

“Exposed, Embraced”

I.

I’ve done a lot of funerals in the last seven years, but somehow this one seemed different. In the week just passed, I buried my blog. For those of you who actually have a life, and therefore have no idea what I am talking about, a blog is a sort of public Internet journal –a website where I would share my thoughts on whatever might happen to interest me, and anyone could read it. My blog had a brief but productive life: Eight and a half months, 842 posts. The blog survived by its author.

I thought it was a good idea when I started it –just a way to get some things off my chest. It seemed cheaper than therapy. I initially conceived it as the bonus round for the Sunday morning Fellowship Forum –a way to keep the conversation going. But a funny thing happened, not long after the blog launched, something I had not really anticipated: people started reading it. (I mean other than my mom). Some of them I knew; many of them I did not. And even as it was picking up some steam—even as my blog began to be known and read by people that I’ve never met—well, I started to feel uneasy.

I started to feel exposed.

I suspect it has something to do with context...or, in this case, lack thereof. When I teach or preach or pastor here at Plymouth, it occurs within a certain context. To you, I’m not just some guy spouting off on the Internet; I’ve officiated at your weddings, baptized your babies, buried your loved ones, gone to see you in Intensive Care. We have a relationship, and that relationship enables me to talk to you about the things I think are important.

But blogging isn’t like that. Blogging is pretty much the opposite of that: it is communication *without* context, communication in the absence of relationship. And that does not work so well –or, at least, it does not work so well for me. Out of context, I tend to come across as snarky and opinionated and maybe just a little too pleased with myself. Some of the less-than-appealing aspects of my personality end up exposed –out there, on the Internet, for everyone to see.

And I don’t like being exposed –not like that, not to strangers, not outside of the context of relationship. But in the right context? Exposure may be just what the doctor ordered. According to this passage from the Gospel of John, we will all be exposed; we will all be seen for who and what we truly are. But the context is key, and in this case the context is Christ. In the gaze of God’s grace, in the light of God’s love, we are all exposed. And then we are all embraced. That is how we start to change.

II.

Appropriately enough, our scripture reading this morning is a story set in darkness. By night Nicodemus comes to Jesus –by night, because Nicodemus fears exposure. Nicodemus is, after all, a card-carrying member of the ruling religious establishment, and Jesus has already been identified as an emerging threat to their power. If he is going to come to Jesus at all, Nicodemus would much rather come by night. He would rather not risk exposure.

Our passage picks up in the middle of their conversation, perhaps at the single strangest part. In speaking to Nicodemus, Jesus alludes to an obscure story from the Old Testament book of Numbers in which Moses saves the children of Israel from a plague by creating a prototype of Iowa State Fair food: snake on a stick.¹ Moses makes a serpent out of bronze, places it on a pole, and for reasons that remain obscure, this has some sort of healing and beneficial effect –but we don't really have time to get into it this morning. I will save that for another sermon.

And then we come to the money verse; the single most memorized sentence in the entire New Testament. But it is also perhaps the single most misunderstood. We really need to read John 3:16 along with verse 17: *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. But keep reading: 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.*"

Somewhere we got the idea that these words are only about life after death. What will it be for you? Heaven or Hell? Smoking or non? But that badly misses the point. Look at those verses again. What does God love? The world.² The *whole* world, every single inch of it and every person in it, without any exclusion or exceptions. God loves all of it; God intends to save all of it. Even you. Even me. Even us.

So forget about heaven and hell; Jesus is talking about here and now. Every day is Judgment Day. And that is the key, that is the context, for the rest of the passage. It is all about exposure.³ In Jesus Christ, the light of God has come into the world, so that darkness is driven away. No more shadows, no more secrets, no place left to hide. Every evil, broken and dysfunctional thing will be driven out into the open. Every aspect of our lives will be clearly seen, revealed in the harsh and healing light of God.

III.

God's exposure of us sounds severe –and it is. But it serves a vital purpose. God exposes us in order to embrace us. We have to see ourselves as we truly are. Only then does the love of a God have a way to work on us.

