“Inherit the Wind”
Isaiah 6: 1-8; Romans 8:12-17; John 3:1-17

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From the Pulpit
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A baptismal meditation delivered by The Rev. Dr. Timothy C. Ahrens, Sr. Minister, The First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, Trinity Sunday, May 31, 2015 dedicated to Giovanni William Catenacci on his baptismal day and in thanksgiving for the choirs of First Church at the close of their amazing season of singing and leading worship and always to the glory of God!

“Inherit the Wind”
Isaiah 6:1-8; Romans 8:12-17; John 3:1-17

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of each one of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our rock and our salvation. Amen.

Our Gospel story begins in darkness. Under the cover of night, a Pharisee named Nicodemus comes to Jesus. A very religious leader of the Jews, a powerful man from a powerful family of Jerusalem comes to the son of a carpenter, a Jewish peasant of Nazareth to find out about the truth of God.

The two men – Nicodemus of Jerusalem and Jesus of Nazareth – could not be more different. Nicodemus is a power broker. He is one of only 6,000 Pharisees - men fully
and completely dedicated to following the Law of Moses and living it completely. We would call them “Super Jews” in our day and age – those who follow the 613 laws of Moses to the letter of the law. Jesus, on the other hand is a man of simple tastes and extraordinary ability. He lives into the fullness of God’s love by radically and clearly teaching love and justice in the Temple, the synagogues and by the seaside and by healing in the streets and towns - everything done outside the pockets of religious and social privilege.

**While Nicodemus is a power broker, Jesus is an Outlier.**

What is an Outlier? Malcolm Gladwell says this of a term he has claimed and written about in a book by the same title:

"Outlier" is a scientific term to describe things or phenomena that lie outside normal experience. In the summer, in Paris, we expect most days to be somewhere between warm and very hot. But imagine if you had a day in the middle of August where the temperature fell below freezing. That day would be outlier. While we have a very good understanding of why summer days in Paris are warm or hot, we know a good deal less about why a summer day in Paris might be freezing cold.
Gladwell continues, “In my book I'm interested in people who are outliers—men and women who, for one reason or another, are so accomplished and so extraordinary and so outside of ordinary experience that they are as puzzling to the rest of us as a cold day in August in Paris.

Like a summer day of freezing cold in the heart of Paris, this story itself is an “Outlier.” We have to ask, “Why would a religious powerbroker from the Big City come under the cover of night to a Questionable Character – an Outlier – from the country - to ask questions about God’s plan for Salvation?” Is Nicodemus in search of God’s truth or trapping Jesus for later prosecution? What is he up to? The fact that Jesus entertains all the questions from the Pharisee indicates he genuinely wishes to lead him to the truth of God’s plan of salvation.

Jesus doesn’t disappoint us. We see the vastly different perspectives on life before God laid out in the conversation. Like a good attorney, Nicodemus seeks sufficient proof—historical and logical – in order to arrive at a faith that is safe, solid and clearly conclusive based on the evidence admitted in the case. Jesus insists that life in the kingdom of God is given by God and is unachieved. Such life is grace.
“Coming from above” such life is uncontrolled and uncalculated. God’s gift of life is like the wind – you cannot calculate the direction from which it comes and where it goes. In order to “Inherit” eternal life, you must “inherit the wind.” In essence, we see the classic battle of religion vs. spirituality – which seems to be played out even more in our day and time.

This exchange between the Powerbroker and the Outlier boils down to this: God is a life-giving God. God’s way – once encapsulated in an image of Wrathful Judge has shape shifted into one of Forgiving Love. God’s way is the Way of Grace. God loves the world – the whole world! God has no desire to destroy the world or see the world perish. God has given the Son to us so that all may live. In Jesus Christ – the Outlier of Nazareth - God has come to save the world. To trust in this saving actor in history – this Savior – is to inherit eternal life.

Nicodemus can carry on about going back into his mother’s womb which is absurd – even Giovanni knows that can’t be done! But, Jesus wants him to come to grips with love over judgment.
“The Kingdom of God” and “Eternal Life” are close at hand, our “Outlier” tells us. They are not far off so we cannot attain them. The late, great Marcus Borg writes that “The Kingdom of God” is what “life would be like if kings didn’t rule the world, a transformed world of justice and fairness, where everyone has enough for life” (quote from Marcus Borg). And eternal life begins in the here and now not the sweet by and by in life beyond life.

