

FROM BEAR CREEK UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

Diamonds in the Rough

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John 3:14-21

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There is an old western gospel song that comes originally from Butte, Montana. It seems that in the late 1800s C.W. Byron was a member of a traveling troupe of actors who put on bawdy shows for the miners. The troupe consisted not only of a few men, but of women with flashing legs, bulging bosoms and suggestive lyrics. It appealed to the rough and base side of the lonely miners. One night C. W. happened to pass a Salvation Army Band from a local mission and by their music came to Jesus and went on to be one of the early Methodist circuit riders of the Montana Territories. His song is "Diamonds in the Rough."

Diamonds In The Rough

While walking out one evening, not knowing where to go
And just to pass the lone hours before we held the show
The Bethel Mission Band passed all singing with their might
I gave my heart to Jesus and left the show that night.

Chorus:

The day will soon be over when digging will be done
And no more gems be gathered, so let us all press on
When Jesus comes to claim us, and says, "It is enough."
The diamonds will be shining, no longer in the rough.

One day my precious comrades, you too were lost in sin
And others sought to rescue but Jesus took you in
And when you're tired and tempted and scoffed by sin's rebuff
Don't turn away in anger you're a diamond in the rough.

Chorus:

While reading through the Bible, what wondrous sites I see
I read of Peter, James and John, by the Sea of Galilee
And Jesus, when He found them He found them very tough
And they were precious diamonds He gathered in the rough.

Chorus:

As you might guess it is a favorite song of Montana Methodists. They sing it with gusto at Annual Conference and whenever they want to remember the early days of miners and the Christian civilization the early circuit riders struggled to bring to a wild and dangerous frontier. And the singing inspires these Methodists to once again take up the cross of

bringing Jesus and the way of Jesus to a culture perhaps less violent on a daily scale but no less lacking in compassion and justice for the miner, the widow, the orphan, the drunk, the mentally ill, the dying and the enemy.

Jesus is speaking of diamonds in the rough when he reminds his hearers of the serpents in the wilderness. He is referring to a tale of Moses and the Exodus recorded in the book of Numbers:

From Mount Hor (the Israelites) set out by the way to the Red Sea, to go around the land of Edom; but the people became impatient on the way. The people spoke against God and against Moses, "Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness? For there is no food and no water, and we detest this miserable food." Then the Lord sent poisonous serpents among the people, and they bit the people, so that many Israelites died. The people came to Moses and said, "We have sinned by speaking against the Lord and against you; pray to the Lord to take away the serpents from us." So Moses prayed for the people. And the Lord said to Moses, "Make a poisonous serpent, and set it on a pole; and everyone who is bitten shall look at it and live." So Moses made a serpent of bronze, and put it upon a pole; and whenever a serpent bit someone, that person would look at the serpent of bronze and live. Numbers 21:4-9

So John 3:14-15 says:

And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted, that whoever trusts in him may have life in all times.

The Bethel Mission Band is the serpent on a stick for C.W. Byron, it is Jesus upon the cross. Whenever we are bitten by sin, whenever the diamond we are is stained by a failure to live servant love, then we can look upon Jesus crucified and raised high, and we are forgiven, and we are healed; and by the Holy Spirit the diamond of our lives is polished to shine grace, peace and mercy.

Today's lesson contains one of the most abused verses of the Bible. It is used by those who would wound rather than heal, condemn rather than forgive, judge rather than understand. I am referring, of course, to John 3:16:

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 life in all times.

John 3:16 immediately follows the imagery of Jesus who like the serpent is lifted high on a pole so that all who are in the misery of life, the poisonous death of life, might look and see salvation. The verse is not a judgment or condemnation, but is a promise of redemption for sin sick souls.

And to emphasize the nature of Jesus, and anticipating the proclivity of humans to take a promise and make it into a

condemnation, John 3:16 is immediately followed by a clarification:

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.

Too often the promise of healing salvation has been used as a whip of condemnation. Too often the promise of grace and mercy has been used as an instrument of fear and judgment. It is sad, tragic and even demonic how some will take the love offered in Christ's life, death and resurrection to add misery to a suffering world. God is not about condemning us; we do that well enough ourselves. God is about loving us, feeding us in the wilderness (even when we whine), saving us from the serpents of our own doing, and leading us to a Promised Land of milk and honey, of shalom for all creation.

A friend sent me the following story. I don't know the original author nor if the story is historically true, but it is believable as true and reflects my experience in faith. The author writes:

Years ago, I was enthralled as I listened to a pastor who for several years had faithfully served the church. His executive responsibilities had taken him all over this country. As he concluded his message, he told of one of the most frightening yet thought-provoking experiences of his life.

He had been on a long flight from one place to another. The first warning of the approaching problems came when the sign on the airplane flashed on: Fasten your seat belts. Then, after a while, a calm voice said, "We shall not be serving the beverages at this time as we are expecting a little turbulence. Please be sure your seat belt is fastened." As he looked around the aircraft, it became obvious that many of the passengers were becoming apprehensive. Later, the voice of the announcer said, "We are so sorry that we are unable to serve the meal at this time. The turbulence is still ahead of us."

And then the storm broke. The ominous cracks of thunder could be heard even above the roar of the engines. Lightning lit up the darkening skies, and within moments that great plane was like a cork tossed around on a celestial ocean. One moment the airplane was lifted on terrific currents of air; the next, it dropped as if it were about to crash.

The pastor confessed that he shared the discomfort and fear of those around him. He said, "As I looked around the plane, I could see that nearly all the passengers were upset and alarmed. Some were praying. The future seemed ominous and many were wondering if they would make it through the storm.

And then, I suddenly saw a little girl. Apparently the storm meant nothing to her. She had tucked her feet beneath her as she sat on her seat; she was reading a book and every thing within her small world was calm and orderly. Sometimes she closed her

eyes, then she would read again; then she would straighten her legs, but worry and fear were not in her world. When the plane was being buffeted by the terrible storm when it lurched this way and that, as it rose and fell with frightening severity, when all the adults were scared half to death, that marvelous child was completely composed and unafraid." The minister could hardly believe his eyes.

It was not surprising therefore, that when the plane finally reached its destination and all the passengers were hurrying to disembark, our pastor lingered to speak to the girl whom he had watched for such a long time. Having commented about the storm and behavior of the plane, he asked why she had not been afraid. The sweet child replied, "Sir, my Dad is the pilot, and he is taking me home."

The writer goes on to say:

There are many kinds of storms that buffet us. Physical, mental, financial, domestic, and many other storms can easily and quickly darken our skies and throw our plane into apparently uncontrollable movement. We have all known such times, and let us be honest and confess, it is much easier to be at rest when our feet are on the ground than when we are being tossed about a darkened sky. Let us remember: Our Father is the Pilot. He is in control and taking us home. Don't worry.

It is the message to the Israelites as they grumble in the wilderness, "Look to God, follow the healing vision of Moses holding a bronze serpent on a pole before you. And God will lead you home."

It is the message to the first hearers of Jesus, "Look to God, see Jesus raised high on the cross and follow that vision to salvation."

And it is a message to us and our world," Look to God, see how Jesus loves you, dies for you and so is raised by God before you. Follow Jesus raised on and from the cross and you will have the joy of life, and the kingdom of heaven will be with you, in the night and in the day, in weeping and in dance, now and forever.

Shalom and Amen.