

## Okay To Stare

### JOHN 3:14-21

And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, <sup>15</sup>that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.

<sup>16</sup> '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 eternal life.

<sup>17</sup> '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. <sup>18</sup>Those who believe in him are not condemned; but those who do not believe are condemned already, because they have not believed in the name of the only Son of God.

<sup>19</sup>And this is the judgement, that the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil. <sup>20</sup>For all who do evil hate the light and do not come to the light, so that their deeds may not be exposed. <sup>21</sup>But those who do what is true come to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that their deeds have been done in God.'

Have you ever heard of what some experts refer to as the “car wreck phenomena?” Car wreck phenomena refers to how people have a tendency to stop and stare whenever there is an automobile accident. It’s not that much different than the condition known as “rubber necking” which many of us get chided for by the traffic reporters on the radio. You know those instances when there is an accident in the lane going in one direction and traffic also gets backed up in the in the other direction because everyone has to slow down and have a look?

Why do we feel the need to stare at these spectacles? According to Rosemarie Garland-Thomson in her book titled, “Staring: How We Look,” we stare in response to what we don’t expect to see. In other words, staring is like asking the question “What’s going on here?” or “What’s happening?” Staring is an impulse that causes us to work on what seems strange, in order that we might satisfy our curiosity. When we stare at a spectacle like a car crash we might elicit feelings of awe or wonder.

But what about when we stare at people? Even though we might like to stare at others, we know we’re not supposed to. We hear a voice from somewhere in our past telling us not to. Parents scold children when they do it. The gym I attend has signs up all over the place reminding members that it’s impolite to stare. People can find themselves made uncomfortable by the stares of others. The timid wither under a cold stare. It’s seen as an invasion of privacy. Studies show people don’t like being stared at. They may want to look attractive and be admired, but they don’t want a public dissection.

But not Jesus, Jesus doesn’t mind being stared at -or at least it seems that he is willing to be stared at according to this reading from John’s gospel. It’s the text that contains within it the now famous John 3:16. Made famous because of all of those people who have

written John 3:16 on a piece of bristol board and placards and waved them high in public places like sports venues. (I guess those folks don't mind being stared at either -especially when it's for Jesus sake.) But John 3:16 aside, let's turn our attention this morning to John 3:14. The verse that says, "and just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up." These are words spoken by Jesus as he and a Pharisee named Nicodemus sat down in a room one night almost two millennia ago. In the lamplight they talked and Jesus explained to Nicodemus the purpose of his coming into this world. While they talked Jesus refers to a story from the book of Numbers. It's about a time when the ancient Israelites were being attacked by snakes in the desert. The eventual cure for the snake bitten Israelites was to look at a bronze snake that God had commanded Moses set on a pole. It was one of those "stare your enemy in the face" kind of cures.

So when Jesus is lifted up, it is safe to assume that this happens so that we might look upon him, that he might be the subject of our stares. And in Jesus' day, there was a certain degree of shame that came with being stared at, especially when being lifted up meant being hung on a cross to die. Back then, public execution like crucifixion was a real spectacle. Public executions never had any difficulty attracting a crowd or a group of onlookers. And Jesus knew that people had to see him, an innocent who was publicly humiliated and shamed, dying on a cross. In many ways, his execution was an indictment of the unjust nature of this world and the human demand for sacrifice. But to cast one's gaze upon Christ on the cross has something to say to each of us. God knows that book upon book has been written attempting to explain the meaning of the cross.

What does the cross mean to you? What do you ponder as you gaze upon the Son of Man who is lifted up? Or do you think of anything at all? Maybe crosses and crucifixes are so present in our world that we take them for granted. We know longer pause to consider the deeper meaning. They are all too familiar and don't give us reason to stare.

The global leader of the Church of England, the Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams doesn't think the cross means much of anything to people anymore. In case you haven't heard, the British government is set to argue before the European Courts that Christians do not have the right to wear a crucifix or a cross in certain settings, since wearing a cross or a crucifix, although a form of religious expression, isn't a requirement of the Christian faith. When the Archbishop of Canterbury was asked for his opinion on the matter he was seen by some as undermining the position of Christians because he said that for many, the crucifix has become little more than jewellery, "which religious people make and hang on to" as a substitute for true faith. He said that the cross had really become nothing more than

a religious ornament. Well, what do you think is the Archbishop of Canterbury right? It is true that for many people a cross or a crucifix is really nothing more than jewellery? Or some other fashion accessory like so many of the things we wear? Having nothing to do with Christian faith, the cross becomes a meaningless decoration. And I'm not saying that a cross or a crucifix that we hang around our neck should be seen as something we would wield like a cross in one of those old vampire movies. Nor like some sort of lucky charm or super natural repellent. That's when we treat it as an idol. Instead, I would like for us to spend some time considering the cross. What is there that we identify with as Christians? What is strange to us? What is there to consider?

