

## Scripture Lesson (beginning of service)

### 1 John 3

<sup>1</sup> See what great love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God! And that is what we are! The reason the world does not know us is that it did not know him. <sup>2</sup> Dear friends, now we are children of God, and what we will be has not yet been made known. But we know that when Christ appears,<sup>[a]</sup> we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is. <sup>3</sup> All who have this hope in him purify themselves, just as he is pure.

<sup>4</sup> Everyone who sins breaks the law; in fact, sin is lawlessness. <sup>5</sup> But you know that he appeared so that he might take away our sins. And in him is no sin. <sup>6</sup> No one who lives in him keeps on sinning. No one who continues to sin has either seen him or known him.

<sup>7</sup> Dear children, do not let anyone lead you astray. The one who does what is right is righteous, just as he is righteous.

The sermon scripture this morning is from Acts Chapter 3 verses 12-19. John and Peter are outside the temple and they have just healed this formerly lame begger in the name of Jesus and made him able to walk, and a crowd of Jews gathers to see what's going on. So picking up in verse 12...

<sup>12</sup> When Peter saw this, he said to them: "Fellow Israelites, why does this surprise you? Why do you stare at us as if by our own power or godliness we had made this man walk? <sup>13</sup> The God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, the God of our fathers, has glorified his servant Jesus. You handed him over to be killed, and you disowned him before Pilate, though he had decided to let him go. <sup>14</sup> You disowned the Holy and Righteous One and asked that a murderer be released to you. <sup>15</sup> You killed the author of life, but God raised him from the dead. We are witnesses of this. <sup>16</sup> By faith in the name of Jesus, this man whom you see and know was made strong. It is Jesus' name and the faith that comes through him that has completely healed him, as you can all see.

<sup>17</sup> "Now, fellow Israelites, I know that you acted in ignorance, as did your leaders. <sup>18</sup> But this is how God fulfilled what he had foretold through all the prophets, saying that his Messiah would suffer. <sup>19</sup> Repent, then, and turn to God, so that your sins may be wiped out, that times of refreshing may come from the Lord,

How many of y'all at some point, however long or not-so-long ago, had to take Driver's Ed?

I don't remember a lot about Driver's Ed. I mean, clearly I learned the material, because I know how to drive a car, and I passed the North Carolina driver's license test all those years ago, and I'm relatively confident I could pass it again. The weekend of actually driving that student driver car was pretty memorable. But as for the two week classroom part of Driver's Ed, not a lot sticks out. The one day I do specifically remember though, was when our instructor talked about collisions.

He made a point to call them "collisions" and not "accidents." And after that day of class, he'd correct anybody who used the word "accident." He told us a few horror stories about 15-year-olds who had gotten in minor or major wrecks in the driver's ed car, and a couple of them were so outrageous we broke out laughing. But the more he talked about it, his intended purpose of wanting us to take this seriously started to really sink in.

There were about 35 people in that classroom, and at any given time 25 of them might be asleep. Most afternoons all those high school freshmen were thinking "why does the State of North Carolina make us do this?!" as their eyelids drooped toward their chins and their chins drooped toward their desks. But that afternoon, after the instructor had finished regaling us with stories of student drivers who had put his life at risk, he challenged us to come up with a car accident that couldn't have been avoided. We couldn't do it. But not for lack of trying. Every single one of those normally sleepy students had a hand up to throw some off-the-wall situation at him, and every one of them, he pointed out somebody whose fault that collision was. It might not have been the driver from whose perspective the story was told, but after every example he assigned responsibility to someone, and said "See, that wasn't just an accident." It was kind of annoying to have to change your habitual vocabulary when you were talking to him or asking a question in class. But looking back on it now, especially because we have some "outlawed" vocabulary words in Short-Term Mission, I can see that he was making a point.

At the end of that classroom course, sure we looked at it that he was going to get in a car with us and let us driver and then tell us how bad we all were at it. But he looked at it and saw that he was about to put his life in each of our hands for

several hours, and he wanted us to take it seriously; to take responsibility; to own it.

Peter spent the first half of that piece of scripture doing the same thing. I really thought it sounded pretty harsh when I read through this for the first time during my planning process last week. I mean he's really driving home that *You've been bad little children* thing there. "You handed him over to be killed," "You disowned him before Pilate" "You killed the author of life." In the Danny Peck translation of the Bible, that shrinks down to "See, that wasn't just an accident." But once he's done getting this group of Jews to own their sinfulness, he takes this whole lesson further and he tells them the good part, after Jesus died. "God raised him from the dead." Because that's the real end of that story, right, that whole thing we're celebrating through the ongoing season of Eastertide. That sin didn't win. God did. Peter says "...this is how God fulfilled what he had foretold through all the prophets,"

"See, that wasn't just accident."