And Salvation is not about afterlife either. Salvation is about transforming ourselves and the world in which we live. We are called day by day to live into the love God has given us. We called to be “saved” - which means to be “healed” - for this life and our times. What makes our “Outlier” Jesus so special and his message so clear is that he calls us to live and to love fully in this day. He heals and teaches as one who has been taught and has healed already.

Several years ago in an address to progressive Christians, theologian and author Marcus Borg asserted that Salvation has been "systematically misunderstood" in Christian doctrine. "It has never been about an afterlife," he said. In the same address, Dr. Borg called Christians to speak out and live out of our local congregations. He said, "Local congregations play key roles in serving as "midwives" to such
faith and active transformation." As we practice Christian formation and socialization, we are called to be the church as the community, which centers itself in peacemaking and nonviolence (Borg).

Furthermore, America has the greatest gap in economic inequality in the world, and that gap is growing. As a local congregation and as individuals within our community, we must become the agents of transformation challenging this way of life and living.

Along with Nicodemus, we must wake up, get up and go to Jesus seeking the truth from our Outlier King. In him, we will find the truth of God’s love worth living for.

In the name of Jesus too many pulpits across this land spew venomous hate against people. I don’t know about you, but I am so tired of hearing about gay people, immigrants, the poor and African Americans being the cause of what is wrong in our land. Preachers who spew hate have NO truth, NO love, NO justice and NO Jesus in them. While poisonous preaching receives millions of hits on-line from believers and non-believers alike, preaching about God’s love for all and condemnation of NO one seems to get lost somewhere around John 3:18ff.
It troubles me that the only Jesus that some people will meet - for the first and the last time – is hate-filled. If I were not a Christian and saw this, I would run as far away from this faith as possible.

I am personally and pastorally sickened to the deepest part of my soul by this vitriol. Instead of speaking to and from the heart of Christianity, it speaks to and from a cancer of hate in the human community and in our land, which has absolutely nothing to do with God the Creator, God the Son, or God the Holy Spirit. Nothing whatsoever!

However, too much of the media and the Internet feed on this sickness.

So, we must become the treatment for this cancer. We must get God’s true word of love out to the world. To this day, I cling to and celebrate the bold congregation in the heart of the Bible Belt who several years ago put up a billboard on Billy Graham Highway in Charlotte, NC reading:

“the Mission Gathering Church is sorry for the narrow-minded, judgmental, deceptive, manipulative actions of those who took
away the rights and equality of so many in the name of God. Our hearts are with you. Christianity for all.”

Like the Mission Gathering Church, we must be the transformative church of Jesus Christ who brings hope to a hurting world. There is hope when people of faith speak out against hate and speak up for love. We are called by God to be a Beacon on Broad Street and beyond. And the beacon begins with the little light shining inside of each one of our hearts - because the heart of Christianity begins in the heart of Christians!

In John 3:16-17 Jesus breaks it down for Nicodemus and all of us - for all time - are invited in to hear him say,

“God so loved the world that God gave his only Son so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but 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.”

I don’t know about you, but it sounds to me that we have been saved (or healed) by Jesus so that we will NOT condemn.
On this Trinity Sunday, let us be clear:
Condemnation is not of Jesus.
Condemnation is not of the Holy Spirit.
Condemnation is Not of God.

In fact, the same one who has come into the world for the salvation of the world is the same one in whose name we have baptized and blessed Giovanni William this day. We made promises to be there for Giovanni and walk with him as he lives and grows in faith. If we are serious about this, it begins in this moment. We, Jesus’ saved, redeemed and loving followers, are taken, blessed, broken, and given to the world to be a healed and healing presence in the world.

Our Gospel story, which begins in darkness, ends with the Light of the World shining bright. So, do not be crushed by hate. Rather, be lifted by the Son of God who is our Lord and Savior! He is calling us to live, to love, and be a light for him and for the hurting world for which he weeps. So, let us join him is his passion and victory. Let us follow our Outlier Lord. In the Spirit of Christ, may we all “inherit the wind.”

Amen.