

March 11, 2018: Fourth Sunday of Lent (Year B)
John 3:14-21: Recovery

Have you ever walked into the middle of a conversation and realized being present for the first part of the conversation would have made the part you heard make a whole lot more sense?

In one of my favorite episodes of the Andy Griffith Show, there is a perfect example of this.

Andy, Barney and Floyd are hanging out in Floyd's Barber Shop and Andy is in the midst of telling this riveting story of him catching a large carp in the local pond, when a reporter walks in, just in time to hear Andy say, "Mr. Carp, you have met your match." She apologizes for the interruption, and asks Andy to continue with the story. So Andy proceeds to describe hitting the carp in between the eyes with the blunt side of an axe to stun it, stringing it up in a tree, and asking Barney to take a picture of him next to his catch. The reporter becomes increasingly agitated as the story continues, not realizing that Andy is talking about a fish, and not a person. Eventually she walks out in disgust because she can't bear to hear any more. (Season 2, Episode 7 – Crime Free Mayberry).

You may have felt like you were walking into the middle of a conversation when I started reading our text for this morning. It begins with a statement about Moses and a snake, then shifts immediately to Jesus, talking about himself.

We did pick up in the middle of a conversation between Jesus and a man named Nicodemus, a member of the Pharisees. He had come to Jesus under the cover of darkness to try and understand a little more about who he was. Jesus proceeded to talk to him about his need to be born again. This led to a discussion about what this meant, and how it was possible, but no mention of Moses or a snake until we get to the first verse of our text. Even if we read the entire passage it would seem like it was coming out of nowhere, but it would have made sense to Nicodemus, who was very familiar with the story Jesus was referring to. It is found in the book of Numbers.

Numbers 21:4-9

From Mount Hor they set out by the way to the Red Sea, to go around the land of Edom; but the people became impatient on the way. The people spoke against God and against Moses, "Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness? For there is no food and no water, and we detest this miserable food." Then the LORD sent poisonous serpents among the people, and they bit the people, so that many Israelites died. The people came to Moses and said, "We have sinned by speaking against the LORD and against you; pray to the LORD to take away the serpents from us." So Moses prayed for the people. And the LORD said to Moses, "Make a poisonous serpent, and set it on a pole; and everyone who is bitten shall look at it and live." So Moses made a serpent of bronze, and put it upon a pole; and whenever a serpent bit someone, that person would look at the serpent of bronze and live.

This incident took place during Israel's 40-year journey through the wilderness after their departure from Egypt. They were becoming extremely impatient, and bitter, and ungrateful. So they began speaking out against God and Moses, his chosen leader. It just became too much, so God sent poisonous snakes among them. It sounds like a harsh punishment for complaining, but it wasn't the first time. It was a least the fourth. And it was more than just complaining.

After some had died from the snake bites, the people came to Moses, confessed their sin, and asked him to pray for God's salvation from the snakes. God's answer came in the form of a bronze serpent set on a pole. Whenever they looked at it they would be healed. Jesus told the story as a way of explaining how

his being lifted up on a cross would bring eternal salvation for all who would look upon him, or believe in him.

There are certainly some similarities between the two stories beyond the idea of something or someone being lifted up. You could draw a comparison between the poison of the snakes and the poison of sin, and how each leads to a type of death, but looking upon the thing that has been lifted up brings life and healing. But don't want to focus on the similarities this morning, but the differences. With probably the most significant being that unlike the bronze serpent in the wilderness, there are some people who would choose not to look at Jesus on the cross, which is the same thing as rejecting or refusing the gift of salvation he wants to give them. Why, you might ask, would someone make this decision? That's a really good question.

I ask myself that question a lot. And I imagine you do too from time to time. Why would someone choose, of their own free will, to not receive the healing, the transformation, the freedom, and the eternal life that God offers through His Son? It's a tough question to answer.

Notice how I framed the question. We tend to think of God's gift of salvation strictly as a matter of where a person spends eternity. That being saved means going to heaven when we die. And that not being saved means going to hell. That's not a Biblical definition of salvation. Salvation is about our eternal destination, but it also about the work God wants to do in our lives before then, the growth and the transformation that he wants to bring about now, and throughout our lives, as we follow him. This is how I want you think of salvation this morning as we explore this idea of why someone would say, "I don't want any part of that."

I think this passage of Scripture can help us understand why some people choose to look at Jesus, lifted up on a cross, while others choose to look away.

It is because believing in Jesus, looking at Jesus as he hangs, dying, on a cross, is hard.

We have all heard sermons describing the process of crucifixion, the shame of being stripped nearly naked, or completely naked in some cases. The pain of having large spikes driven into your hands and feet. The agony of trying to support your own weight by arching your back and pressing against those wounds, in order to avoid suffocation, all while being completely exposed to the elements, and the crowds that have gathered, until finally, collapsing from sheer exhaustion, and breathing your final breath.

Or maybe you have seen it depicted statue, or a painting, or in a movie. I remember watching the movie, the Passion of the Christ, and coming to a place where I was just numb from watching the scenes of Jesus' suffering, including the whipping and beating that led up to his crucifixion.

