

## I. Intro.

### A. "Tell it to us straight. Don't beat around the bush ..."

1. These are words we seem to be hearing more & more often in this national election year.

- a) Some US voters appear fed up with the usual political discourse and diplomatic language
- b) I don't in my own lifetime recall political campaigns with so much rudeness and unfiltered language, with little regard for who gets insulted and how many enemies are made
- c) Apparently many of us in this country prefer leaders who are straight shooters ... who call it as they see it, & don't care who they offend

2. We live in a soundbite culture ...

- a) Quotes are taken out of context and scanned for their ability to appear in a Tweet or other social media
- b) We seem increasingly unable to listen to anything beyond two sentences, or read anything longer than a paragraph
- c) In fact, I should be thankful that anybody cares what a preacher has to say at all:
  - (1) Those of you with me right now listening to a sermon are either the exception to this cultural trend,
  - (2) or you're actually just tuning out, waiting for me to get to the point ...

### B. I began with a reference to political campaigns this year NOT in order to focus on one particular presidential candidate, or even on the loudness of voices from the political extremes this year

1. Lying beneath the phenomenon of Mr. Trump & Mr. Sanders themselves are some fascinating societal undercurrents

- a) It begs the question of WHY candidates spouting radical ideas are drawing huge crowds ... candidates who many would say are not electable?
- b) There are people in our country who apparently feel VERY angry ... VERY afraid ... VERY unrepresented

2. That reality is very worthy of discussion by Christians, but now is not the time, and this is not my point.

### C. I AM pointing out that in today's world, people around us often demand plain responses & expect straight talk ... black & white answers

1. They often want someone to connect the dots for them ... to spell it out, and make it really simple
  - a) I'm not a fan of that approach because, in my humble opinion, it usually means oversimplifying complex realities
  - b) It usually leads to overreacting to one problem & therefore creating new & bigger problems elsewhere
2. But regardless of my opinion, it's fair to say that we are very familiar with people these days urging us to just make it simple & get to the point
3. Hmm ... that sounds rather like some powerful people who criticized Jesus in his own day ...

## **II. Let's look at what was happening in and behind the scenes of this story of Jesus in John ch. 10**

### **A. It was not during spring time, but during the Jewish Festival of Dedication, what we know as Hanukkah, which happens in December**

1. This festival commemorates the rededication of the Great Temple of Jerusalem in 164 BC, after the foreign king Antiochus Epiphanes had destroyed it
2. Jesus was not up north in his home territory of Galilee
  - a) He was in Jerusalem, the Jewish power center, the home turf of the religious authorities who were challenging him
  - b) Jesus was walking around at the Temple, the very focal point of the Festival of Dedication ... Jesus was speaking out at the very holiest place to the Jews, at the center of their identity
3. And this was not the 1<sup>st</sup> time in the Gospel of John that Jesus ran into conflict with the Jewish authorities
  - a) In chapters 2, 3, 7 & 8 the religious leaders sparred with Jesus at the Temple ...
  - b) This was because he drove out the merchants, healed a lame man on the Sabbath and publicly taught in ways that were openly critical of the leaders

### **B. Now in chap. 10, we have Jesus responding to the 5<sup>th</sup> or 6<sup>th</sup> round of harassment he's getting from those leaders**

1. The religious critics tell Jesus he's being obscure with them, he's not making his message plain ...
2. But in fact he HAS been proclaiming his uniqueness, his divine mission, his identification with God the Father in numerous ways:

- a) He said “The Son of Man must be lifted up ...” (3:14) and “I will give you living water ...” (4:10-13)
- b) He said, “I am the bread of life” (6:35) and “I am the light of the world” (8:12)
- c) He said in this very chapter, “I am the good shepherd” (10:11)

3. In our terminology, you could say that Jesus has already been giving them soundbites throughout his preaching & teaching ministry ... but it’s mostly in metaphors, in word images that just don’t connect the dots for them.

4. But at the end of today’s passage he gives them a particularly loaded soundbite: (*read v. 30*)

- a) This soundbite does make sense to them, but not in a positive way
- b) If guns had been invented back then, Jesus just hands his enemies a round of bullets with these words, since in their ears, it’s a clear admission of blasphemy
- c) In fact, it IS almost as deadly as bullets, if we listen to how the passage continues in the next verses (*read vv. 31-33*)
- d) So they pick up stones, to stone him to death, which was the penalty for blasphemy, according to Leviticus 24:16

5. It was only through the power of Jesus’ own arguments and his ability to escape into the crowds that he avoids being arrested at that time

**C. In summary, Jesus criticizes his critics for not seeing who he really is ... for not hearing his plain revelation of himself ... for not believing him**

