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Melville United Church

Fergus, Ontario
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Guest Preacher,
Rev. M. J. V. Shaver, B.A.

"THE GOSPEL IS LIGHT"

John 1: 1-18

I don't know whether blood and the preaching of the Word mix, but it must be fun to try, at least we seem to think so. Bill and I have preached for one another on occasions for a long time now, and early last month when we sort of made this date, in the presence of the clerk of session, (I don't remember asking his permission, but I think we did, but he knew about it) he said it was alright. We decided then that we'd come out even, the last time he preached for me in Fort Garry United Church, Winnipeg, about three years ago.

Since that time, I have had a lot of time to think about what the role of a visiting preacher is, what is a visiting preacher for. There's a lot of things he is not for, and he's not much for the preaching of the Word, I think. How does he know what is going on in a town, how does he know what is happening to people? The Word of God isn't the word until it is spoken to people where they are, until it is spoken with a love that knows, with a love that participates. So there's a lot of things that a visiting preacher isn't. But I think maybe there is one role that he can have. He can be the occasion when we recall together, and we are awfully good at forgetting. I don't have to know you to know that you forget fast, I just have to be a human being, I just have to know how real that verse of the hymn is, "Tell us the old old story, and tell it often, for we forget so soon." But it is an occasion for recalling what all preaching is for. It is an occasion for putting into so many words, for coming out and naming just exactly what all preaching is supposed to amount to, that all Christian preaching is supposed to be illuminating; it's supposed to bring light. This is what the gospel is. The gospel is light. It's not a strange arbitrary point of view that is proclaimed and then you're ordered to believe it. Now what he says, I'm not quite sure; what he's driving at, I don't know; sounds all kind of mixed up to me, but if you say I got to believe it, alright I will. We'll chalk it up as something we mustn't doubt. We don't understand it, it doesn't make sense, no head nor tail to it; but we'll chalk it up as something we mustn't doubt because you say so; because thereby we're saved,

Now that is not the gospel, and that is not the preaching of the Word. It's not a pronouncement that you can't make head or tail of it. If that's what you're hearing, then something's gone wrong; you're listening wrong, or the preacher is wrong, somebody is lazy, somebody is not on the job, somebody is not preparing for worship, either the preacher or listener. It's not a pronouncement that you cannot make head or tail of, and you're advised to chalk it up as something you must not doubt. Its news, its news that is strange alright, but its news that makes sense out of what otherwise would be a life that you couldn't make head or tail of. Its not the kind of arbitrary strange news that comes along, and you are confronted with so that you think 'well I'll believe it, if you say so'. Its news that brings understanding, that throws light on what otherwise would be darkness.

Now this is what's supposed to be being offered in the preaching of the Word, an insight, an understanding that comes to a life that won't work out, that's all gone wrong. The gospel claims to be doubt's answer, not a matter that must be carefully sheltered from all doubt.

Now throughout the history of Christianity, one classic way of saying the gospel, specially in the reformed tradition and the one I want to deal with this morning under the general idea, the general point that the gospel is light, is the grand reformation doctrine which the reformation claims to find in Romans and in Galatians and in Paul and all through the New Testament, the doctrine of justification by grace. The proclamation that justification is by grace and its corollary that self-justification is doomed and every attempt at self justification is doomed,

and will burn us and break us and destroy us.

Now what I'm trying to say is, that this doctrine of justification by grace and its corollary that self justification is doomed, is light. This isn't some sort of bad news that along comes an angry God who says, "All your trying to be good is 'no dice'". Well now, why would he say a thing like that? It's not understandable; "all your righteousness is as filthy rags". Well, why get mad at us and say that. It doesn't make sense. Not that. This proclamation that self-justification is doomed, its supposed to be insight. This explains what otherwise doesn't make sense in life. This comes to us, 'Ah ha, now I know what's wrong, now I know what's out of whack.'