Watching any human experience the horrible, painful, agonizing death that crucifixion was would be difficult, but with Jesus it is especially so, if you believe his message. Because then you would have to accept that you are the one that put him there. For centuries people have debated who was responsible for Jesus' death. Some say it was the Romans. Others say it was the Jews. And still others say it was both. But in the big scheme of things, they were only playing the part that was written for them. It was for your sin, it was for my sin, it was for the sin of everyone who has ever lived, that Jesus suffered and died on a cross.

The cross of Jesus makes us uncomfortable. One of the largest churches in America went so far as to remove every cross from their building. They sent out surveys to the members of their surrounding community asking them questions about what they liked and didn't like about past church experiences. Many of them responded by saying they didn't like to be made to feel like guilty, rotten sinners, and the cross apparently made them feel this way. So this church removed all their crosses. They have since replaced them.

We know the cross is essential to our faith and that we can't get rid of it, so we try to sanitize it. One example, in Protestant Churches, crosses are empty. In Roman Catholic Churches, the crosses are often depicted with Jesus still hanging upon them. They are referred to as a crucifix. I've heard people make the argument, "Well Jesus is no longer hanging on the cross, he has risen from the dead, so why should we make a cross with him on it?" It's true he has risen from the dead, but is that the only reason we don't like to see Jesus hanging on the cross?

When we sing about the cross we sometimes refer to it with words like precious, wonderful, and beautiful. We wear crosses of gold around our necks or in our ears like ornaments. We get tattoos of crosses on our bodies. A former professor once asked whether someone would wear a gold electric chair around their neck. Or get one tattooed on their body. He was trying to make the point that people in Jesus' day would have never seen a cross as anything but a cruel instrument of torture and a symbol of Roman tyranny and oppression. I'm not suggesting that crosses without Jesus, or crosses worn to decorate our bodies are wrong. The cross does reveal the beautiful truth of God's love for us, and we should celebrate that, but it also reveals the ugly truth about who we are. And we can't allow ourselves to forget that.

Another way Jesus described himself in this passage and elsewhere was as a light, shining in the darkness, exposing the truth about human beings and the sinful motives behind their actions. Just as some people choose not to look at Jesus hanging on the cross, they choose to hide from his light of truth, preferring to remain in the darkness, believing, in their ignorance, that their actions are right, or somehow justified. It makes a similar point, that people don't want to come to terms with who they really are.

Looking upon Jesus, hanging upon the cross, forces us to acknowledge our guilt, the role our sin played in his crucifixion. Looking upon Jesus, hanging on the cross, fills our hearts with sorrow as we consider the price God paid for us and for our salvation. Looking upon Jesus, hanging on the cross, inspires a humble awareness of how truly undeserving we are of God's sacrifice. It all contributes to a growing awareness of the love that God has for us, filling our souls with joy beyond measure.

What does all of this have to do with recovery? An online dictionary defined "Recovery" as "a return to a normal state of health, mind or strength, or the action or process of regaining possession or control of something stolen or lost." The state of normal we are trying to return to is life as God intended it to be, before sin entered the world. The thing that we have lost that we are trying to regain possession of is our relationship with our creator. Recovery is the goal of rehabilitation. Recovery is not possible until we can be honest about who we are and our responsibility for our current situation. Looking upon Jesus, hanging on the cross, is the only way this can happen.

Recovery doesn't happen overnight. Statistics suggest that most people who enter into rehab don't experience recovery after the first attempt, but that it often takes multiple attempts, and multiple failures, before someone is able to fully leave behind their old way of life. Our journey toward spiritual recovery takes time. And full and complete recovery is not something we can experience in this life. We will fail

many times along the way, but God is patient with us. His grace is sufficient for us. When we've lost our way, we simply need to look to look up, to Jesus, hanging on a cross, and his light will shine on our path, showing us which way to go.

When was the last time you looked upon the cross? Maybe you glanced at it one time, out of the corner of your eye, quickly prayed a brief prayer because you didn't want to spend eternity in hell. But remember salvation is so much more than that. Full salvation is about receiving the healing, wholeness, and transformation that God wants to bring about in your life. Receiving this gift requires more than a glance, but a long hard stare, looking intently upon the cross of Jesus and allowing the difficult truth it reveals to really sink in.

What makes it hard for you to look upon the cross? What are you ashamed of? What are you embarrassed about? Embrace the guilt, the shame. Receive God's amazing grace. Be reminded of his forgiveness. Sink into the depths of God's indescribable love. Look upon the cross of Jesus, and be healed. Look upon the cross and be made whole. Look upon the cross and be changed. Look upon the cross and be transformed. Look upon the cross and experience the fullness of his salvation.

Lighting the Lenten Candle

Reader: We have moved through the wilderness together, experienced the embarrassment of an intervention, and committed to completing the program that God has given us. We now look toward recovery, believing that true and lasting change is possible.

Reader: We light this candle, remembering that true and lasting change is only possible if we turn our eyes on Jesus and look upon the one who died for us and for our salvation.

(light the fourth candle)

Prayer: As we continue through this Lenten season, dear God, give us the strength to embrace your cross, and admit that it is our sin that put the crown of thorns upon your head, that drove the nails in your hands and feet, and thrust the sword in your side. Then remind us that it was because of your love for us that you allowed us to do it. Amen.