### **III. We are now in the 4<sup>th</sup> Sunday of the Easter season**

**A. This is when we celebrate Jesus’ resurrection from the dead & we try to recognize the appearances of the risen Christ to his community of faith**

**B. So today let’s ask a fundamental question of every Easter season: **How is the risen Christ revealed to us today?** (*repeat*)**

### **IV. I’d like to suggest 3 possible answers to that question:**

**A. Sometimes the risen Christ is revealed dramatically, in powerful encounters that transform someone’s life**

- 1. Albert Race Sample wrote a semi-autobiographical book called Racehoss: Big Emma’s Boy (Eakin Press, 1984), based on his life growing up in a violent home and being a repeat offender in the Texas prison system

a) The prison environments are almost unbelievably brutal, yet this damaged boy learns to survive ... then comes the day when, in the darkness of solitary confinement, he experienced God’s loving presence:

b) Here’s how that story is told:

*The slamming of the two steel doors still rang in my ears. Sitting naked on the slab in pitch-black silence, I hung my head as the tears bounded off the floor onto my feet ... Sweat poured. Gritting my teeth, I hugged and rocked myself, trying to squeeze my head against the unyielding concrete ... I mauled myself, scratching and tearing my body. Slumped, exhausted on the slab I covered my face with both hands and cried out, “Help me, God! Help meee!!” ...*

*A ray of light between my fingers. Slowly uncovering my face, the whole cell was illuminated like a 40-watt light bulb was turned on. The soft light soothed, and I no longer was afraid. Engulfed by a presence, I felt it reassuring me. No pressure anymore, I breathed freely. I had never felt such wellbeing, so good, in all my life. Safe. Loved ...*

*And the voice within talked through the pit of my belly, “Don’cha worry about a thing. But you must tell them about me.”*

*I lay back on the slab. A change had taken place. Never before had I felt so totally loved. That’s really all I ever wanted. The biggest need in my life, fulfilled in an instant. And I loved that Presence back.*

(as retold in [Pulpit Resource](#), Vol. 35, No. 2, April-June 2007, p. 27)

2. Although most US prison conditions are not as inhumane today as what Sample described from the 1940’s, God still dramatically touches inmates’ lives in jails and prisons today

a) By the grace of God just last Monday Kirk Martin was released to the Goshen Work-Release Center, after four years in prison facilities

(1) We praise God to have Kirk nearby and hope that he can worship with us next Sunday

(2) We also pray for God’s strength to keep him grounded in Jesus for the challenges that lie ahead of him.

b) I believe that Kirk’s return sooner than originally expected has to do with the work of Jesus Christ in the Elkhart County jail, moving Kirk to a deeper surrender of his life than he had previously made

c) When you get a chance to welcome him back, I’m sure he’ll have lots of stories to tell of God’s amazing love turning inmates’ lives around

**B. But the risen Christ is not always revealed in power and drama: the presence of Jesus Christ today sometimes appears quietly through his Holy Spirit DESPITE our human doubts & questions**

1. A Christian writer named Fredericka Matthews-Green tells of an email she received once from a friend who was struggling with the question of how it is that Jesus died for our sins.

*The friend was raised in a nominally Jewish home, then moved first to atheism and then to nontheistic Eastern religion before he came to consider the Christian faith. He wanted to believe the claims of the Christian faith, but it just didn't make much sense to him.*

*He wrote, “How could the Father send the Son, if they are one? How could God the Son die? Why was it necessary that his body be resurrected? Please don't take this as being argumentative: I would really like to find some way to understand. As much as I love Jesus' teaching and person, no matter how I turn it around in my mind, no matter how much I read, I cannot understand what it means to say that Jesus died for our sins.”*

*Matthews-Green answered his email letter graciously and honestly. She wrote, “It seems that what happened (and continues to happen) is that people somehow began to sense that Jesus Christ is still alive and in some inexplicable way present to them; along with this, they find that their burden of sin is lifted, and that this is somehow because of his death on the Cross and Resurrection. ... Plenty of ‘somehows’ in that sentence; we're dealing with something [incomplete or not fully developed, something] nevertheless insistent.”*

*Matthews-Green then made a helpful comparison in her response to her friend. She remarked that farmers have always known that light makes plants grow. They knew this [thousands of years] before the complicated processes of photosynthesis were discovered by scientists. Similarly, even though Christians struggle and stammer to give precise explanations of how salvation works through Jesus' death, they still know it. Somehow. (as retold by Leanne Van Dyke, Believing in Jesus, Geneva Press, in Pulpit Resource, Vol. 35, No. 2, April-June 2007, p. 27-28)*

2. Sometimes the risen Christ is revealed to us today **DESPITE** our inability to explain exactly how salvation through Jesus works

**C. How else is Christ revealed today? Here's a deceptively simple answer: in congregations ... in communities of faith**

1. The great 20<sup>th</sup> Century missionary bishop Lesslie Newbigin spoke of the church as the “primary reality” of the Christian faith, the major way that the world encounters Christ. He wrote, ...