Now of course we could have trouble with the word, 'justification'. One thing that is thrown at preachers is that they use obscure language, they use biblical language or Elizabethian language or words that no one knows anything about. Now, find a word that modern-day people know something about, not 'justification'; find us a word that says the same thing. Well, I would like very much to find a word that says the same thing, and I think I've got it, and that word is 'justification', and I want to tell a little story about a man who had no theological training whatsoever, in fact, he thought preachers talked through their hats, and he used the word, and I had a great time telling him that he had used the word in exactly its biblical meaning. He was a member of Alcoholics Anonymous. I didn't know him very well, but I knew his friend, in fact his friend had invited me to meet him. He was in very bad shape. He had been dry about a year and was most unhappy. There he was stretched out on the chair and the footstool, and all that was vertical was his neck, you know that depressed posture, and what was wrong. Well, he began to unburden what was wrong. Now in the days when he was drinking, the person he envied above all else was the very ordinary Mr. Citizen who was sober, who came home with his pay cheque, who came home to a wife who wasn't about to leave him, who came home to kids who didn't run and hide because he might be violent, who just plain ordinary came home, was accepted, wasn't threatened by loss of job, loss of everything. How he envied the very ordinary sober man.

Well A.A., the fellowship, the community therapy had given him his sobriety, and he was sober, and he came home to a wife that wasn't going to leave him, and he came home with all his pay cheque, and he didn't lose great gaps of time in blackout, and as he put it, about half a day's work would earn him enough money to keep the family in groceries and everything else, and so home he came and back to work he went; and home he came and back to work he went, and he had reached this enviable state, and he had reached it for about a year, and his whole cry was, "You can't tell me that this justifies my existence." Now what he was worrying about and what got him down flat on his back was the question of his justification, and that is exactly the biblical meaning of it. I don't suppose he had ever read a line of St. Paul, yet he's using the word the way St. Paul does.

What is there that will justify my existence, that will make it matter that I'm here, that will give me a reason for being, that will establish my being. Now its insight. The gospel comes as light to the disastrous problem that we've got, that our justification is by grace, and that every attempt we make to justify our own existence is doomed.

I had a younger preacher friend call on me one day; Bill will know exactly the situation, he was a young minister that had gone into city missions, and indeed had the post that our Dad had held in All People's Mission in Winnipeg, and I was convenor of Home Missions for the Presbytery, and we had a committee meeting at which he was reporting on his work. Now he came to see me this day. "Jack, (and he was, you know, several degrees of heat above normal) I'm going to resign, because of this meeting," because the committee at points had been critical of his ministry. Now this Home Mission work is a great ministry; you work in an area where people really don't rally, where you are not that sure of support, in fact you're pretty sure you are not going to get any. You work in a field that the church isn't that sure it should have you there, so you're threatened from both sides, you're under threat continually. We knew what this meant, and he was very angry because at that meeting he had come off with his ministry unjustified. Now it was a matter of insight and light for us to know that there was no way he could justify his ministry there; that he could shout and scream and say, 'look what a good boy am I' or he could get somebody else on that committee who was sworn to say, 'hurrah, look what a good boy he is', and this would not justify his ministry, this would not remove all the self doubt, all the

guilt, this would not win him his acceptance anywhere, and in a final way this would not remove all the threats to the justification of his ministry. There was no way to do it unless God did it. He would just beat himself to death and not find light, searching everywhere in the world, pursuing every member of that committee, filling out tons of reports, itemizing his work. None of it as we know, as we could see now, would justify his ministry.

This is what's so full of light in the gospel, its telling you how life is, that's a fact, that's how life is; no use getting mad at it, this is how existence is. Self justification won't justify us. And that is why the gospel is such good news. Its God who justifies, its God who calls sinners his, and calls them by name, says they're worthwhile, says they're worth dying for, sinners. Its because God is who He is and He affirms our existence and He justifies us that we are justified, that we have a reason for being. But try to put it on the map in any other way and it will be doomed.

I had occasion to interview, you know, several boys, along with thirty of the students from the Theological school at U.B.C. United Church School who were being shown through Brandon Lake Boys Industrial School, a school for juvenile delinquent boys committed by Juvenile court, etc, and each of us had three boys we were interviewing. One boy was fascinating, a most interesting person, sixteen years old. He'd been sent to the school for a five month sentence determinate, and had spent eleven months, and it looked like he was going to spend another five or another eleven. Well, we talked, and we found out that he was taking some courses by correspondence.

