**Sermon Series: Transitions**

**“Why are We Here?” by David Hockett Boone UMC**

**John 3:16-17 July 19, 2015**

I grew up in Bethlehem UMC, in a rural community, outside of Greensboro, North Carolina. It was a wonderful place to grow up, and I owe so much to the people of Bethlehem who helped raise me, who taught me the faith, and lived as Christ before me. I am where I am today in part because so many of them were prayerful listeners to God and they took seriously the vows they made when I was baptized – to teach and guide me and to help me become a faithful follower of Christ by being my Sunday School teachers, and youth assistants, and choir leaders, and Council members, on and on. I have such fond memories of that place as I’m sure so many you have of this place or whatever church have helped to shape and form you as a disciple of Jesus Christ.

One of the more interesting things about Bethlehem is that they have a more than 160 year tradition of camp meetings. Now camp meetings are a uniquely protestant tradition. They have their origins in 19th century frontier Christianity. They were outdoor revival meetings. Bethlehem had a tradition of camp meeting.

Folks literally used to travel from all over to camp on the grounds of the church and spend a week in worship and prayer. By the time I came along the camping had mostly stopped but folks still came out at 2:00 in the afternoon and then again in the evening to hear the gospel proclaimed through the sweltering heat and humidity and over the din of the katydids, and the occasional thunderstorm. There was literally sawdust on the floor, we sang the old hymns of the faith, and there was a guest preacher, the lighting was dim, but the Spirit was bright. Mostly we were just together, the body of Christ gathered to hear a word from the Lord.

Now I can’t pinpoint a specific service or sermon, I had no bolt of lightening voice from heaven moment, but I know that my call to ministry was shaped by and in that place. It was there that I heard in a life-changing way the good news of God’s radical, limitless, unending love, poured out in Jesus Christ for the life of the world. Some of you may know the old gospel hymn. We sang it often in that place.

*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.*

*Love lifted me. Love lifted me.
When nothing else could help. Love lifted me.*

There was a time in my ministry when I probably would not have begun a new appointment focusing on this morning’s reading from John. It’s familiar to the point of almost, dare I say it, being cliché or overdone. And yet, somehow, in this place, at this time, knowing what I know about Boone UMC, it seems to resonate in a rather fresh and profound way. Last week, as a part of our series around *Transitions*, I spent some time with you thinking about how we got to the place where I was standing in front of you as your newly appointed Senior Pastor. And I said that it had something to do with our listening and our paying attention to God; and that the way forward, the way through this time of transition and into the future that God has in store for us involves our regularly listening to God. Because if Jesus is the embodiment of God’s word then as his followers, his friends we must know that the one who is the Word still speaks. If we are listening, even in times of change, Jesus is still speaking, still calling us to follow, to embody the good news for this weary world.

As Christians we confess that God is Trinity – Father, Son, and Holy Spirit – one God in three persons. Trinity tells us that at the heart of God there is this eternal relationship, a mutual indwelling, almost a divine dance if you will, of love – of boundless, limitless, radical love. Scripture tells us that God is love. And love here is not so much a sentiment or feeling as we often think of love, as it is an embodied commitment expressed in a concern for peace, for justice, for the welfare of the other. And there is a sense in which all of creation, all that is, seen and unseen, is the overflow of that love, almost as if God cannot help God’s self, contain God’s self, and God’s love overflows, is poured out, like the precious oil poured on the head, running down on Aaron's beard, down on the collar of his robe (Psalm 133:2), or like the psalmist who says my cup overflows (Psalm 23). God’s love is like that. Which is why the gospel of John tells us that God so loved the world that God poured out the life of God’s own Son, that if we trust in him we will have life and life more abundant.

A little over a year ago, Kim and I traveled to Israel with other members of the Reynolds LEAD Academy of which I am a part. Some of you know something about the LEAD Academy. It’s a small group of pastors who meet throughout the year, to hear from key leaders in the church and to reflect on leadership, evangelism and discipleship in the local church. (I’m leaving actually tomorrow for England where members of the Academy will attend a Hillsong United Conference for a few days.) Then we’ll spend about 5 additional days visiting sites that are important to the history of Methodism, where we’ll hear lectures on Methodist history and current trends in evangelism from Dr. Laceye Warner of Duke Divinity School.) But back to Israel, while in Israel we were led by Dr. Bob Tuttle who is a retired professor of biblical studies and world religions. Dr. Tuttle would conclude each day by offering a few observations, helping us connect what we had seen in the Holy Land with our ministry of preaching and teaching the Bible, because being there is kind of like walking around in the Bible.