*How is it possible ... that people should come to believe that the power which has the last word in human affairs is represented by a man hanging on a cross? I am suggesting that the only answer, the only [means of interpretation] of the gospel, is a congregation of men and women who believe it and live by it ...*

*Evangelistic campaigns, distributions of Bibles and Christian literature, conferences, even [Christian] books ... all are secondary[. They all] ... have power to accomplish their purpose only as they are rooted in and lead back to a believing community. Jesus ... did not write a book but [he] formed a community. (Lesslie Newbigin, The Gospel in a Pluralist Society, Eerdmans, 1989, p. 22)*

2. But friends, that's not just some missionary's theory
  - a) Eight of us here from Waterford just returned last week from a great learning tour of Mennonite Central Committee's work in Honduras

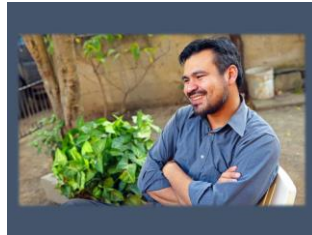
b) The tour was of course, focused on the work of MCC, through the particular lenses of our own Waterford young adults Emily Bowman and Jesse Amstutz ... yet you can't understand MCC's work in Honduras without conversing and worshiping with Honduran Mennonite churches

c) On May 8, you will hear more from us about our inspiring experiences of God at work in Honduras

### 3. But today, let me tell you a little about the risen Christ being revealed in and through a Mennonite congregation in Honduras.

a) 2 weeks ago on Saturday night we rode in our extended van to a politically and economically challenged neighborhood of San Pedro Sula called Chamelecón.

b) We pulled off at a well-lighted gas station and rolled the front windows down so that any police or gang members watching us would not suspect us of dangerous activity ...



(1) when pastor Jose Fernandez of the congregation drove up and greeted us, we followed his car through dimly lit streets, now feeling safe enough to drive in the neighborhood after dark.

(2) We eventually pulled up to basically this very street scene:



This is Vida en Abundancia congregation, an evangelical Mennonite church in one of the more dangerous neighborhoods of San Pedro Sula.

c) The temperature was probably still in the low 90s when we arrived



to go into this same sanctuary:

(1) What we experienced was a two-hour high-energy worship service filled with a band & contemporary music and little girls like these twirling in praise,

(2) There was powerful preaching and even occasionally some

women loudly sobbing or shrieking out the depth of their emotions, as a manifestation of the Holy Spirit

d) While we foreigners were sweating profusely and trying to figure out songs and words we didn't know, the Spirit was clearly flowing as the people fervently sang of their dependence on God as their only hope

e) After they treated us to supper, Pastor Jose summarized for us the history and calling of this congregation:

(1) Gang activity has been especially strong in Chamelecón for the last 10 years

(2) The church is located on a street that divided sectors controlled by 2 rival gangs ... many people could not come to church because they'd have to cross over the other gang's territory

(3) In the last 3 years, four members were murdered as bystanders ... so many people moved away because of the violence and drug trafficking that the church lost over half its members

(4) But the church felt the calling to see God's work in this difficult context:

(a) Rather than closing out the world around them, they held worship services and prayer campaigns in public spaces

(b) They shared food with the community and started working with the children of families of gang members

(c) In order to give students an alternative to violence & demonstrate ways of peace, they brought into a local school the Peace & Justice Project, which is the organization my son Jesse now works with

(d) This project makes presentations in schools once a week, where they teach 5<sup>th</sup> & 6<sup>th</sup> graders lessons on themes like respect, forgiveness, self-esteem, anti-bullying and conflict resolution

(5) Amid this risky context, Pastor Jose and his family decided together to stay in the neighborhood ... their decision to do this ultimately represented to the community the hope that God would still do something there (personal experience, plus story & photos from [A Common Place](#), MCC, Summer 2015, pp. 4-11)

f) Vida en Abundancia church is a congregation revealing the risen Christ to their own surrounding community ... How are WE an embodiment of the risen Christ in and around Goshen?

## V. Conclusion

**A. Jesus, in our Scripture today, challenged his listeners to see him for who he truly was ... to believe in him ... & most importantly, to follow him**

**B. The risen Christ still comes to us today, comes in power but also in mystery**

1. Christ comes even to our doubts & misgivings ... & he calls you and me ...
2. Have you recognized him?
3. Have you believed him?
4. Most importantly, brothers and sisters, are you following him?