"Oh, you like certain subjects eh?"

"Yeh, history".

"Well, why do you like history?"

"Well, I like history."

"Yeh, but you try to tell me why. This may explain something about you if you tell me why."

And reaching around for why he liked history, he finally came up with some words like this.

"Because I want to reach back and discover, and put my hand on the historic moment."

Ah ha, here's a sixteen year old boy, I don't know how long a term his second term in a juvenile home is, and longing to know the meaning of it all, longing to know the meaning of events, and what a basic search that might be meaningful. This was very revealing. Well, we went on to ask him a question about the church and religion and did it mean anything to him.

"Well", he said, "how can I answer that honestly?"

"What do you mean?" "Do you mean that because I give my life to religion and you think its worth nothing that you are going to find it hard to tell me?"

"No, I don't think its worth nothing, I don't think its a bunch of junk."

I just think it has nothing to do with me, or my case or my problem."

So then we went around, and we talked some more, and I went back to this question about his history and I said,

"Gee, I'm sorry that you can't be getting this history from a person so you could get into conversation with them, because that's the real exciting way to get an education, is to have a conversation with a senior in the field."

"Oh Boy," he said, "I'm exactly glad that there's not a person teaching me, in fact that's why I'm enjoying school, because I get it by correspondence and I don't have to put up with the teacher."

"Well, what's wrong with teachers?"

"Teachers I can't take. In fact, I can't take anybody who counts; my mother, the officials here, teachers, anybody who counts. I've got to cut them down. That's why I'm in here so long."

Well now, what is our boy trying to do, (and he's no dope) wondering if life means anything, wondering if he counts, wondering if in all this threatening world and existence it matters whether he's there or not. How's he going to prove to himself that he counts, how's he going to justify his existence by being one up on everybody that's big? By cutting down everyone he comes near who counts?

Now it would be news to him; it would be an unloading, and insight into what was out of whack with the way he was trying to carry on, for him to see that self-justification is doom. What if he knew that God loved him. What if he knew that so thoroughly, that's how he knew he counted on this earth, that God loved him, and that was his justification.

In the whole manner of human relations, the manner of relation between man and wife, the manner of any real close relation, its insight for us to see that the real relationship there, the one that really counts, and the only one that counts, is the one that's freely given, not the one that's earned. You try to appease for the response of relationship in a husband and wife set-up or a family set-up, and that's the end of it, that's the beginning of its destruction. Its only when its trusted for that its real, that its there. If we have to appease for it, if it is something that we attempt to establish by our working, by our snatching, if it is something I hope to establish by what I do, its under terrible threat.

Let me tell you a story about a boy. I'm telling you a story about a boy because it is close enough. If I told you a story about a husband, it would be too close. There's a boy who comes home from school; he's been told to come straight home from school. Well now, he gets out and there's a bunch of his friends who say, "Come on and play with us." No, his mother said to come straight home. But these are his friends and its good to have friends; its not bad to have friends. Did you ever have a child at school that didn't have a friend, you know when you first move? Its a terrible thing. I remember the first time we moved to Fort Garry, we had a girl in grade 2, and she was home almost at the crack of the bell the first three days, and then one day she was home late, and we were glad that day. Its wonderful to have friends. So the boy cuts off those friends to come home. Now that's a very real moment, a very hard thing. On the way home, you know its Spring, like to go wading in his rubber boots; everybody else is wading, so come on in wading, but his mother said, "Don't you go in deep water with your rubber boots", so he breaks that fellowship, that tie, on behalf of his mother. Now if this keeps up he's not going to have any friends. Then he comes in the yard, and he remembers at the last minute, "Oh, Mother said to come in the basement door", so he goes in the basement door, and upstairs he comes, and the door opens, and mother says, "How did you get that ink on your blouse?" Now what's the point of appeasing and appeasing when you can't win in the end anyway, if that's why you're doing it, And you can't win in the end. Even if the acceptance is pretended, the threat that it might not be is still there. No amount of appeasing will finally win acceptance, or make that acceptance safe. It just makes it more threatened.

And this is what is so terrible about being good in order to appease God, and this is what made the Psalmist so heartbroken. "I pledge my heart in vain, I work and I work and I'm not rewarded", and as long as I think my being good is in order to win acceptance from the universe, from what's there, from what's real, as long as my being good is to establish my existence, its doomed. Any kind of self-justification is terribly threatened, absolutely threatened, not safe. This is news. This isn't some arbitrary way of saying, "You've all been bad boys". This is what's inside of me, or what's gone wrong with my life, and what keeps going wrong every time I seek to justify myself.

And of course that's just the negative side of the real good news which is the miraculous news, that its God who justifies, that its His love of sinners that puts me on my feet and gives me a place in the world, and the only thing. But that's so. Strange, indeed strange, and indeed hard^a thing to take. And this I think needs to be said too; having said that the gospel is light, that it finally illumines what goes wrong with life, then why isn't everybody lined up to hear the gospel? Why are there so many who pay so little attention to it, and why do I pay so little attention to it, time and time again? There are many reasons why the churches don't contain everybody in the land, because preachers don't always preach the Word; because people aren't listening; all kinds of reasons. But the heart reason that I want to suggest today is the one that John suggests. It is because people prefer darkness. Time and again I prefer darkness, and you do, because its safer, we think, to be our own saviour than it is to trust for it. Its the end of pride to have to say that it is God who justifies, not me, that I can't even justify myself before God by being much more excellent than my fellows, that I have to come empty handed for my justification, with no qualifications, with not even pass marks, or a half pass, or a quarter pass. We prefer darkness to this, this kind of death.

Let me tell you about another alcoholic friend of mine, and the same friend brought him. There wasn't as good an interview; it took a long time to get under way. He was supposed to have had a spiritual problem, raised with lots of religious talk, and then had become an alcoholic, and then was nibbling at the A.A. program, partly sober, partly not. He would be dry for a little while and then fall off, and he was having a time of great

groaning when he met my friend, and this friend said, "Well, how about it, would you like to see Shaver?" "Well you bet, I'll see Shaver." So my friend went out to start the car, and it wouldn't start, and they had to get a tow, and by this time his friend got a little panicky and finished off a 'mickey' of hard liquor, so when my friend got him to my house, he was really under; upset coffee all over the floor, which of course made me think of my wife upstairs sleeping; took him a long time to talk straight even. We didn't know whether to call it off, or to continue the interview, but after insulting me, and insulting me to see whether he could get a rise, out came the problem, a little more and a little more. "Look I'm just groaning, I want to believe, I want to know I'm forgiven and accepted by God, but I can't, it won't come, I can't believe it." Well theoretically I say to him, "the answer is that the gift of faith is freely given you; you don't want it, that's why it isn't coming."

"What do you mean I don't want it. Can't you hear me crying? I've been bawling for three days. Sure I want it. God's paying no attention to me. I'm asking Him to save me and make me a believer, but he doesn't want me."

"No, at some point, you're saying no."

"Bah...how old are you...." and this went on and on, finally I got him to talk about his wife...."and what a mess she was, and a loving God sure wouldn't want him to put up with that marriage." He began to reveal enough about himself that I said, "Now look, what if its God's will for that marriage of yours to be redeemed."

"Oh God's a loving God; He wouldn't want me to go back to a mess of a marriage like I got."

"No, not back to a mess of a marriage, to a redeemed marriage, to a restored marriage. What if that's the will of God. Do you believe He couldn't do it." Then he stopped dead.

"I guess.....I guess.....I believe He could do it, but I don't want it." Now it wasn't until he was calm enough to come to some kind of self understanding that he saw, in very truth, that the reason he didn't know justification by grace was because he didn't want it. He wanted something else. He wanted life his way, then blessed. "Let me decide how it shall go, and then You bless it. I'll make the decisions, You do the blessing". That is not justification by grace.

It is because we do not want to come empty handed, absolutely trusting for our justification that we don't know it as a free gift. And here comes the astounding news, that it is God who justifies. That's what is at the heart of the universe.

Who would know it?

It is God who justifies.

Let Him.

Prayer: The word Thou hast for us, O God, write in our hearts. Amen.