

CLEAN HEARTS; RIGHT SPIRIT – Deeds Done

John 3:14-21

Whenever we act, there is a reason for such interaction. Sometimes motivations are well hidden; occasionally, these are easily revealed. Some are so deeply buried that much is required to unearth these truths. Holy conversation has always offered the opportunity to probe the soul sufficiently to discover such reasons; compassionate grace makes it possible to admit to such stimuli in the context of reconciling love and redeeming forgiveness. It is out of this love and grace that repentance and growing belief bear fruit in new life. More than other aspects of therapy, the identification of the presence of the loving, saving God is the crucial difference between becoming only whole and additionally holy. Psychology serves well to heal the brokenness of mind but it cannot duplicate the work of the present, gracious God in healing the wounded soul. More than repair is needed if faith is to fully blossom; it is resurrection that moves us into the future with hope and confidence.

A woman recently revealed the impact of failing to confront her continuing brokenness. She is a school psychologist and thus is fully cognizant of how the mind works: she is also an active follower of Christ and clearly understands the impact of faith on such wounds. In the earlier part of her life, she was part of the courageous few who integrated a state university. Convinced that this school could offer her the education she sought although an aunt had lobbied for a safer university in another state, this woman in her younger years enrolled. During the years of college education, she was grateful for professors who had grown up in other parts of the country even as she endured continuous hatred from the students, other faculty, and the administration. She did graduate and moved to California for greater acceptance and freedom, although she has not found either in its expected fullness.

Recently, as she prepared to speak at the university, she undertook a self-guided tour of the campus, noting much that was new and some that was as it was in her student years. One older building particularly attracted her attention and she sought to take a picture of it. Suddenly, a group of three young people approached her and asked if one of them could take a picture of her standing in front of the structure. At that point, in that interaction, the fear that she had experienced in her college years as she walked across the campus arose with surprising power. The words, the spitting, the pushing

the fierce, hateful stares all came back to her and caused her to feel threatened. She reports that she acted out of her fear rather than the possible generosity of the selfie generation. Further, she was surprised how quickly and completely the past overwhelmed her and wondered how that could be, particularly out of her training. She discovered that neither her mind nor her spirit had healed from the evil of racism.

Jesus enters into several interactions with the words: Do not be afraid. Clearly, his presence and his words would and did prompt fear in the minds of the hearers. Terror is often a response to the power of God though truth is always God's expectation. Basic to our fear is the prospect of death, as though in death, we are separated from God and God's love. As Jesus is taken from his disciples, including the women, by crucifixion, fear grows in all of them, sometimes making it impossible to receive God's resurrecting activity. Thomas' doubting is shared by all of us. Here in John, the source of our fearlessness is eternal life.

Though the Greeks suggest immortality and even Paul uses this Greek idea in his discussion with the pervasive Greek culture, eternal life is not intended to be an extension of this life. Instead it is to be an aspect of this life as we embrace the presence and power of God in our present day and encounter the salvation that is offered to us in this day, in each day. If death fractures both mind and soul, John's words are intended not only to heal such brokenness but also to supply new energy and vision to disciples, even if their rabbi has been taken from them. John proclaims to Nicodemus that he can participate in eternal life with who he already is. He can be born again in and through the loving presence of a gracious God. Hearts are created clean by God, spirits are made right by God. Nicodemus came to Jesus emptied of despair, Jesus filled him with hope.

Many will be fascinated by the more familiar John 3:16. It may be difficult to move beyond these verses---the gospel in miniature for many---and yet Jesus has much more to offer in his discussion of new life. Initially, it is important to hear that the gift of Christ is not intended to condemn the world but to save it. In the character of prophets, it could seem that Jesus comes to criticize and to judge. In his teaching, Jesus seeks to correct both perspectives and behavior and any could count this to represent condemnation. Do not strive to be first and most honored but rather serve sacrificially. Sell all that you have and give the money to the poor. You have heard it said, but I say to you. Unless you are more than the Pharisees, the kingdom of God is far from you. The point of all the activity and word of Jesus and of the work of the prophets is only to open the gates of the

kingdom of God ever wider and invite all to enter into the presence of God.

John admits that there is evil in the world. Though such metaphors as Satan or the devil may seem antiquated and no longer of any value, John preaches that evil does exist and, further, that human beings are free to choose its seductive suggestions that offer power and wealth, security and honor. Jesus teaches that the evil we experience comes from within, within the human mind and spirit. We do not need to search beyond ourselves to encounter the presence of evil for we all choose to react out of fear, if only occasionally. It is this evil that darkens both mind and soul, threatening to obscure the light that God is and offers.

Most, particularly if confronted, some would admit that racism powerfully exists. We have not been able to think ourselves beyond this evil, reason ourselves out of the dilemma that it creates. Evil often resists logic, appealing to instead to emotion. The woman returning to the university knew that matters had changed significantly at that university but the emotion of fear rose quickly to the surface and paralyzed her. And, of course, this is not the only expression of evil in the world.

We are called to be people of the good, that which can be brought to the light, that which is the light in the world when it is of God. We may celebrate the overcoming of evil, the coming of light wherever it occurs as the results of our cleverness and our persistence. But deeds done to produce light find their sources and power in God. Thus, it is appropriate to give thanks to God for such good. "All good things around us," proclaims the hymn, "are sent from heaven above. So thank the Lord for all God's love."

Out of humility, we recognize that without God, we would not know good. We might attempt to distinguish between good and evil, labeling all that serves us as good and all that frustrates us as evil. But our lives are to center themselves in God and God's kingdom and not in ourselves and our desires. Jesus comes to be the light for the world and to shed light on the good that is present and possible. Whether we choose to follow in his way will likely determine to degree to which we live in this light and offer it to others.

John recounts that like the serpent in the wilderness, Jesus is lifted up as source of healing, of hope. Serpents in the minds of many within the Bible and even today represent active evil. The snake in the Garden of Eden tempts and causes all humanity represented in Adam and Eve to choose evil rather than obey God. What then is to be done to redeem? More importantly, how is healing brought forth in the time of Moses? Recognizing that they have sinned against God, principally by their lack of

trust in the presence of God providing in the wilderness, the people seek a way to escape the death that comes from the bite of the serpent. In prayer, Moses is given a way by which that which is counted evil has been converted to the good. As it is mounted on a pole, the serpent, now in permanent bronze form, becomes a source of life. Just as the people lift their eyes to the serpent and so live, so others will lift their eyes to Christ and find healing possible. Guilt often causes us to lower our eyes to avoid truth, grace raises our eyes to receive truth which is always a gift of God.

Such a remedy to choosing evil may seem far too simplistic and especially primitive. But to sense God's presence and rest within God is not as complicated nor difficult as it may seem. The God who has created the world and us yearns for love and glory, not because God is in need of it, but because we are in need of offering it. In such love, we will see good, even in that which is rejected and threatening. And in such good, we shall experience love flowing from God who so loved the world that he sent one to save us, extending this saving grace to the whole world.

In Christ, God tears down every wall that separates us from the love of God even as it divides us from one another. Without such walls, light shines through so that we can see the good and rejoice in it as gift from God. Thanks be to this God. Amen.