



Sunday, March 14, 2021

Rev. Robert W. Brown  
***RECONCILIATION; Living into the Resurrected Life***

#### INTRODUCTION

This is week four our Lenten series called ***RISE UP; Living into a Resurrected Life***. We have been looking closely into how we might open ourselves to this amazing grace of God and **RISE UP** not only from physical death, but also experience God's resurrection power here in this life as well. So far, we have talked about practicing the gift of grace, the importance of vulnerability and the strength found in humility. Today, and in our small groups this coming week we will talk about the need for true reconciliation and forgiveness as a critical aspect of living into a resurrected life. Next week we finish up the series talking about gratitude.

Today's scripture is from chapter 3 of John's Gospel. The text is part of a late-night conversation that Jesus is having with a well-respected religious leader named Nicodemus. Nicodemus had quietly sought out Jesus to learn more about this man who he suspects may-very-well "come from God". Jesus engages openly with him, explaining that he will never truly understand who he is and his what his mission is about, until he is "born anew" or "born of the Spirit." Now Nicodemus is even more curious and presses Jesus for more.

As we pick up the conversation and listen in this morning, we will hear Jesus give the most remarkable elevator speech about his true identity and the essential reason he came into the world.

From the Gospel of John, Chapter 3, verses 14 though 21, Jesus says this to Nicodemus.

#### **John 3:14-21**

And 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.

"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.

"Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him. Those who believe in him are not condemned; but those who do not believe are condemned already, because they have not believed in the name of the only Son of God. And this is the judgment, that the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil. For all who do evil hate the light and do not come to the light, so that their deeds may not be exposed. But 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."

#### SERMON

Please pray with me.

*Holy God, like Nicodemus, we too long to understand Jesus. Soften our hearts to receive your word, open our minds, challenge our presumptions. Guide us by your Holy Spirit so that we might continue to live into a resurrected life. May the words of my mouth and the meditation of all our hearts be pleasing and acceptable to you our Rock and our Redeemer. -Amen*

In 1935 a guy named Bill happened upon a guy named Dr. Bob. The two men quickly bonded around their mutual affection for alcohol. They ended the evening sharing openly about their struggle to quit drinking and, to their astonishment, discovered that admitting their powerlessness to someone who could identify with the same insane compulsion actually helped them to be both graciously supportive yet generously accountable to one another, without judgement or condemnation. Somehow, this simple act of compassionate understanding gave them the strength to remain sober one day at a time. And it worked! The two men soon found that they could also help other hopeless drunks in the same way. Eventually, they devised a 12-step recovery plan that caught fire and spread around the world. ALCOHOLICS ANONYMOUS was born. The very first step of the 12 is to

1. Admit you are powerless over alcohol & that your life has become unmanageable.

What Bill and Dr. Bob understood is that no recovery can begin until we are able to honestly face the extent of our brokenness and admit defeat. Today, the very same 12-step program has been adopted for all kinds of addictions. The truth is that we are all addicted in some way and these addictions lead to misery, guilt and remorse. It's been proven that these original 12 rigorous steps will help anyone to bring God's healing grace - first to ourselves and then out to the entire world. When an addict commits to following these 12-steps, the program works! As they are fond of saying, "it works if you work it." I know that Bill and Dr. Bob specifically and wisely kept any particular religious idea or thin theology out of their program. The only mention of "God" is in step two and three.

2. Came to believe that a Power greater than ourselves could restore us to sanity.
3. Made a decision to turn our will and our lives over to the care of God *as we understood God.*

And thank...the higher power...that keeping narrow religious language out of the program has endured, because a lot of people, both in and out of church circles, frequently view organized religion as the self-proclaimed keepers and defenders of pure, righteous living. They assume *the* moral authority to uphold a rigid binary between good and evil. Religion's idea of God then becomes an equally rigid arbitrator, the final judge who rewards the righteous and condemns the bad - those who don't measure up are condemned. This is a religion where grace is earned, mercy is reserved only for the deserving and charity is piously dispensed with fiduciary precision. So, you might understand how if you are a drunk or an addict of any sort, you stay as far away from organized religion as you can, or if you are active in church, you keep your

addiction hidden away, a tightly guarded secret practiced in the shadows. But it is exactly this hidden shame that actually feeds addictive behavior. As they also are fond of saying in the halls, “you’re only as sick as your secrets.”

The wonderful irony here is that even though talk of “religion” is strictly prohibited in 12-step discussions, the truth of the matter is that in these meetings, the teachings of Jesus, as I understand them, are fiercely practiced day in and day out, one day at a time. Even though I’d likely be escorted out of a 12-step meeting for saying it out loud, AA NA OA SA XYZA really are practicing an awesome way of being the church! Although it’s probably not at all what most of us commonly think of as church.

