

SERMON TITLE: "Lift Up Christ"
SERMON TEXT: John 3:1-17 (also read Romans 10:5-15)
PREACHER: Rev. Kim James
OCCASION: March 11, 2018, at First UMC

INTRODUCTION

On Thursday and Friday, I was gone to Denver for a meeting of the Rocky Mountain Conference Board of Pension and Health Benefits. As the chair of that board, I opened Friday's meeting with a devotion based on Psalm 105. The first verses of that psalm say, "O give thanks to the Lord, call on his name, make known God's deeds among the peoples. Sing to God, sing praises to him; tell of all God's wonderful works." After reading those verses, I invited the members of the board to introduce themselves and share something wonderful that God was doing in their personal life or the ministry of their church. Of course, within a group of 15 people, there were some worries and concerns that were weighing down heavily, and some of those were shared too. But, I think all of us were encouraged to hear the good things that God is doing. As we heard everyone's testimony of God's wonderful works, both we and God were lifted up.

In today's gospel reading from John 3, we heard about Moses who lifted up a serpent in the wilderness—which, by the way, was a good thing that brought about healing for the people who were being bitten by snakes. And we also read in verse 14 that the Son of Man must be lifted up. It's that latter part I want to focus on today. In and through God's love, God lifted Jesus up in order to save the world. With that divine purpose in mind, let's look closely this morning at John chapter 3 and consider why we, also, should do our best to lift up Christ.

1—SO PEOPLE CAN BELIEVE

The first reason we should lift up Christ is so people can believe. In John 3, verses 12-16, in our New Revised Standard translation, Jesus uses the word *believe* four times. Obviously belief is an

important part of our salvation, and anything we can do to help other people believe in Christ is our highest calling. The passage we read from Romans 10 spells that out quite clearly. How can people call on one in whom they have not believed? And how can they believe in one of whom they have not heard? And how can they hear unless someone tells them?

There was a time in our country when Christianity seemed to be in the air we breathed and the water we drank. Prayers were spoken in schools, and no one questioned nativity scenes or Ten Commandment displays in public places. People were so familiar with the Bible that quotations and references to Bible stories, like Moses lifting up a serpent, could be made with the assumption that everyone would understand what was being said. (By the way, if you don't know that story about Moses and the snake, you can go home and look it up in Numbers, chapter 21.)

Maybe I've made my point that, even here in Utah, where religion still holds a relatively powerful influence, we're now living in a different time. Scholars tell us that this time in which we live is "post-Christian." What they mean is that Christianity is no longer the prevailing faith or cultural norm in our society. Increasing numbers of people indicate no denominational affiliation or religious preference. By and large, even those persons who call themselves Christian are less educated in the Bible and less committed to church attendance.

Because we who remain faithful to Christian spiritual disciplines are a minority, we can't assume that the people around us know much about Jesus. We can't assume that they understand the help, healing, and hope that Christ can offer. We can't assume that they comprehend the incredible blessings that come from trusting in Jesus. And that's why we have to show and tell them. We have to lift up Christ, so people can believe.

2—SO PEOPLE CAN HAVE ETERNAL LIFE

A second reason we should lift up Christ is so people can have eternal life. Eternal life is of value because it enables persons to see beyond the miseries and grief of these days to the promise of a much

better afterlife. Eternal life is a promise that gives courage to do the right thing now—even if it is painful—because we have the confidence that we will receive our full reward later on. Eternal life is the assurance that broken relationships will be restored and that broken bodies will be healed. Strapped by earthly limitations now, we can't quite get our heads around how all that heavenly wonder will happen, but we can be assured that eternal life is a time, place, and way of being in which God will make everything work out just right.

As John 3:17 says, God didn't send Jesus into the world to condemn the world. People have an innate ability to condemn themselves; they don't need much help with that. What they do need help with is seeing beyond this particular moment. They need help imagining where the roads they have chosen will inevitably lead them, if they continue the same way into the future. People need to see how they can change from a dead-end road to a path that leads to happiness, healing, and wholeness.