And then he one-ups himself again and jumps all the way away from sin to hope for these *individual* people.

**"Repent, then, and turn to God, so that your sins may be wiped out, that times of refreshing may come from the Lord,"** (Emphasis added).

God did His part. God continues to do His part. God will continue to do His part. You just have to continue in him.

Remember when I said I started reading these verses and I thought they sounded pretty harsh? That's because for me, anyway, it's easy to look at that chunk and let condemnation jump out at me. Because Peter called those guys out. And through them in this scripture he calls us out. But, paraphrasing from the Methodist General Board of Discipleship, we in the Church hear a call from Jesus through scripture to repent. To move away from sin in the hope of Jesus' resurrection. But there was a time when we heard that call for the first time. (End paraphrasing) And this crowd of stunned Jews looking at a healed man, a man that they've known, whose disability they've seen over and over again, this group is seeing that and they're hearing that call for the first time. Yeah, they're getting

called out, but they're not hearing condemnation. They're hearing Peter say "This dude had problems, but check out what God just did for him. And y'all have problems... do you see where I'm going with this?" What we should hear is what Peter was saying: not to repent out of fear and shame for the stuff we're dragging around. Repent out of hope. Jesus *beat* the grave. He *beat* sin. Hope is already here. We already one step away from times of refreshing from the Lord.

We've got to own our brokenness, whatever that might be. Sometimes we do that when we share a testimony. Sometimes we do that by letting someone call us out like Peter did there. But we own our brokenness before God because he owns our redemption. As the great lay theologian and my friend Dana Artinger puts it, "Broken homes, false religions, drugs, anxiety, sex, judging, fear, lying...God is bigger than it all. He can **redeem** the worst stories and ugliest sin." (Emphasis added)

It's like 1 John told us. "See what great love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God." God's bigger than all that? That is some pretty great love.

I was in Quito and Shandia Ecuador a few weeks ago to work, hosting a short-term team from Canada. A lot of times teams come and they think they are going to do all of the "taking care of." Taking care of the poor people. Taking care of the indigenous people groups. But as a host, among other things it's my job to **take care of** all those North Americans. There's easy-to-see stuff. Food. Housing. Transportation. You can't get all those details done thousands of miles away before you get there or even on the ground if you don't speak the language. Somebody's clearly got to take care of that. But then there's not-so-easy-to-see stuff. Team members sometimes don't realize how much "taking care of" their minds and hearts need. Because sometimes and there is this mindset in short-term mission of "We're going to bring Jesus with us to these people, and He's going to work through us to touch them," and they might not stop to think that 1) Jesus is already there, or 2) that maybe He's going to be working **in** those team members and touching them just as much.

Now I don't necessarily say that about the team I was working with this spring. As a group they were definitely there to serve but there to grow in relationship with God as well. In fact my first time in Ecuador I probably had more of those faulty

mindsets than a lot of these guys did. But being prepared to grow doesn't mean that God doesn't still surprise us.

When you tell people that you went on a short-term mission and at the end of your ministry, five people got Baptized, your audience gets excited about that. <sarcasm>That's what short-term mission is all about right? Numbers!</sarcasm> And they're probably picturing the white North American youth pastor Baptizing all the locals who have just experienced Christ for the first time through this ministry. Except we had the exact opposite of that. Our close friend and Bolivian pastor and missionary got to dunk five gringos who were moved by God in one way or another over the course of their time there.

We knew for several days that a girl from the team, Rachel, wanted to be Baptized there in Shandia. She'd been talking to one of the older leaders, a mentor in her life, and we had a feeling that a couple of the other students might have something stir in them as they experienced that process with her or heard her talking about it. So the morning of our last full day in Shandia, my co-worker Gina took one of the adult leaders from the team, Andrew, and took off to scout the river for potential places for a Baptism. We wanted to be able to all see, and we needed the river deep enough to dunk everybody, but without a strong current, because we wanted to still have all our Baby Believers at the end of this process and not get anybody swept away. Gina and Andrew were gone for a while, but when they came back they'd found a suitable place, and Pastor Juan Carlos gave us a mini-sermon and a lesson on Baptism before we all waded down there.