The 12-step program organized a way for people to transform their lives through what religion might call confession, contrition, forgiveness and reconciliation. It is a program designed around rigorous honesty about the broken places. Here is a way and a place where you can fully recover your humanity by openly speaking about your worst moments, your hard regrets, fears, losses and wicked temptations. In the speaking and the listening you realize that you are not alone, you are not judged and in community. You can see that there is always a way out of the dark lonely chasm. The only requirement is a desire to stop the behavior that brought you here in the first place. Anyone can screw up, relapse, even show up high and still find a seat - as long as you’re willing and ready to start again.

This 12-step program is also a map that leads to true reconciliation. True reconciliation, however is a costly endeavor. Like forgiveness, reconciliation must begin with finding the humility to admit mistakes and learn a different way to live. No matter what the offense, reconciliation always requires the need for repentance and then speaking honestly - out loud to another trusted person about all your sins. This is the true power of confession. It requires courageous vulnerability to allow a light to shine in on the shadowed and secret places. the real you will be exposed! Recovery and reconciliation is about recognizing the self-made prisons of unspoken shame, unresolved grief and the lingering bitter poison of resentment. Recovery and reconciliation are never easy, and never quick.

I think Jesus was actually pointing to the way of true reconciliation when he told Nicodemus that, “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.” Jesus is talking about reconciliation with God, reconciliation with estranged loved ones and even reconciliation with enemies. The cost however is enormous. There must be a willingness to die to all of the self-destructive behaviors that keep us down, the behaviors that chip away at our best selves and cause us to turn away from God’s acceptance, grace and love. To surrender and willingly die takes massive courage. The kind of courage that can only be found when you finally have had enough of living in that dark pit of secrecy, despair and self-loathing.

As if to fuel courage needed, Jesus goes on, “Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved

through him. Those who believe in him are not condemned.” Jesus offers safe haven for all who have a desire to reconcile, especially those caught up in self-destructive and abusive behavior. God perennially extends an open invitation to all people at all times.

The only condemnation that comes is from the inevitable results that follow our unaddressed brokenness. This condemnation is not God’s judgement, it is the predictable outcome of a progressive and debilitating disorder, strengthened by our stubborn resistance to humbling ourselves to the healing light. We prefer to rely on our own strength rather than ask for help. In the blindness of a dark pit we think somehow our dignity, honor and respect will be preserved.

“This is the judgment, Jesus said, the light has come into the world, and people love darkness rather than light because their deeds are evil. For all who do evil hate the light and do not come to the light, so that their deeds may not be exposed. But **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.” Only the truth can bring us into the healing light that leads to real reconciliation.

It is no surprise to me that so many churches of all denominations are fading. We don’t really know how to find our confession or confront our need for recovery. We don’t know how to openly hear the unfiltered confessions of other broken people. Too often the church is too quick to judge, too quick to condemn, too quick to point out the splinter in another’s eye while ignoring the log in their own. We don’t know how to be reconciled with those outside our bubble. Imagine how revolutionary it would be if the church found ways that *allowed* - no *eagerly welcomed* people to speak freely and safely about their roughest edges, their disabilities, failures, and personal struggles. Wouldn’t that be risky? – yes it would – scandalous? most likely – criticized by others? you bet – terrifying for the “good people” in the pews? Certainly! Even still, imagine organizing the Church around an environment of non-judgmental openness. A community that makes it safe to admit that we are all a work in progress. We are all in recovery. Imagine a church where grace is so palpable and expected that we dare to risk rigorous honesty with ourselves and one another. A church where the hard and costly work of reconciliation, forgiveness and healing yields an ongoing, abundant harvest. Recovery progressing day in and day out. A church functioning more like a free hospital for the wounded and the broken rather than an exclusive sanctuary for the sanctified and righteous good people. I believe this is how God so loved the world. I also believe this church very well be on the way to such a place. I believe many of us sincerely want to discover the secret of true reconciliation, in our nation, our communities and families. The question is, are we willing to pay the price? Are we willing to die to our addiction to convenience and comfort for the sake of reconciling with an eco-system badly in need of recovery? Are we willing to die to self-interest and exclusive privilege so that we can be reconciled with those on the margins and work to reconcile the weighted scales and systems that perpetuate injustice? Reconciliation is an all-encompassing affair and the need is more urgent day by day. I believe it is time to find our confession and boldly let the healing light seep into the cracked and broken places in every one of us.

If we can look at this Lenten journey as symbolic and relevant to our life journey, then we already know that the path to living a resurrected life must first go through the valley of death. Following in the Way of Jesus we may be able to experience what 12-steppers already know. The crosses we dare to face can actually become the transformative, liberating agents that bring about resurrected life. This is what God always does. Only through God's inexhaustible grace, extravagant love and endless mercy that we can live into the resurrected life offered freely and without reservation to anyone who dares to receive it. AMEN.