

John 21:15-25

When they had finished breakfast, Jesus said to Simon Peter, ‘Simon son of John, do you love me more than these?’ He said to him, ‘Yes, Lord; you know that I love you.’ Jesus said to him, ‘Feed my lambs.’ A second time he said to him, ‘Simon son of John, do you love me?’ He said to him, ‘Yes, Lord; you know that I love you.’ Jesus said to him, ‘Tend my sheep.’ He said to him the third time, ‘Simon son of John, do you love me?’ Peter felt hurt because he said to him the third time, ‘Do you love me?’ And he said to him, ‘Lord, you know everything; you know that I love you.’ Jesus said to him, ‘Feed my sheep. Very truly, I tell you, when you were younger, you used to fasten your own belt and to go wherever you wished. But when you grow old, you will stretch out your hands, and someone else will fasten a belt around you and take you where you do not wish to go.’ (He said this to indicate the kind of death by which he would glorify God.) After this he said to him, ‘Follow me.’

Peter turned and saw the disciple whom Jesus loved following them; he was the one who had reclined next to Jesus at the supper and had said, ‘Lord, who is it that is going to betray you?’ When Peter saw him, he said to Jesus, ‘Lord, what about him?’ Jesus said to him, ‘If it is my will that he remain until I come, what is that to you? Follow me!’ So the rumour spread in the community that this disciple would not die. Yet Jesus did not say to him that he would not die, but, ‘If it is my will that he remain until I come, what is that to you?’

This is the disciple who is testifying to these things and has written them, and we know that his testimony is true. But there are also many other things that Jesus did; if every one of them were written down, I suppose that the world itself could not contain the books that would be written.

“The Gospel of John: Christ is the Word. We Can Hear It”

(It’s All About the Word)

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These sermons on the Gospels, they are put in the order that you heard them for a reason. We heard the Gospel of Luke, we explored that the week we had Communion, because the synoptic Gospels, Matthew, Mark and Luke, are a little easier. Luke saw God as interested in the sacraments, and the Book of Kells pictures a lamb. So that was the first one, the first Sunday of the month, we had Communion, so that was the order, that was the reason we had it. Gospel of Mark, Jesus is going to his death with the courage of a lion, and on the front of the bulletin you saw from the Book of Kells the lion. Matthew saw Jesus as a teacher who delivered, like the Ten Commandments, who delivered the Sermon on the Mount, and the communication from God in Matthew's Gospel was always an angel, and so in Matthew's Gospel the Book of Kells featured an angel, and you saw that on the front of the bulletin. Today is the Gospel of John. It's the most complicated, I think, to explain, the most difficult to understand, and I chose to have this Sunday be the Sunday we take a look at that, because it's the Sunday of the all-church picnic and I know you're going to be around the church for a while this morning, and into the early afternoon, and you may have questions about the Gospel of John, and I just want you to know that Rebecca is here to answer your questions. Or you could put me in

the dunk tank at the picnic if you think I'm all wet. This is why, today the Book of Kells pictures the Jesus of John as an eagle, which is an appropriate symbol. It's the front of your bulletin, it's an eagle, if you wonder what that symbol is, because Jesus is seen as one whose powerful ideas soar and fly above, and that's appropriate. I hope you'll see that as we work through this. It's complicated.

The reason it's complicated is, John gives us Jesus who's saying do opposite things at the same time that mean the same thing. John gives us Jesus who's saying opposite things at the same time, but they mean the same thing. It's a bipolar message. It's a schizophrenic mix, it's manic in its manifestations. Most things are best easily seen as opposites. For example, George Carlin sees football and baseball as opposite games. Football is played on a gridiron, baseball is played in a park. Football players wear helmets, baseball players wear caps. In football, the specialist comes in to kick something. In baseball the specialist comes in to relieve somebody. Baseball has a seventh-inning stretch, football has a two-minute warning. Baseball gets extra innings, football gets sudden death. In football, the main objective is military - that battle in the trenches, the field general quarterback seeks to evade the blitz, soften up the enemy with a pounding ground attack, an aerial bombardment. Sometimes uses bullet passes, or goes for the bomb, or penetrates the end zone. Whereas baseball, the object is to go home.

John gives us Jesus who does two opposite things at the same time, and they're part of the same thing. Jesus, in John's Gospel, afflicts our comfort and Jesus comforts our affliction, and our comfort is our affliction, and our affliction brings us comfort. There, I've said it. Okay, let me try to show what I mean. Jesus gets in our face in John's Gospel. Conversation with Peter, Peter who denied three times knowing Jesus, prior to the text that Rebecca read. Three times he denied him. Three times, Jesus says to Peter, do you love me more than these. Peter says yes. Feed my sheep. Second time: Peter, do you love me? Yeah? Tend my sheep. Simon, son of John, do you love me? Now Peter is getting a little irritated. "You know everything. You know I love you." Jesus says, "Feed my sheep." "Do you love me?" Jesus said. That's not, "Do you belong to my church?" That's not, "Have you converted any sinners lately?" It's not, "Are you doing your best?" No, it's not "Are you in church every Sunday?" It's not, "Is your church a vital congregation?" No. "Feed my sheep if you love me. Are you working hard to forgive your enemies? Do you love me? Are you waking up in the morning with a prayer on your heart that says, "O God, what a day this is going to be."? Are you hearing the voices of hope amidst the chorus of nay-sayers saying no? Are you looking at big things as though they were small, and small things as though they were big, because they are? Feed my sheep. Not a request, a demand. It's not a hope, it's a promise. Entrance requirement. Jesus afflicts our comfort.