I’ll never forget Dr. Tuttle talking one evening about how so many of us human beings have made a mess of our lives, have made significant mistakes, and committed any number of intentional and unintentional sins. He looked at us and said, “Now I know some of you personally, so don’t try and deny this.” Granted, he said, some of us are pretty good at hiding it and covering it up, but if we believe the apostle Paul then we all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God – all of us, every last one of us. We are not our best selves, our God-created selves. And yet, for some inexplicable, amazing, mysterious, mind-boggling reason there’s the Gospel. We see it from the beginning of the Story, all the way through to the end when it will all be as God intends. You could see the history of it literally written in the land. So Dr. Tuttle looked at us and said, “in spite of all the ways you try and mess it up, God is madly in love with you.” You can say it any number of ways – but the good news friends, the good news to Abraham and Sarah, the good news to Moses, the good news delivered by the prophets time and time again when the children of Israel had forgotten who they were called to be, the good news born to Mary and Joseph, the good news proclaimed from the cross, the gospel that resonates from an empty tomb down through the centuries even to us is – God is madly in love with you, with us, and will literally stop at nothing, not even death to make that love known.

John puts it this way,

*This is how much God loved the world: He gave his Son, his one and only Son. And this is why: so that no one would perish; by believing in him, anyone can have a whole and lasting life. God didn’t go to all the trouble of sending his Son merely to point an accusing finger, telling the world how bad it was. He came to help, to put the world right again*.

Friends, when we listen, when we pay attention, we discover why we are all here, why we are Church. When we listen we are reminded that God has called and gifted us, each one of us to participate in, to share in God’s mission of loving and saving the world. Listen carefully to what the gospel really is, “…so that no one would perish, but by trusting in Christ, anyone can have whole and lasting life.” God didn’t go to all this trouble, and give God’s own Son just so that God could point an accusing finger at us, to say look how bad you are. God came to help, to put the world right again.” Yes, we’ve made mess of things but God wants to get us out of the mess. God is not eagerly waiting to condemn us to hell. God sees how many of us are already there and God has come to help, to set us free, to buy back that which was lost, to put the world right again. And why…don’t ask me to explain it, the deep mystery is that God is madly in love with us. As Tim Keller says, “We are more sinful and flawed in ourselves than we ever dared believe, yet at the very same time we are more loved and accepted in Jesus Christ than we ever dared hope.”

And this truth says something about the posture or attitude of the Church. If God is madly in love with us, and if God is madly in love with the world to the point that God would pour out God’s own Son, then our primary attitude toward the world, toward our neighbor must be one of love. Why ar we here? We’re here because God loves us and the Church’s mission is not to stand apart from the world pointing an accusing finger at the sins of those who have not yet heard or responded to the gospel. Rather, we are called to follow Christ into the world, to get down on our hands and knees, and love God’s hurting children wherever they are.

We are called to love. We are here not for ourselves, but for the life of the world. And we are called to embody for our neighbors a different way of being human, a way of being human that is shaped by the life of the One who came not to be served but to serve.

We are called to embody for the world the love of God we have known in Christ Jesus our Lord. We’re called to be a foretaste of that Beloved community that Christ inaugurated with the seed of his blood and at the center of which stands his cross.

Friends everything we do must be directed to this end – to living, and teaching, and sharing the love of Christ with others. We don’t exist for any other reason than for this – that is the great big God-sized dream we are being invited to participate in. And you get that Boone United Methodist. You get it because you’ve been listening, which is why your mission statement says, “We are called to love our community.” I really can’t think of a more beautiful image of the Church than that – a community following Christ, towel and basin in hand, loving their community and the world, the way Christ first loved us.

So what does this weary, lost world see when it looks at the Church? What does this little corner of God’s creation see when it looks at Boone UMC? What do those already living in hell see? Do they see an accusing finger being pointed back at them, condemning them? Or do they see the open arms of the God who is madly in love with this world, with folks like them and with sinners like you and me? Can they see in us the God who longs to embrace, to redeem, and to make them whole? And can they hear the good news that, that God loves you and wants to put things right? Amen.