



# Old Men, Questions, and the Growing Edge

Ephesians 2:1-10 & John 3:14-21

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Art Linkletter became famous partly because of a series he hosted in the 1960's entitled: *Kids Say the Darnedest Things*. The show was thirty minutes of Linkletter interviewing a variety of children and getting them to say the cute and sometimes shocking things, usually about their parents or their teachers. We are used to children asking questions that can be both naïve on one side and deeply penetrating on the other.

As I have aged, I have come to see that it is not just kids that ask the good questions, it can be older folks as well. As children, when we conversed with older people, parents, grandparents, aunts and uncles and so forth, we thought of them as founts of assured knowledge. Older folks just knew things that we didn't and that is certainly still the case as we age. But older folks have questions as well and often if a person older than myself asks a question of me, I listen intently because it is usually a good question.

In my pastoral experience I came in contact with a man in his nineties who had lost his beloved wife and was a bit at sea, as they say. Each time I would visit him, he would ask rather plaintively: 'Why am I still here?' Or he would say, 'Why doesn't God just take me?'

I won't pretend with you that I had any hard fast answers for him. I always stumbled a bit with his question because I knew that he was sincere about his enquiry. These were things that were troubling his mind and he asked his pastor in order to find some resolution or at least peace. I'll never really know if I provided either for him, but I certainly appreciated his questioning.

Today's passage from the Gospel of John is Jesus' response to a question from an older man. The way this pericope is set up in our lectionary for this day actually excludes the question that Jesus was asked. That question appears in the thirteen verses before where our passage starts.

Nicodemus, an older man, a Pharisee, a respected religious authority, visits Jesus at night in order to engage him in a bit of theological discussion. Jesus tells him that he must be 'born from above' if he is ever to really understand the things of God. This causes quite a moment in Nicodemus' life; he can't get his head around what Jesus is saying so he enquires further about this being 'born from above.' The passage we read this morning comprises part of Jesus' answer.

In this passage, Jesus makes it quite clear that God's intention in the incarnation is that the world would be saved, not condemned. The impetus for this divine activity in the midst of time and space was purely God's amazing love. 'God loved the world so much ...' Jesus says at one point. We have heard that little snippet time and time again, but we have rarely heard what follows:

**Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved.**

This was utter foolishness to Nicodemus. He was trained in a theology and a thought that found God's action limited to activity of condemnation. Nicodemus looked around his world and thought it made perfect sense that God would condemn it; it was an utter mess in the eyes of old Nicodemus, but yet here was this man that Nicodemus respected for his wonders and his teachings telling him that God's response to the shape of the world was not condemnation but saving love.

Paul echoes these very sentiments in the other reading for this morning, finding that our salvation is achieved not by what we do or think, but that it has been done in what God did in Jesus Christ. For Paul, our salvation and God's love for humankind is a settled matter, not needing any additional effort or works on our part, other than to share this tremendously good news with the rest of the world and to live out its implications in our lives.

That's the unsettled part. That's the part that requires our continually questioning, thinking, praying, and acting: living out the implications of the settled aspect of the good news. If God loves the world so much as to send his Son not to condemn the world, but for the sake of the world's salvation, what are we to do? This is the very question that Paul sought to answer not with a singular answer, but with a continual effort of working out our salvation in the manner of our lives.

William Willimon, in a sermon on these texts, sought to encourage his hearers to continue in their curiosity about life and the things of God and how those two things overlap, intermingle and combine. Here's what he said:

**No, absolute certitude about anything is rare. We tend to bed down with the facts, what we know for sure, far too soon in the journey. Perhaps it's because I'm paid to think about God, who is so much more interesting than psychology or French history, but I fear that what we call 'higher education' is but encouragement to give up the fight too soon, to cut out intellectual losses, to grab the few facts we've assembled, and to leave the table long before the game gets good. We become far too easily pleased with what we know for sure, and apathetic over what we don't know. And this is our great defeat.**

The good news of God's love demonstrated in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ is indeed a settled thing. What is not settled, however, is how we will respond and how we will live with incredible story as our life's guide and source, day in and day out? This is the question that we all must face and seek continual resolution in our hearts and minds for. (By the way, I'm now free to end sentences in prepositions or haven't you heard the news?)

Anyway, for the Christian, the growing edge is not just to be constantly and consistently reminded of God's great love for humankind, but instead to ponder how we are best suited in this particular moment, in this particular place in the history of the world and in the history of our own lives to respond to this great love. Just how are we to live?

Our answer to this question is not a 'one and done' kind of thing. If we are serious about our lives, we keep learning how to better respond to the good news of God's great love for us in Jesus Christ. How we respond should then change and grow – Paul called it 'growing up in Christ' – and the effects of our efforts in this area should bear fruit. Hearing the good news of God's love is not something from which we ever graduate you might say, we keep learning.

In the same sermon I quoted earlier, Willimon added this:

**To keep approaching the limits of our knowing, the distance between the knower and the known, this is wisdom. Curiosity is close cousin to Humility. First-year [college] students can be embarrassingly more interesting than seniors.**

During this season of Lent and beyond, keep asking questions, keep growing, keep seeking to live the life that God has granted you ever in response to the good news:

**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. 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.**