It would be easier to be a Christian if it weren't for Christ. If we could be, but we can't. Feed my sheep. Jesus afflicts our comfort, gets in our face. "I am the way, the truth, the life." "Nicodemus, you're the best. You do it all right, but you want to know what more you can do. You come to me at night. Nicodemus, let me tell you something, son. You've got to be born again, or you've got to be born from above. You've got to see the cosmic

picture. You've got it all. You've got nothing. Your values are just words. You need to match your image with your values." Jesus got into his face.

Jess Moody uncovered a remarkable story about Rose Kennedy. When you think of the heartache that that woman had suffered, lost a son in an airplane crash in the second World War. John and Bobby murdered. Her daughter severely retarded, spent a life in a mental institution. Ted, caught up in a scandal that led to the death of Mary Jo Kopechne. Her husband a philanderer and a crook. At one point in her life, Rose Kennedy gave up on God. But then this house cleaner got into her face and said to her, "Mrs. Kennedy, you'll never be happy until you make room in your soul for a manger where the Christ child can be born." And she fired the housecleaner, but she could not forget the words, and she knelt by her bed at night that night and she prayed that she'd find room in her life for the Christ child to be born, and she found a new sense of peace, acquired a new perspective, and re-hired the maid. People like that get into our face and afflict us, and afflict our comfort.

Will Willimon, now a bishop, he was dean of the chapel at Duke, he and his wife went to a funeral. The preacher went on and on in his Southern Baptist style, no offense to Southern Baptists, but you know what I'm talking about, especially if you are a Southern Baptist, about how this dead man made so many mistakes in his life, he was narcissistic and hedonistic, selfish. Did you ever go to a funeral and the preacher said nothing good about the person? I've done three like that. And the preacher listed all this guy's sins, and all the times he had failed in his relationships, and how he had no chance for eternal life or the promise of heaven. And then the preacher said, "It's too later for George. His life was a waste, but it's not too late for you." Will and his wife got back into their car. He turned to her and said, "That was a terrible thing that preacher did to us, I'm glad to know he wasn't a Methodist. The very idea, saying it was too late for George but it's not too late for us." She said, "I thought it was terrible. Poor taste. Preacher using that man's public life to manipulate us to think about our lives." The problem is, the preacher was right. It is time for us to think about what we need to change.

Have you ever had someone bring you up on the truth, and it hurt, but it was true? Ever been caught with a comment that made you take a look at yourself? Jesus got in your face. Like the man who was driving through Virginia, he and his wife driving through Virginia, he thought he was doing the proper speed till he saw the flashing lights and pulled over. Officer asked for his license. He and his wife talked as they dug into the glove compartment for the registration and proof of insurance. Said to the officer, "I'm usually very careful about my speed." They handed the officer the papers. Officer studied the papers and gave them back to him and said, "Mister, this isn't your registration." It was a warning ticket for having sped in North Carolina.

There is that in Jesus that brings us into a close association with what we have wanted to space ourselves from. There is that about Jesus that reminds us that we have the capacity for greatness, but first we've got to deal with our mediocrity. And there is that about Jesus that gets into our face and says, "I know you, I know you better than you know yourself, and you're going to get to know yourself if you've got the courage." Ken Wilbur was right

when he said that the current state of a religion in America is anemic. Anemic. It wasn't, it shouldn't be. Jesus' state of religion wasn't anemic. Because you don't go around saying "I am" unless it's true that you are. And you don't talk about being the light of the world if you're afraid to go out after dark. And you don't promise to bring living water to a parched world unless there's some way to tap into the eternal spring. And you don't tell a blind man to see unless there's a world worth looking at. And you don't tell a paralytic to walk unless there's someplace to go. He got into their face. "If you love me, don't tell me about it, feed my sheep." It afflicts our comfort.

But at the same time, and in the same way, he comforts our affliction. He gets into our hearts. It's part of the same thing. John's Gospel is the only one where there are these conversations before Jesus' death, and he's talking to his friends. He's organized a grief support group, is what he's done. And he's saying, "Let not your hearts be troubled, neither let them be afraid." What he's talking about is not their death but his. He's helping them grieve his death. "I go and prepare a place for you. I've come again. I take you to myself. I have come that you might have life, and that you might have an abundance of life." John's Gospel is the only Gospel that reports Jesus doing such a deeply human thing as what I'm about to describe. His friend dies, his friend's sisters are grieving, in the home of Mary and Martha after Lazarus' death. Jesus does something really, really strange for a Messiah. He weeps. He comforts our affliction, gets into our hearts.

