

I AM not of this world

Third sermon in series: I AM...the transforming promises of our Savior

Preached on Sunday, March 2, 2008

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Text: John 8:21-33

Theme: Jesus challenges us to see what we were created to be and heals us of our spiritual blindness so that we might be freed from the hold of worldliness or “the cosmic clink.”

It seems this Amish man was in court suing the driver of a car who had hit him while he was driving in his horse drawn buggy. The defense attorney was pushing the Amish man on the reason for his change in answers from his original statements at the scene to the story he was now telling.

“The Amish are known for their truth telling but you seem to be lying. Why have you decided to change your story now, after these several months? At the time you said you were feeling fine, but now you are claiming all these injuries.”

The Amish man answered, “You see we were riding along as peaceful as you please when this man in his car came flying over the hill and plowed into my buggy. He hit us so hard that the cart, horse and I went sailing into the ditch. I remember the man getting out of his car and walking up to my horse and looking at him lying there next to me. Then he went back to his car and got a gun and came back to the horse and shot him.

Then he turned to me and asked, “How are you doing?”

Well sir, it seemed to me in that moment that it was not a good time to tell the truth.

Have you had moments when it seemed like a good time not to tell the truth? Today I am going to be preaching on the truth – the hard truth that Jesus represents in our worldly lives – and how he came to set us free. Today’s sermon is part of the series on the “I AM statements” found in the Gospel of John and today I am going to be preaching on one of the most obscure of those statements, “I am not of this world.” Today’s statement is more difficult to understand than the others in the series because it is posed negatively but also it does not point to an object like bread, water, or a door or gate. It is a strange statement that reveals Jesus’ divinity, authority, and relationship with God. It is also a statement that infuriated the Pharisees.

Last week I preached about Jesus’ statement “I am the light to the world” and said it actually appeared twice – once in chapter 8 and the other in chapter 9. Today’s statement is sandwiched in the middle of both statements and in many ways relates to the problem the Pharisees are having in their continued spiritual blindness. Chapter 8 is an extended, confusing, heated debate between Jesus and the Pharisees over issues of his authority, connection with God, his power to forgive and judge, and ultimately who he was. If I were the editor of this chapter I would rename it and call “Caught between a rock and a hard place,” because it begins with the Pharisees gathering rocks to stone a woman caught in adultery and ends with them gathering rocks to stone Jesus. It appears they have some anger management issues that need exploration.

After Jesus forgives the woman caught in adultery things heat up for Jesus. The Pharisees want to know on what authority he forgave her and when he tells them his authority comes from his Father (a term of intimacy with God they would never think of using) the debate hits its boiling point. For more than 50 verses Jesus and the Pharisees have a verbal duel and Jesus uses all sorts of images to show the difference between his world and theirs. He talks about light and dark, human versus spiritual

judgment, human versus spiritual blindness, human versus spiritual standards, and human versus spiritual freedom. The more he tries to clear things up the more confused and agitated they become.

At one point in the debate Jesus says, “You are from below and I am from above. You are of the world and I am not of this world.” The word that Jesus used for world in Greek is “kosmos.” It means all that is seen, touched, and material. It is the earthly kingdom that was the crown jewel of God’s creation but has not lived up to being what God intended it to be. In fact, as Jesus tries to explain, humankind has not lived up to being what God intended because we are spiritually blind and rigidly focused on sin and law and intensely self-absorbed. In fact “kosmos” is hostile towards God and towards the one God sent and wants to kill him. In spite of that God has not given up and wants to redeem and free humankind from their worldly bondage.

What makes this “I AM statement” so powerful for me is that Jesus declares I am not of this world – there is another world, there is a better world, there is a kingdom where grace, forgiveness, justice, and hope prevail. There is another world that we who are blinded by our own sin and self absorption cannot even see until we are healed. There is another world that we who are imprisoned in unforgiveness, bitterness, and hate cannot escape until we are set free. In many ways this world we live in is like a prison and we can only be set from “cosmos clink” by the truth of Christ.

The scripture reading for today ended with Christ telling those who were trying to be his disciples that if they continued to hear and follow his word they would discover the truth and this truth would set them free. This truth would be the key to the doors of our cosmic clink.

Now that sounds great but what does it really mean? What does all this high and lofty theological mumbo jumbo mean in the way we live our lives? In what ways does the truth of Christ set us free?

We are freed from trying to be people that other people want us to be. Poet E. E. Cummings wrote, “To be nobody but yourself in a world that is doing its best day and night into making you like everybody else is to fight the hardest battle there is and never stop fighting.” You and I are constantly bombarded with a message of what we are to look like, act like and think like. We are set free from having to be young, tall, beautiful, athletic, sexy, intelligent, successful, well dressed, and well connected to be what God intended us to be.

