

Sermon Text for November 15, 2015

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Luke 10:17-20, Genesis 24:10-21

“Why don’t they believe us?”

Today we find ourselves at a scene around an Old Testament well. The well traditionally was a meeting place for the local people. You remember Jesus and the Samaritan woman at the well.

In the Old Testament the well is also a place to cruise and check people out of the opposite sex. A spot where men and women, boys and girls, would go to check each other out. Think of Rebekah who is going to be discovered at the well today. Then there was Rachel who meets her husband Jacob at the well. Or Ziporah who meets her husband Moses at the well. It was a happening place.

For the Bronkema family Princeton Theological Seminary serves as the well, the place of spouse retrieval. My father and mother met and were married there as students, my brother and sister-in-law met and were married there, Stacy and I met there.

But the attention of the passage today is centered on a servant of Abraham and his mission to find a wife for Isaac. And this is the point, this slave as he is in the course of his mission repeatedly prays to the God of his master. Why would this pagan, polytheistic, many God-worshipping man look to the God of his master, Abraham, instead of his own for guidance and direction? Because his master had shown him and allowed him to believe not only that his God existed but that he was a mighty God.

Today we ask the question of why don’t people believe us when we speak of Christ as our Savior. If they did then this church and every church would be filled with people who like that foreign slave would be praying and thanking Jesus Christ for the work that he has done in their lives. Let’s identify some reasons why people don’t believe us.

I was made aware of an event this week that has a lot of American Christians concerned and really is something that is taking up a lot of their time to resolve. No, it has nothing to do with what happened in Paris, it has nothing to do with the epidemic of hunger in this country and around the world. Many of us are pretty incensed and determined to make Starbucks come to terms with putting Christ back into Christmas.

Today I have identified six reasons why people don’t believe us. Now this is a different type of sermon. I am not using the Scripture and going through it verse by verse

like I normally do. Just that this juxtaposition of the Starbucks debate and what happened in Paris is too powerful for me, it is too strong of an example with what is wrong with American Christianity that I wanted to teach in a way that I hope we will be able to hear using the slave of Abraham finding a wife for Isaac as a jumping off point. If we truly want to see people come to know Christ, then we have to figure out what is it about us that is preventing them from hearing and believing the message.

1) We preach about love too much. How is that possible? Let me tell you. We have heard so much talk of love in the church and in culture that after a while we begin to equate the love that we hear in church with the love that we hear in culture. It begins to lose its meaning. The love that God has for us is so unfathomable, it is so far beyond anything that we have ever experienced or been a part of that when we try to talk about it casually, constantly and often without care then we cheapen it. There is no true earthly example of the love that God has for us. When we compare it and relate it to our world then inevitably the complete otherness of that love is lost. The love that God has for us in Jesus Christ is so different than anything people have ever experienced, that they can only relate to it with what they know. And the love of this culture is not comparable to the love of God.

I am not saying that we need to go back to the Calvinistic fire and brimstone style but there was something in that that made people realize that anything does not go. When we preach only the love of God and water it down so that people ultimately do not need to make a decision then it loses its power and its meaning. Ultimately people don't believe us because God's love for them is no different than the love they can find in a TV sitcom or what they see online.

2) We underestimate the callousness of the world. People who don't know Jesus know it is a hard life out there, the least we can do is recognize it with them and not sugarcoat it. How nice it would be to believe that there are only momentary lapses and that the good in people will overcome their evil without any help from God.

Unfortunately the world we live in is very different from what we hope it to be. This world only believes what it can actually see and feel. When Descartes said I think therefore I am, he in essence defined us as a people who believe only those things that we can quantify and place in our sensory experience and lock boxes.

We tend to forget that the world's Gospel not only tells us that wealth is good but it ought to be our primary goal in life. Jesus in Luke instead tells us that wealth is a

product of a corrupt age. The world is far more calloused than we realize, and so if we are not able to break that callousness with the message of Christ and truly address it people will not believe. I heard once that every worship service should also be a protest meeting. One in which the way of Christ is lifted up over and above the way of the world.