A couple of years ago I engaged in a silent retreat at a Quebec monastery that is still home to a priestly order. As you can well imagine, being a monastery there were crucifixes everywhere. And I noticed that there were a number of individuals who would do nothing more than sit for great lengths of time and just stare at a crucifix. It might sound like a waste of time by today's standards where the value of life is increasingly measured by doing.

I was reading an article last week that was lamenting the de-intellectualization of western society. The article spoke to how many populations in present society, with an appetite for instant information and an "answers only approach" spends little time in critical reflection. What is transpiring is a reduced level of retained memories, of knowledge and shared wisdom. Fewer men and women are pausing to consider the deeper, multi-layered meaning of things. With shorter attention spans we have only brief exposures to things that demand so much more time in order to be fully appreciated. You know I remember how twenty years ago I was taught in university that the average news story lasted six weeks. Now the average story has a shelf-life of 48 hours. So that even when we do stop and stare at things, which is what happens with news stories, we invest less time in focused consideration.

My friends, life and aspects of life are meant to be considered, pondered and appreciated like fine art. We are invited to go deeper than we might gaze upon them to discover a greater value. The cross of Christ is something that was meant to be stared at, to be gawked at. We're supposed to look at the suffering innocent who is lifted up. There is much there that demands our consideration. As the theologian Hans Frei once wrote, "There are multitudes of crosses in the world. But it is because of Jesus' cross that we apply the term to all the others." To actually stop and consider the cross of Christ could cause us to ponder any number of things. Maybe we begin to consider the crosses we bear in our own lives. Maybe we think about the crosses others bear for us appreciate the sacrifices that are made. Why, we may not even realize these things until we stop and wonder and stare on the

one who was lifted up for our sake. Do we even know what it means to bear a cross without looking to the cross of Christ?

And this is why I want to tell you this morning, in spite of everything else you may have been taught, is that sometimes it is okay to stare. Sometimes we need to stop and stare. In that book I mentioned in my introduction about staring, the author actually notes that when we stare at another person something more complicated happens than when we stop and look at something like a car accident. You see, we don't usually stare at people we know, we tend to gawk at strangers, unfamiliar people who take us by surprise. Consider people with disabilities who are relative newcomers to the public world. According to studies, they are the most stared at segment of the population. For years men and women with disabilities were out of the public eye. But as we see them more and stare less, it means that our relationship is developing with them.

The interaction, between starrer and staree sets into motion an interpersonal relationship. When we decide to stare, we decide to become involved and we invite a response. Staring's brief bond can be intimate and generate a sense of obligation with what Joshua Meile calls "an unavoidable exchange of empathy." You see there's something about staring that stirs up a response within us. Staring at another can challenge us, maybe get us to consider something about someone you've never thought about before.

I have to admit that I am a closet starrer. There are times when I might find myself sitting down having a coffee somewhere and I will stare at people. Maybe wonder where they are from, what their story is, who they are. Sometimes the more time we spend staring at another the more we begin to see what we have in common, once we get past the differences.

Looking at Jesus crucified at cross for the first time, and I mean really looking might seem strange. But it is that initial stare that will allow us to go even further in our life with him. This is why the Son of Man is to be lifted up says Jesus, because "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 eternal life. So go ahead and stare at the cross, don't even think about that voice in the back of your head telling you not to. Give the cross a second look and don't turn away.

For in Christ God has not turned away from us. He has set his gaze upon each of us. God's heart has been opened to us. Because God knows that beneath our sometimes questionable or strange or lacklustre or boring exteriors there is more to be considered, more to be valued. There is more to know. Things God knows that we do not. There is more to discover about God and more to know about ourselves. It's like the great sculptor

Michelangelo once said, "I saw an angel in the stone and carved to set it free." On the cross, Jesus the Messiah was lifted up not only to die but to show resurrection hope because God can see all that is right and good in this world and in each of us. God doesn't give up on that life, God's only desire is to set it free, that we might have the knowledge of a life that is everlasting.

So consider the cross and remember it's okay to stare.

Thanks be to God.