Sidenote: It's always interesting to hear another denomination's take on Baptism. In fact, I bet if you Google "What do Methodists believe about Baptism" and read the hit from the UMC's own website you'll probably come away from it thinking something along the lines of "Wow." Baptism is a pretty cool thing.

It was especially cool that day in Shandia since this was a Christian and Missionary Alliance denomination pastor talking to a group of mostly Presbyterians with some scattered Methodist and Baptist and non-denominational backgrounds in there. But what we all agree on about the whole thing is that Baptism represents cleansing; it's a beginning. It's not an end-all be-all moment in your faith after which everything does a 180 and life is perfect. Baptism, or Confirmation in a lot

of time in our case, is that start point where you say “Okay God, you’ve been fulfilling your end of your Covenant all along. And now, me too. From here on out, I’m walking with you.” And that’s the gist of what I told Andrew that day.

This is the part of the story where I have to summarize more than usual. Because I was there. And I know what happened. But still, I couldn’t tell you exactly the words that came out of my mouth, because I know they weren’t from me.

I “happened” (ha!) to be walking next to Andrew on the way to the beach of the river where he and Gina had decided we should do the Baptisms. We had to walk across the long footbridge across a smaller river, which was still pretty big, and that gave us some time to chat. And of course the topic of the moment was Baptism. And as Andrew told me a little of his story, he said that he had only been a Christian for a couple of years, and that he had never been Baptized. He kept repeating how he knew what a commitment it was- he kept using that word commitment over and over again. And he finally said “I’m just not there yet.”

If it had really been my mind and my mouth going right then, I would have slapped him on the shoulder and said in a supportive voice “Yeah, bro,” or something equally worthless just to try to show that I was still listening. But before I was sure I even had any input on the subject, words were coming out of my mouth. I had this sense of “there’s something in there, so spit it out,” so I obeyed. I said something to the effect of “That’s all well and good, but if you are waiting until you’re so far in your walk of faith that you’re this perfect, sinless, super-Christian, that’s never going to happen.” And that looked really harsh to me as I typed it out while I was writing this. Like Peter harsh. But like I said, it’s somewhat of a blur to me, so maybe those weren’t exactly the words I used. But that was definitely the idea. And apparently it was something he needed. Because we continued that conversation for a few more minutes about just saying “Yes” to God and being willing to be called his child. And by the time we hit the end of the bridge, he looked me right in the eye and said “Thank you for your words,” and took off to talk to his friend and the team leader, Jim.

I walked over to the edge of the water and I just stood there not thinking anything of that conversation. Because I didn’t have any particular motivation for saying the words I said. Again, I just had this sense I was supposed to spit out what was in my brain right then, however it got there, and so I obeyed. And I know I was

horrible at accepting his appreciation later, because I just had to say “Dude...” and point to the big guy. Because that wasn’t me. But it also wasn’t an accident. A few minutes after this conversation and his subsequent one with Jim, Andrew came back over and stood next to me just swinging his arms and smiling. And he said “There’s no time like the present.” That was his way of telling me he’d decided to be Baptized.

“I’m just not there yet.” To “There’s no time like the present.”

That’s the 180 in this story. Not after his Baptism. Before it. Because I’m sure that Andrew has continued to grow in his faith. As he’s gone back home and continued to process that time and talk to other people about it, and continued to walk with God and be mindful of the commitment that he has chosen to live out. But he still has the same friends, the same family, the same job that he did six weeks ago. In those very visible ways and in certainly just as many invisible ways he went back to a life around him that hadn’t had a 180. But Andrew’s purpose now is not to see condemnation in the old stuff. He said yes to God. He’s still not perfect. He’s still not some super-Christian. He’s still not sinless. But while he’s still going to sin because he’s human, he has chosen to live not a life of habitual sin, but a life walking with God as his son.

Christian author Lawrence Richards- in his commentary of our chapter of 1 John- talks about that difference. He writes that John “...was talking about the pattern of a person’s life. He was not talking about isolated acts of sin, but about the direction of one’s journey. The question is not ‘Does he sin?’ but, ‘Does he make sin a habit?’ When God’s life takes root in the human personality, that ‘seed remains in him’ the life of God within struggles against sin, and the Spirit nudges us in a new direction.” (from *The Bible Teacher’s Commentary* by Lawrence O. Richards)

May we take responsibility for our brokenness. And may we take our commitment seriously. May we own that commitment as we repent and continue to accept God’s redemption, walking with him, being nudged along by His Spirit. Amen.