Two women who had just met at the local health club started talking about their lives and they wanted to impress each other. One turned to the other and said, “I eat moderately, I exercise moderately, and I live moderately.”

Her new friend then asked, “Is there anything else you do?”

“Yes,” the other woman said, “I lie extensively.”

The truth of Christ sets us free from always having to prove our worthiness so we can discover our belovedness just the way we are. The truth of Christ sets us free from having to conform to some worldly definition of success so we might be transformed in the image of our Lord. The truth of Christ sets us free from the endless desiring of more and more so that are able to be happy with less. I was reading an article from a hospital chaplain who just happened to visit a patient undergoing treatment for venereal disease. He said, “Reverend, my trouble is I’ve been led around by my ‘gotta haves’ all my life.”

How many of us are led around by our ‘gotta haves?’ I’ve gotta have one more pleasure, I’ve gotta have one more thing, I’ve gotta have more money, I’ve gotta have a bigger position, I’ve gotta have a faster computer, I’ve gotta have – well you fill in the blanks. The first step of spiritual freedom is to not be led around by our ‘gotta haves.’

Secondly we are freed of our sins and all the guilt and shame connected with them. Do you know how heavy our cosmos baggage is? Do you realize what dragging around all our sins, guilt, and shame does to our souls? Just for a moment I want you to remember a mistake you made, or a sin you committed against someone you loved. Perhaps you hurt your spouse, a member of your family, or a close friend. I want you to remember how that guilt or shame felt on your heart. Then remember how good it felt to confess your mistake and receive forgiveness. Wasn't it like a breath of fresh air? Do you remember the relief?

That is just one sin, one mistake, one act of confession and forgiveness. Just think of the freedom we can feel when we put our whole life in front of Christ and ask for mercy. Every sin, no matter how dark and distant, is forgiven. Every stain is washed clean. We begin life anew. That is freedom! That is liberation!

When Jesus was talking with the Pharisees he was telling them that they were stuck in their sins and were going to die in their sins. They were a slave to the very thing they hated about themselves and others. And yet with one word, with one action, with one declaration they could be set free but they could not do it.

This last week I was talking with Meghan and Jean in the office and remembered a situation when I was a chaplain in the hospital that still haunts me today because it demonstrated two lives stuck in sin. I was called to a room where a woman had just coded. The team was already at work trying to bring her back to life and I saw a younger woman at the door in tears so I went to talk with her. It was the daughter of the woman fighting for her life. The daughter told me about the struggles she had had throughout life with her mother and how they were filled with resentment and bitterness towards each other. She pleaded with me to ask God for one more chance to tell her mother that she loved her and to ask forgiveness.

Miraculously her mother came back to life. The team parted the way and the young woman made a dash to tell her mother those words that had been locked in resentment and bitterness for years. They both stared at each other and no words came. No words! I could not believe it. The woman coded again and the daughter once again pleaded for another chance. Once again her mother miraculously came back and once again in the moment where they could have given each other life and forgiveness they both glared in silence. Eventually she died and both remained locked in sin and resentment.

Is there someone you have not forgiven? Is there some relationship in your life that is still locked in sin and resentment? Christ's love can free you. As Christ has forgiven you, you are to forgive those who have injured you. It is your first class ticket out of "cosmos clink."

Third, we are freed from worry. Think about how much of our time and energy is consumed by worry. We worry about having enough and having too much. We worry about things that never happen and about things that happened long ago that can't be changed. The things of this world are temporary. They can disappear in a moment. We should not waste our time and energy worrying about them. Instead we should be putting our trust and faith in the Kingdom – our future home that is eternal.

Fourth, we are freed from manipulating the events of our lives. Think for a moment about how much time and energy you exert trying to stay in control your life. Think about all the doctoring of information, the spinning of facts, the juggling of stories, keeping all our stories straight, and the endless scheming and planning all because we think we know what is best for us. But we don't. We think in worldly terms. We keep forgetting that our vision is limited and our wisdom is based on worldly logic. True freedom comes when we can place our trust in God and God's provision and simply live obediently.

Finally, we are freed from fear of having to be alone in our spiritual journeys. We are freed of the fear of rejection, alienation, and abandonment. We are free of the fear of being lost and not knowing the way. We are free of fear when we put our trust in the one who declares I AM the light to illumine your path, I AM the truth to set you free, I AM the bread for the journey ahead, I AM the shepherd who will not let you perish, I AM so do not be afraid.

Are you a prisoner in the cosmic clink because of fear, or worry, or the inability to let go and trust in God? Are you stuck in your own sin, anger, resentment, and unforgiveness? Are you looking for the key to your prison cell? Christ is that key. His truth, his forgiveness, his grace, will set you free. Will you join me in prayer....