This is a major theme in John's Gospel: God so loves the world that God sends Jesus into it to expose us for what we really are. And all through John's Gospel, people will react in different ways to the light of Christ. Some will respond well; they will come into the light, be exposed for who they truly are and be embraced by the love of God. But others will not much care for the light that Christ brings. Some will turn away. Some will stay stuck in their darkness.⁴

Like the religious authorities. Like the Roman Empire. Darkness is their best friend. In the darkness, they look pretty good; look like the guardians of all that is just and decent and holy. But Christ comes to shine a spotlight on the powers-that-be, and all of the sudden, under the bright lights, they do not look so good. When they conspire to crucify him as a heretic and an enemy of the state, they are exposed in all of their violence, corruption and injustice. Their true nature is revealed.

In Jesus Christ, the light of God shines into our darkness. Every day is Judgment Day, a time for exposure and embrace.

IV.

But only if we come into Christ's light. Only if we allow ourselves to be exposed. And take it from a recovering blogger: exposure is an unsettling prospect. No one wants to feel vulnerable. No one wants to be seen for what we really are. We have learned a thousand little tricks to help us hide; we have mastered all the subtle arts of subterfuge. We almost entirely disappear behind our carefully-crafted façades, perpetually pretending to be the people we wish we were. If we are lucky, we may have a handful of people with whom we can let down our guard, people that we can trust enough to act like ourselves. But that is the exception, not the rule. Most of us, most of the time, go to great lengths to conceal our truest selves, to avoid being exposed.

And we wonder why we feel so lonely. We wonder why we yearn for something that we can never quite find.

We need to be exposed –in the right context, of course. In our relationship with God, and with God's people, what begins as exposure ends as embrace.

God so loved the world that God came looking for us. God came looking for you. And when the love of God lays hold of you, you will feel extremely exposed –known right down to your deepest, darkest places, the places you pray that no one will ever know, the places where you keep your secrets. But what God exposes, God also embraces –even and especially the depths of our selves. And then, by the grace of God, you will start to see the truest truth about your self: You are known, and you are loved, loved beyond all measure, just as you are. The very God who knows you far better than you will ever know yourself is the same God who loves you far more than you will ever fathom.

How does this happen? How do we come to know this love? It happens here. It happens now. God calls us into the church to do the things that Jesus did; to take the light that we have been given and shine it into every dark place. Sometimes we do that outside of the walls of the church –we shine Christ's light on the powers-that-be, expose the injustice of this present darkness, call the world to better things.

But some times, we do it right here. We do it to each other. At its very best, the church can and does become a safe place for us to be exposed; a sanctuary where our true selves can come out of the shadows and into the daylight. As we start to shine the light of Christ on each other, we will see that under it all, we are so much alike. We all fall far short of God's desires for us, and we are all beloved children of God.

We are exposed. We are embraced. And then, by the grace of God, we can start to change.

Amen.

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Notes

¹ Numbers 21:4-9

² See the entry on *kosmos* in *Kittel's Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*. Volume III. Edited by Gerhard Kittel. Translated by Geoffrey Bromiley. (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1964), pp.867-897.

³ As Raymond Brown indicates, *elegkew* conveys a range of meanings not easily captured in one English word. It means "to expose, convict, reprimand," and much more. The idea in John's Gospel is that God's love exposes us and judges us in order to save us. See: *The Gospel According to John (i-xii)*. (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1966), p.135. Also helpful is the entry on *elegkew* in *Kittel's Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*. Volume II. Edited by Gerhard Kittel. Translated by Geoffrey Bromiley. (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1964), pp.473-476.

⁴ "The coming of Jesus as the *light* of the world (see 1.4-5, 9-13; 8.12; 9.5) creates a situation of a judgment because people cannot avoid the choice of light or darkness. The point emphasizes the inevitability of choice, in which the person is revealed (compare 16.8) as born of God or as a child of darkness (the devil, see 8.43-47)." –John Painter. Notes to the Gospel of John in *The Access Bible: New Revised Standard Version*. Gail R. O'Day and David Peterson, Editors. (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1999), p.135.