While I was on the airplane coming home Friday evening, I started reading a little book about Dietrich Bonhoeffer. He was a Lutheran minister who lived in Germany at the time of the 2nd World War. Unlike many German Christians who quietly went along with Hitler's regime, Bonhoeffer opposed what he saw was happening in his country. Because of his opposition, Bonhoeffer was imprisoned. Instead of feeling sorry for himself, Bonhoeffer then used his imprisonment as an opportunity to lead prayer and worship, and to offer pastoral care to the other prisoners. An English fellow-prisoner wrote about him, "Bonhoeffer always seemed to me to spread an atmosphere of happiness and joy over the least incident and profound gratitude for the mere fact that he was alive." At the moment in which prison guards came to take Bonhoeffer to the gallows, he turned to the Englishman and said, "This is the end, but for me it is the beginning of life." Even in the worst situation, Bonhoeffer was able to see the hope of eternity.*

Like Bonhoeffer, we need to lift up Jesus so the people around us can see and claim their way to a better future. We need to lift up Christ so people can have eternal life.

3—SO PEOPLE CAN KNOW GOD’S LOVE

A third reason we should lift up Christ is so people can know God’s love—which is so famously proclaimed in John 3:16. No one has to wait for heaven to experience this joyful aspect of faith.

Wherever we are on life’s journey, God’s love is present with us. We who are Christians already know this comforting truth, but other people may not yet comprehend the magnitude of God’s forgiving mercy, compassion, and kindness. So, it’s our responsibility to communicate this divine love to them.

How do we do that? We feed them in Jesus’ name. We clothe them in Jesus’ name. We drive them to the grocery store or doctor’s appointment in Jesus’ name. We forgive them in Jesus’ name. We teach them in Jesus’ name. We repair or build their home in Jesus’ name. We listen to them in Jesus’ name. We encourage them in Jesus’ name. We coach their sports’ team or lead their Girl Scout troop in Jesus’ name. We rescue them from disaster in Jesus’ name—maybe by giving in today’s UMCOR special offering. We heal them in Jesus’ name—maybe by putting some change in the offering plate this month for the Morton Cure Paralysis Fund. We sacrifice our time, our talents, and as Bonhoeffer illustrated—sometimes even our lives—in Jesus’ name.

You may have noticed that I didn’t say we do it in *our* name. Most of us would like people to think well of us. But what’s even more important is that people think well of Jesus. So we have to clearly point to Jesus in what we do. People need to know who it is that motivates our good deeds, kind attitudes, and sacrificial giving. They need to know, so they can be inspired by and connected to that same source of goodness. We need to lift up Christ so people can know God’s love.

4—SO GOD CAN SAVE THE WORLD

John 3:17 tells us a fourth reason that we should lift up Christ: so God can save the world. I think, traditionally, this verse has been interpreted to mean so God can save all the individual people of the world from spiritual death. That certainly is one valid understanding. An additional legitimate interpretation might be that God wants to save whole populations from death by starvation or malaria or

opioid addiction. It could be that God wants to save the nations of the earth from destroying each other in war. In fact, God might want to save our planet earth from destruction by nuclear bombs or climate change, so that all the individual people of the world could have an opportunity to believe in Jesus and receive salvation through him.

Those are tall orders, but when we lift up Christ, we can help God fulfill this goal. Ten years ago, at the 2008 General Conference, the United Methodist denomination determined that our mission was “to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world.” To help make that mission come true, our General Conference delegates set four focus areas which are still in effect today. One of them has to do with the reduction of poverty around the world. Another focus area has to do with improving global health. To make sure we have the spiritual strength to do those things, we are also focusing our attention on recruiting and training new clergy and lay leaders and creating new and renewed congregations. As United Methodists, we lift up Christ so that God can save the world.

CONCLUSION

When I started thinking about this theme of lifting up Christ, I immediately remembered an old hymn I used to sing:

I was sinking deep in sin, far from the peaceful shore.
 Very deeply stained within, sinking to rise no more.
 But the Master of the sea heard my despairing cry.
 From the waters lifted me; now safe am I.
 Love lifted me! Love lifted me!
 When nothing else could help, love lifted me. (by James Rowe)

Of course, the ones being lifted in that song is us the singers. But isn't it great that we can share that joy with other people? Isn't it great that we have an experience of God's love that is worth singing and telling about? Let's not be bashful. Let's be bold. Let's give people a chance to believe, receive eternal life, be loved, and be saved. Let's lift up Christ.