” of Christianity, the nutshell is not going to accomplish or continue the work and life of Jesus. The world does not need the “nutshells,” it needs the food from the inside to change the world the way Jesus said it needed to change. For many, this passage has become nothing more than a loud noise being shouted into a corrugated pipe. For many, there is doubt that this simple nutshell of Christianity and Jesus can possibly be what Jesus and Christianity is all about. For many, John 3:16 is not a door into the life of Jesus, but instead has become the exit from Christianity.

So what becomes of those who cast a heavy shadow of doubt about this passage as the alpha and omega of Christianity? What become of those who find no magnetic draw into the Church and Christianity because of this passage? What becomes of those who think or even say “I can be neither lured or frightened into Christian life by such noises?” Or “I cannot find fulfillment or peace by simply hearing what presents itself to me as noise.” “Is that all there is?”

Being a Christian begins by saying “I believe,” but that is neither the journey nor the destination. Believing is where it begins, but where it must go next is beyond the nutshell and demands the food of the nut. The food of the nut is in the “Holy” part of Jesus. It is the Holy that needs to be found and shared. It is in the sharing of the “Holy” when the power and hope of Christianity becomes more than “noise”.

William Willimon relates a story of a man who is a recovering alcoholic.

“Rodger, why have you stopped coming to church?” He replied, “Preacher, after you have been to AA, taken the cure, had to stare your demons in the face, had to stand up naked in front of 20 other drunks and tell every bad thing you have done or thought, and had to ask God and them to forgive you for being you, well church just seems like such a trivial waste of time.”

The Church is “trivial” when it is only noise, noise that makes the person feel more powerful, and sometimes the noise becomes nothing more than something to laugh at by the bystander. Jesus said: “follow me,” and it is in the following that takes being a Christian far beyond a simple act of believing. It is the following that places us onto the highway of Christian life. On that highway we will embark upon a journey that we cannot possibly predict, but a journey that will take us to places and to people that we must go.

I was watching the Biography channel recently. The show was focused upon the people that were involved in the transition from vaudeville to radio to television. All three of those medias occurred within one generation. There were only a small number of entertainers that were successful in the transitions. Among them were Milton Berle, Jack Benny, George Burns & Gracie Allen, and Red Skelton. All of them have since died, but the show ran the old interviews with those people. Red Skelton was at the very end of his life when they interviewed him, and his words were poignant for those who might be in the shadow of doubt. He said:

“If you have a God given talent, that is God's gift to you. If you use that talent, that is your gift to God.”

When you are having a Shadow of Doubt, then let the Holy Out. Let the God given gift you have be used in such a way that it will be your gift back to God. Another way of saying it is to “let your light shine.” Give selflessly of yourself to others in a way that brings out the Holy through you, that is the food that is inside the nutshell.

Some are likely to say: *“But I don’t know what my God given talent is. Here I am late in life and I still don’t know what it is, or, I am too young to have yet discovered it. Or, I don’t even know if I have such a thing”*

It seems as though Jesus was teaching us, regardless of our age or status, to be willing to do things differently - after all, it is believed that some of his disciples were not very young, and were entrenched in a different lifestyle than they would find by following Jesus. Jesus invited them to try, to take the risks, to be unafraid to let the Holy out and to reshape the world. Some of his disciples were young and with a commitment to get beyond the “nutshell;” they produced in ways that began the turning inside out of this world.

I believe one of the most destructive movements of the Church that has been created is the drive to make Christianity “a personal experience.” It is “personal” in that each of us has been invited to follow; it is not, however, exclusively about our salvation or our eternity. It is about God’s creation, God’s eternity, and how we fit into it and are part of God’s movement; it is about much more than “personal salvation”. It is about God. After all, it does say in John 3: 16 that “God so loved the world.” There is the key. The most important word in that passage is the most likely to be ignored. It is about the world that God loves. It is about a world of people that God loves, and we have been invited to let the Holy out in such a way that the gift we return to God is to fall in love with the same thing that God loves, the world, and then treat it the same way that God treats it, with effusive love.

It is more than belief, and when you are struggling with what it means to be Christian, then let the Holy out, and I think you will find that Christianity is far more substantive and encompassing than the noise that you may hear far too often from far too many. It is about letting God get out through you, and it is not about noise.

Amen.