I think it was about a month ago, maybe a little longer. I mentioned having been to Oklahoma City, looked at the Muir Building, the memorial for the Muir Building. I talked about that. I talked about what an incredible... those chairs on the grass, each chair with the name of someone who died when Timothy McVeigh filled up that rental truck with explosives. Nine rows because of the nine levels in the building, each one representing where they were when the bomb went off. Chairs that were smaller for the children, and the larger chairs for the adults. And the reflective pool. And on the side of that space where that building was, on one side is the Methodist church, on the other side is the Catholic church. Both of those churches were severely damaged by that explosion. And as you looked over into that area where the Catholic church was, you could see a statue, and the statue was of Jesus, and he had his back to where the Muir building explosion was. He had his back to it. And most statues of Jesus have his hands outstretched. His hands were covering his eyes. He could not look, and he was weeping. He was weeping. He was in tears. "Come to me all you who labor and are heavy laden, I will give you rest." The comfort of Christ, the God of Christ, who so loved the world. God gave his only begotten son. God is love. Wonder what God's like, it's like this. Christ who gets into our hearts, who comforts our affliction.

Nell Mahoney is a very gifted writer and lecturer, much in demand. In one of her books, she said that her life started out not in a good direction. She said she had this older sister who was well-balanced and smart and pretty, who made good grades and was always receiving praise. Has anybody got a big sister like that? Hard to follow that sister. Her name is Amy, that's my big sister. "Oh, Mrs. Schuster, I don't think your son is the student that Amy was. Oh, Mrs. Schuster. Maybe he can be an athlete. I don't think college is in his future." In sixth grade, she decided that since she couldn't be like her

sister, she would to everything she possibly could not to be like her sister. When she went through the confirmation class, she refused to join the church. There are lots of good reasons not to do that, maybe because you're not ready, but she did it for the wrong reason, just out of being angry and resentful. But she writes, "It happened on a day that I brought my two bad things from junior high school. One was a bad report card and the other was a bad note from the principal, and instead of angrily denouncing me, why couldn't I do better, my father said, "Let's go for a walk." As we were walking, he put his arm around me and he said quietly, "Something has been troubling you. What is it? Do you want to talk about it?" I wanted to tell somebody for some time, but nobody asked, and I just blurted it out. "Daddy, I can't be like Sister." He held out his left hand. I can still see him in my mind's eye, with his index finger pointing to that left hand, and he said to me, "You're not supposed to be, Nell. God put a treasure in you. It's different than the treasure that's in your sister or your brothers. It's not like your sister's. What your mother and I want you to do, and we will help you do it if you need us, is to find that treasure that's in your soul, to discover it." That day my father set me free to be me."

We all need somebody to comfort our affliction. Joan Baez, the Sixties singer, she said, "My life is a crystal teardrop." Sylvester Stallone said it, "I really am the manifestation of my own fantasy." But what is reality, and who am I? We all have to deal with our teardrops and our fantasies. And realities. We've all got to find a way to get help, because what we have is the need to find a potential to become, to uncover the treasure that is within us that no one else has. To face the worst, to take on the day, to walk the lonesome valley, and to know that there is much riding on what we do, but there is God in the back seat giving us direction, saying, "You don't need to settle for less if you can struggle for more." Nell Mahoney would say it, "Don't put a period where God puts a comma." Did you hear a voice reminding you how special you are, or did you note the time when you pondered the future when someone said that you could trust it, don't be afraid when all of a sudden gathering support when you took the day and reminded yourself, ease your net on the other side. The comfort of our affliction, Jesus gets into our hearts.

All those times when he got into our face, he was getting into our heart as well. And all those times when he got into our hearts, he was getting into our face as well. See, it's both, and it's both at the same time. Let me try to explain how this works. I thought of something Garrison Keillor wrote about when a group of Lutheran pastors rented Wally's pontoon boat for a tour around Lake Wobegone and a barbecue on the boat as they were studying the rural crisis in America/ Twenty-five Lutheran pastors in suits on a pontoon boat, charcoal grill red hot, ready for dogs and burgers, kind of like our picnic today. Someone noted, over on the bank, something that was happening and all of those pastors, all twenty-five of them in their suits, walked over to that side of the boat, and the right pontoon dipped into and under the water, and the gravity of the boat shifted and began to sink, and the charcoal briquettes, red hot, rained down the floor of the boat and the dogs and burgers sizzled into the water, and it was fire and water and meat and twenty-five Lutheran pastors in suits floundering near death, when a ten year old boy who witnessed the event a Wally's pontoon boat sank, as Wally intoned that God was dead, and the Book of Revelation was coming alive to all of them, the ten year old boy, afflicted and comforted the twenty-five Lutheran pastors in suits, all at the same time, like Jesus does,

he got into their faces and into their hearts when he shouted, "Stand up! Stand up! The water's not that deep." And twenty-five Lutheran pastors, dripping wet, learned something about the rural crisis in America, learned something about the dangers of barbecues and pontoon boats, and learned something about how a little child can lead us. That's in Isaiah. And learned about the Gospel of John and how Jesus still afflicts our comfort and comforts our affliction. Let us pray.

O God, continue to get into our face when we need it, and get into our heart when you've been into our face too long. Amen.