

Wesley United Methodist Church

March 12, 2017

“Promises, Promises!”

John 3:1-21

The regulations of a certain hospital required that a wheelchair be provided for patients being discharged. A particular student nurse found an elderly gentleman, already dressed and sitting on the bed with a suitcase at his feet. The gentleman insisted, over and over again, that he didn't need her help in leaving the hospital. After a chat about rules being rules, he reluctantly got into the wheelchair and let the nurse wheel him to the elevator. On the way down she asks him if his wife was meeting him. He said, “I don't know. She's still upstairs in the bathroom changing out of her hospital gown.”

We love to laugh, don't we? And we love to laugh at ourselves and unfortunately at each other. Sometimes funny things happen to us. And sometimes we do funny things. Our brains descend to our backsides and we holler those fate filled words, “Hey, Bubba, watch this.” That's why America's Funniest Videos are still around and going strong. Of course, sometimes the humor has nothing to do with us but has more to do with the situation.

In the Scripture for this morning, Nicodemus' actions are almost funny. And a bit ironic as we'll and as we'll hear Jesus' message to Nicodemus. Read Scripture: John 3:1-17

Nicodemus sets up a secret meeting with Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane, which he or Joseph of Arimathea probably owned. Nicodemus sneaks around in the dark to ask Jesus what he means about to be born again. As they are sitting in the dark, did you notice what Jesus told Nicodemus, about those who believe. He says, “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.” Jesus could have just hit Nicodemus with a 2x4 and gotten it over with. But Nicodemus didn't seem to mind and didn't take offense. Maybe he was used to the way Jesus talked, or thought or spoke.

Jesus was talking about the Jewish leaders who were about to reject him as the people who choose darkness over light. They were living in darkness because they have forgotten their purpose in life as individuals and as a nation. They were God's chosen for a reason, not for their personal pleasure. It was God's pleasure that they were chosen, “the least of all people,” God said. It was because God is God, that they were chosen. That's grace. But they were chosen to be used. They were chosen to serve. It's the same with us. We call this time a Worship Service. But it's not for our benefit. Oh, we benefit from it. In our worship we are strengthened and loved and forgiven and reconciled and redeemed and filled with the Holy Spirit. But it's not for our benefit. It's for God's. We gather for worship so we can go out in service.

We ought to have signed like I saw in another church. Over each door on the outside, as you enter the sanctuary, a sign reads, “Worship begins when you enter these doors.” As you leave a sign above the doors reads, “Service begins when you leave through these doors.”

The Rev. Mike Slaughter of the Ginghamburg United Methodist Church begins almost every worship with these words, “We are not here to be served we are here to go out and serve.”

In contrast to the people of darkness Jesus was talking about, those are the people who are willingly, intentionally living in the light. We slip into the darkness when we forget our purpose. But we live in the light when we live a life of service. Sometimes it's hard to live a life of service.

When we look at this scripture, we find the promise of mercy and forgiveness.

Most of us would be a little embarrassed to have unexpected company when the house was a mess. We'd start scrambling around, picking up things and making excuses. My Michigan girlfriend's hiding places were the dishwasher and the oven. There was a family who was staying at a hotel in Nigeria, West Africa, one time they heard a knock on the door. They opened it and found a smiling Nigerian gentleman ready to clean their room. The wife was totally mortified. She said she was embarrassed. She said that her family had travel bags all over, curling irons, crumpled clothing on the unmade beds, and wet towels on the bathroom floor. The woman started apologizing profusely, but the young man replied graciously, “No problem, for this reason I have come, to put things in order.” Scripture says that's exactly what Jesus came to do for us. To put our lives in order! To straighten up our mess. And the truth is we can't do it ourselves. We've tried and we've failed. So, instead, Jesus offers to clean us up from the inside out.

“Indeed, God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him.”

The movie *The Notebook*, tells the love story of Noah and Allie. Allie suffers from senile dementia. She doesn't recognize Noah. But everyday Noah reads to Allie, from a notebook filled with the stories of their life together, even though she doesn't recognize him, and she sees the tales in fiction. In the middle of a reading, Noah is called away by his new physician. As Noah leaves to see his doctor, the nurse asks Allie if she'd like to “play the piano for a few minutes.

You'll like that." When Allie protests that she doesn't know any tunes, the nurse explains that Allie can read music. Allie gets up to play. And you hear piano music in the background of the scene. Noah visits with the doctor who is a new attending physician. He's examined and then the doctor questions his practices of reading to his wife. Looking at his notes, and says, "I understand that you read to Miss Hamilton." Noah replies, "Yeah, to help her remember." The doc simply says, "Huh." Noah detects skepticism and says, "You don't think it will help." The young doc says, "No, I don't." Noah explains, "She remembers, Doc. I read to her and she remembers. Not always, but she remembers." The Doc lectures, "Senile dementia is degenerative. After a certain point, victims don't come back." Noah says, "That's what they keep telling me." And so the Doc goes on to say that he doesn't want Noah to get his hopes up. Noah gets off the table and says, "Well, thanks, Doc, but you know what they say, science goes only so far, and then comes God," The doc repeats, "Then comes God." The piano has been playing in the background suddenly comes to a stop. Noah says, "They forgot to turn the page for her." And all of a sudden, the piano begins again, with a new song. The doctor says, "I guess they flipped the page." Noah smiles and says, "No, THAT she's playing by memory."

Hope, even a glimmer of hope, can keep us going in the even worst situations. Someone said, "Other men see only a hopeless end, but the Christian rejoices in an endless hope." That hope is born of the promise we hear in the passage: "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." That is a promise for more to come, more to life, more faith, more strength, more mercy, more of God, more of Christ, so much more that it will take an eternity for us to receive it all.

Kathy was one of the happiest women around. She had worked in a hospital kitchen. But her work came to an end when she developed cancer. During one visit to her hospital room her pastor found her in great pain. She was propped on her side, facing a big window that looked out into the wide open space of a south Dakota sky. As her pastor prayed with her, a thought came to mind. He asked, "Kathy, would you like a cross in your room?" With most of her strength gone, all Kathy could do was nod. Her pastor went to the church sanctuary and took the large, silver cross off the altar and carried it in his arms to the hospital. When he entered Kathy's room, he held up the cross and said, "See what I Have?" She looked up, tears filling her eyes, and said, "For me?"

The pastor took the cross from their church sanctuary and placed it on the sill in the center of the big window, where Kathy could see it silhouetted against the sky. That's where it remained for the last two days of her life. That cross gave her strength and indescribable comfort. With every glance, that cross reminded Kathy of the promise of more. "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."

There are many people who know this passage in their sleep. The problem is, they know it up here, in the head, but it's never taken hold, here, in the heart. They know the words intellectually but the promise hasn't taken root in their souls. Our promise is to have God's promises in our hearts and live them so that others may see and want to claim ownership. Amen.