3) A third reason why people don't believe us is that we tend to avoid the tough questions. Rabbi Kushner addressed the issue of theodicy in this way: How do we come to terms with these three axiomatic truths: God is good and just, God is all powerful or omnipotent, and finally that the innocent suffer. Now we can believe any two of these and it makes sense to us. We can believe that God is good and that the innocent suffer because maybe God isn't all powerful. We can believe that God is all powerful and the innocent suffer because maybe God isn't just. We can believe that God is good and all powerful and so the innocent don't suffer.

But when you put the three together, and you must, it creates in people a dissonance that they need answers to. And since we do believe that God is so good, and that we serve an all-mighty God, and when we see the innocent suffer we struggle to come up with the hard answers to the hard questions. People need to know that God is in control, and be told in such a way that they can and want to believe it.

4) We are halfway there. A fourth reason people don't believe us is that we have abstracted the ethical life of a Christian. What does that mean? We tend to take Christ's teachings and remove the earthliness to them, the practical and real side. Instead we spiritualize them so that ultimately they have no meaning. Jesus, when he was on this earth got into the muck and the mire, the nitty gritty of this world.

Jesus wasn't afraid to mean what he said. When he told the rich young ruler to go and sell all he had and give it to the poor that wasn't a metaphor, he meant it. When Jesus says love your neighbor as yourself and your neighbor is the person you would least associate with he meant it. People don't believe us because we take these commands that are meant for the good of the community and try to coerce them to mean something that is strictly between us and Christ. We take it and make it an abstract teaching, we spiritualize it so we don't have to take it literally. Ultimately then, it relates very little to our lives here on this earth.

5) A fifth reason that people don't believe us is that we are a bit embarrassed with transcendence. I've said many times that I believe in physical miracles, that God

absolutely does transcend time and space today to touch and heal, to speak and to direct. We should never be embarrassed to say that we heard the voice of God or that we believe a person is well because of a direct healing from God.

We need to be so sure of God's transcendence that we can relay it to people and convince them that God can literally touch them. If we have a hard time believing that God really does intervene on our earth and in our lives, who are we going to convince? People have a hard time believing us because they want to feel God touch them, and we are struggling over whether God reaches down that far or not.

6) Finally you can shift now and get comfortable if you like, the sixth and final reason why people don't believe us is that we have what is called a Jonah complex. This last one really hit me as I thought more about it. You remember Jonah, he didn't really want to go to Nineveh not only because he was afraid but even more so, he didn't want the people to believe.

Our Jonah complex is that if people come to know God through us then we will be responsible for them. They would start making demands on us that maybe we might not be able to meet such as asking questions that we might not be able to answer or get so involved that they would embarrass us because we don't do as much as they do at the church. The problem may not be so much why don't people believe as much as why don't we want people to believe?

If people believe us and start coming then they will flood in here and use the Well and we won't be able to keep up with them. If people actually start believing what we say and want to become disciples of Jesus Christ through First Presbyterian Church we might need to get more of those little boxes with names on them. Growth in the church means change, and well, we aren't always comfortable with that.

Six reasons why people don't believe us with ways to help people believe us and be led to Christ. The question with our Scripture today is why did this servant of Abraham believe so much so that when he prayed he prayed to the God of Abraham. This servant who was the oldest and the most trusted had been with Abraham for most of his life so he had heard and experienced God's presence in his life through his master. He was able to use that experience at the well and be assured of God's presence in his life.

God gets excited when people believe. God honored the servant's task because he believed. When the disciples came back to Christ and tell him with joy that the people

believed, he was also excited. This is what our hearts should yearn for and what we should be striving for and that is to leave this sanctuary searching for ways to allow people to see our God, the God of Abraham, Jesus the Christ through our lives. We should be looking for opportunities and methods to bring our families, our friends and neighbors to come to know Christ. Amen.