

Thriving or Perishing

John 3:14-21
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First Presbyterian Church
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High on a hilltop overlooking the beautiful city of Venice, Italy, there lived an old blind man who was a genius. Legend has it he could answer any question anyone might ask of him.

Two of the local boys figured they could fool the old man, so they caught a small bird and headed for his hilltop home. One of the boys cupped the little bird in his hands and asked the old man if the bird was dead or alive.

Without hesitation the old man said, “Son, if I say to you that the bird is alive, you will close your hands and crush it to death. If I say the bird is dead, you will open your hands and the bird will fly away. You see, son, in your hands you hold the power of life and death.”

Likewise in our hands we have the power life and death when it comes to our belief in Jesus Christ, eternal life for those who believe and perishing for those who don’t, those who allow their doubts and fears to take hold of them.

In today’s New Testament lesson, Jesus is addressing the doubts and fears of the religious leader named Nicodemus, the Pharisee who comes to Jesus at night, in the cover of darkness, confused about what it means – and what it takes – to become a believer in Christ.

After some discussion, Jesus says to him, “... 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.”

Nicodemus doesn’t have any idea what Jesus is talking about. We know this because, earlier, John tells us, Jesus said to him, “If I have told you about earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you about heavenly things?” Nicodemus’ problem is he’s more committed to earthly matters than he is to spiritual growth.

And sadly, that’s our problem, also. Too often we find ourselves gripped by doubts and fear, and this drives the choices we make, the words we say.

Other times, we’re so concerned with our own comfort that we forsake the call to care for the “least of these,” as Jesus says. And heaven forbid we should be so worried about money or so busy criticizing and controlling others that we fail to be compassionate and merciful.

Overcoming all of this – overcoming our doubts and fears, overcoming the tendency to focus on ourselves at the expense of others, overcoming our worry about money and our need to be in charge – this is only possible when we shift our focus more and more toward Jesus, letting our belief in him, our trust in him lead our words and actions toward others.

Living our lives for the sake of Jesus Christ is what it means to be a Christian.

It's like the natives of the island nation of Madagascar who, when asked, "What first led you to think of becoming Christians?" – they would point to the change it made in others.

"I knew this man to be a thief," they'd say, and "that one was a drunkard; another was very cruel and unkind to his family. Now they are all changed. The thief is an honest man; the drunkard is sober and respectable; and the other is gentle and kind. There must be something in a religion that can work such changes."

Yes, there must be something in such a religion, something in being a Christian that empowers us to make changes like that, changes that give hope in the face of despair, certainty in the face of doubt, calm in the face of upset. And we know what it is – it's our belief in Jesus Christ, when we act on it!

We all know that sometimes we don't act in faith, sometimes we are the ones making bad choices, the ones escalating tensions and starting arguments, the ones being less than Christian in a moment of weakness or anger. What are we to do about that?

Well, there is one verse in the Bible that is key to shifting our behavior, our responses for the better. It's a verse we heard this morning, John 3:16, which says - and if you know it, say it with me – John 3:16 says, "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."

God's love for us is life giving. And the blessings of life come to those who believe in the Son of God. But those who refuse to believe in Jesus, those who actively work against the Spirit of God, they are perishing.

Now, this isn't to say that some people have perfect faith and others don't. None of us believes and trusts in Jesus as fully as we should.

But it does mean that when we put our trust in the Lord we enter into the fullness of God's glory, if only for that moment. And conversely, when it's our doubts and

fears that are driving our words and actions, we experience the sting of death, the pain of being separated from God, of living outside the blessing of the Lord.

At times like that, of course, it is always us who pull away from God; never God pulling away from us. This is good news! This means we can overcome anything the world throws at us when we cling to our faith in Jesus, our faith in the life, death and resurrection of the Lord.

Such faith is always going to win out in the end. As Jesus says, “God did not send the Son of Man into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.”

It is through our faith in Jesus Christ that God is actively redeeming the world. Think about that. Your faith-based words and actions are instrumental in the salvation of the world, a world that God love’s so much as to never abandon it, never leaving us to our own devices?

Ask yourself, as you go about your daily life, do you see evidence of God’s redeeming work? Can you think of times when you played a part in it?

Of course you can. We are all blessed to be a blessing from time to time when it comes to how we treat other people. We just need to extend and multiply those times, those blessings, through who we are being, through who you are being in the moment.

Take for instance the Navy sailor who was approached by a visiting admiral on the deck of the ship one day. The admiral asked him, “What would you do if another sailor fell overboard?”

The sailor promptly replied: “I would raise the alarm and toss him a life preserver, sir.”

The admiral asked a second question: “What would you do if it were an officer?”

Taking a moment to envision that scenario, the enlisted man answered: “Which one, sir?”

The point is we can’t go through life doing good one moment and evil the next, saving our friends and condemning our enemies. Doing that just condemns us and the world around us. Better to always walk in the light of Christ, to let our faith shine forth in a darkened world.

As Jesus says, "... 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."

It is by us staying focused on doing good that God is at work redeeming the world, a world being saved and redeemed at this very moment through our active belief and trust in Jesus Christ. Amen.

PASTORAL PRAYER

God of great love, take hold of our hearts and let us sit here in the stillness of your presence, as we turn our souls to you.

Help us to be still ... and in that stillness to discover the mystery of the living Christ. Inspire us to turn ourselves inside out in service to you.

May you be honored and glorified through our lives, as we clean our homes, drive to our destinations, work in the community, sit in our easy chairs, or answer our e-mails.

At work or at play, take hold of our hearts, O God, and awaken us to the presence of your love.

May your love spill over into our lives in such a way that it illuminates the path and eases the burden for each person we meet. We pray your tender care and keen eye watch over those undergoing surgery and other medical procedures and your comfort and wellbeing for those with illness and disease. We pray for those who grieve.

We pray all this in the name of the one who came as the light of the world, as love incarnate, Jesus the Christ, who taught us to say when we pray ...

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name.

Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.

Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors; and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.

For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen.