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## “What Shamu Taught Me about Following Jesus”

A sermon by Mindy Douglas

Second Sunday in Lent (Year A)

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John 3:1-17

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Some years ago, a friend of mine shared an article that had been circulating on the Internet. Written by Amy Sutherland for the *New York Times*, its title was captivating: “What Shamu Taught Me about a Happy Marriage.” Intrigued, I read on, nodding and laughing the whole way through. The story begins with a typical story by a woman whose spouse is driving her crazy. She loved him very much, but over the years, she discovered he was a little short of perfect. No surprise there, right? But she had a problem. His imperfections had become irritations, or “minor annoyances,” as she put it. He was habitually late. He could not manage to get his dirty clothes in the hamper. He drove too fast. He hovered over her as she cooked. He was not the best listener. And he was perpetually losing his keys and flying into a tantrum over their loss.

Finally fed up, Sutherland came up with the perfect solution.

So, like many wives before me [she writes], I ignored a library of advice books and set about improving him. By nagging, of course, which only made his behavior worse: he’d drive faster instead of slower; shave less frequently, not more; and leave his reeking bike garb on the bedroom floor longer than ever.

Her experiment in nagging was ultimately an epic fail. If any of you who have ever tried this, as I have, you already know that this never works.

“Then something magical happened [she wrote]. For a book I was writing about a school for exotic animal trainers, I started commuting from Maine to California, where I spent my days watching students do the seemingly impossible: teaching hyenas to pirouette on command, cougars to offer their paws for a nail clipping, and baboons to skateboard.

I listened, rapt, as professional trainers explained how they taught dolphins to flip and elephants to paint. Eventually it hit me that the same techniques might work on that stubborn but lovable species, the American husband.”

### **I. How Amy Trained Her Husband**

As she watched the exotic animal trainers do their thing, she took notes. I won't go into details here about all the methods she used, but they boil down to affirming positive behavior and ignoring negative behavior. This isn't rocket science, of course, and it is taught repeatedly in animal training manuals, and especially in parenting books . . . ☺

So she started trying this on her husband. She praised him every time a sock made it into the hamper, he drove a tiny bit slower, or he arrived on time. It took time, but before too long, she began to see a difference. She stopped nagging. Their life became more peaceful.

She also did not engage with him when he flew into a tirade over his lost keys. She quietly kept washing dishes or doing whatever she was doing while he ran around the house without her. Soon, the tirades became less frequent and less mercurial. He still lost his keys. That wasn't going to change. But the way he dealt with it made all the difference.

Sutherland told her husband about her training plan eventually, and he was intrigued—not at all upset, but interested. Before long, she noticed that he had started training her . . . ☺

## **II. What does any of this have to do with God? Or with today's reading from John?**

To begin with, God loves God's creation. God also knows creation is imperfect, fallen, if you will.

At first God tries nagging and threatening. Think about it. God sends the great flood. God gives the Israelites the Ten Commandments. God sends Moses and the prophets to warn the people, to nag them back into a right relationship with God and one another. God practically begs them: PLEASE do right! If not, there will be consequences!

The Israelites respond to God's nagging in a way similar to how Sutherland's husband responds to her. In other words, nagging brings about an epic fail!

As a result of the Israelites increased negative behavior, God could have said, "I hate them so much! I will send Jesus to change them and make them be good the way they are supposed to be."

Instead, God said this:

- "I *love* them so much. I will send them Jesus to help them have life the way I want them to have life."
- "For God so loved the world that he gave his only son" – God gave. God did not take away. God did not punish. God gave a new chance at life.
- "For God sent the Son into the world, not to condemn the world, but that the world might be saved through him."

Did you hear that part? God sent Jesus NOT TO CONDEMN. Not to nag. Not to punish.

"But that the world might be saved through him."

### III. Lent

During the season of Lent, we can sometimes get caught up in our own self-flagellation, making lists in our minds of the things we need to change about ourselves. “This is why I am not good enough,” we think. “I will change it. I will be better. I won’t eat sugar. I won’t drink soda. I won’t drink alcohol. I will fast. I will pray more. I will lose weight. I will exercise more. I will change myself! I will be the person God has been nagging me to be. I will.

Here’s what is wrong with this scenario. God hasn’t been nagging us. The world has been nagging us. And, oh yeah, it isn’t about us and what we will do (about me and what I will do). It is about God and what God already has done.

Lent can too often be the season when we analyze why we don’t measure up. It is the season of sackcloth and ashes, of self-denial, and an in-depth analysis of the many ways we are slaves to sin.

But this Sunday, thanks be to God and the gospel of John, there is, writes Will Willimon, a “‘refreshment Sunday,’ a respite from the rigors of penitence . . .” This Sunday is a time when we are invited to “pause long enough to put the cross in proper context.”<sup>1</sup> Willimon writes:

In the midst of our trivial moralizing, our scolding, supererogation, and scrambling for a few penitential brownie points, John reminds us of why we’re here. We are on the way of the cross not because of what we have done or left undone but because of what God has done. The cross is not simply one more piece of damaging evidence that seals shut the case against guilty humanity.

The goriest work of human sin gets sidetracked into glorious divine redemption. The prophet is sent not to scold but to save. It was out of love that he came among us and stood beside us and chided us and died with us, for us, and saved us. Love.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.religion-online.org/showarticle.asp?title=1292> (3-10-17)

Oh yes, says the church. . . Yes. Now we remember. It was for this that we began the journey. It was not for sackcloth and ashes, whips, the sacrifice of a before-dinner martini and empty stomachs that we are here. It was love that put us in this parade. We kneel not as miserable worms but as those brought to their knees by sheer wonder at the gift. It was not to condemn us that our Lord bid us bear his cross, but to save us. We are not here as the lost but as the found.<sup>2</sup>

God sent Jesus not to scold, but to save. What amazing news!

And this is what Jesus is trying to get Nicodemus to understand as well. Nicodemus, this Jewish leader who comes to him in the middle of the night, under the cover of darkness. Nicodemus, who knew something was different about this Jesus, but wasn't quite sure what, or why, or if believing in him was worth giving up his entire way of living under the Jewish law. He just wasn't sure.

Jesus knew he couldn't nag or threaten Nicodemus into believing in him. No amount of badgering or condemning would convince Nicodemus that his new life would be found in following Jesus. That wasn't why Jesus was born—to be a nag, to condemn the world. God gave Jesus to the world to invite the world to live into him, to be changed by his love, to be transformed in their very being—in their core—as if they were born again into a new person—a new person in Christ.

John Wesley knows what kind of transformation this is, what this new birth looks like. He writes:

From hence it manifestly appears, what is the nature of the new birth. It is that great change which God works in the soul when he brings it into life; when he raises it from the death of sin to the life of righteousness. It is the change wrought in the whole soul by the almighty Spirit of God when it is "created anew in Christ Jesus"; when it is "renewed after the image of God, in righteousness and true holiness"; when the love of the world is changed into the love of God; pride into humility; passion into meekness; hatred,

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<sup>2</sup> <http://www.religion-online.org/showarticle.asp?title=1292> (3-10-17)

envy, malice, into a sincere, tender, disinterested love for all mankind. In a word, it is that change whereby the earthly, sensual, devilish mind is turned into the "mind which was in Christ Jesus." This is the nature of the new birth: "So is every one that is born of the Spirit."<sup>3</sup>

And so I wonder. . .

What if we here at First Presbyterian change the way the world sees Christians as a group of people out to condemn others for every known reason and every known imperfection.

What if we start learning from Shamu and exotic animal trainers and begin to train each other and the world in the ways of Jesus—to train each other and the world to love more and love better through the movement of the Spirit.

Instead of nagging, complaining, criticizing, and condemning, Sutherland trains her husband by saying:

- “Thanks for putting your socks in the hamper, honey!”
- “I really appreciate that we are on time today.”
- “You are a really great driver!”

What if, instead of criticizing and condemning those around us, we say to one another:

- “I saw the way you showed kindness to that person. It was beautiful. Thank you.”
- “I know it must have been hard to forgive that person who hurt you. You are a strong Christian.”
- “I am glad to see you today. My worship experience is always better when you are here.”
- “I see the love of God in you, and I am grateful for the way the light of Christ shines so clearly through your life.”

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<sup>3</sup> <http://wesley.nnu.edu/john-wesley/the-sermons-of-john-wesley-1872-edition/sermon-45-the-new-birth/> (3-10-17)

Friends, Jesus came into the world not to condemn, but to bring life and light, hope and love.

May we, this Lent, bring the same for one another.

In the name of our Triune God: Creator, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

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*Because sermons are meant to be preached and are therefore prepared with the emphasis on verbal presentation (i.e., are written for the ear), the written accounts occasionally deviate from proper and generally accepted principles of grammar and punctuation. Most often, these deviations are not mistakes per se, but are indicative of an attempt to aid the listener in the delivery of the sermon.*

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