

March 4, 2018

TEXT: John 1:35–42

TITLE: What is the Opposite of Heathen?

By the Rev. Dr. Randy Bush

Over the past few years, a new word has become very prevalent in our cultural vocabulary. The word is “binary.” All of us know that life is complex. Things are rarely “black or white”; answers to hard problems are seldom “yes or no.” The problem is that we like to imagine that everything fits into one of two categories, which is an example of binary thinking. For example, a form asks “Are you single or married?” For many of us that isn’t hard to answer, but which box do you check if you’re widowed, or separated from your spouse, or in the process of getting a divorce? Too many forms have us identify ourselves as “male or female.” Our growing sensitivity to the range of sexual identities has opened our eyes to how difficult it is to answer that question when a person is gender fluid or transsexual. Political commentators put up maps of the United States and identify blue states and red states, even though places like Pennsylvania are more truly blended, purple states.

I raise this topic of binary thinking because for generations, many people in the church have been accustomed to dividing people into one of two categories: saved and unsaved. The evangelical movement—from revivals in the 19th century through the rallies of Billy Graham, whose recent death has been widely noted—often centered on getting a response to the question: “Are you saved?” This approach takes a complex subject and reduces it down to a binary equation: Are you saved or not? Are you going to heaven or hell? Are you on “God’s team” or playing for the opposing side?

Now nothing makes a person defensive quicker than having to answer binary salvation questions, because no matter what you say, it is possible that the person won’t accept your answer. “Yes, I’m saved. I believe in Jesus Christ and am baptized.” *But were you sprinkled with water or baptized by immersion?* “I take communion in my church. *Was that communion bread merely blessed or sanctified as the body of Christ?* “I repent of my sins and read my bible.” *Are you reading the right translation of the bible?* And on it goes. Over time we learn how to gracefully answer these questions and hopefully end up saying something like, “We may have different practices but we all worship the same God.”

But one aspect of binary thinking still exists out there—the idea that the world is divided into those who are saved and those in foreign lands who are not saved. Some still identify them with the harsh word “heathen.” It’s a pejorative word, a put-down, a bad binary category that taints the work of the church—which is why the story of Lottie Moon is perfect for our consideration this morning.

Charlotte “Lottie” Moon is likely the most famous Southern Baptist missionary in American history. She was born in Virginia in 1840. As a young college student, one night she attended a student revival. She went to scoff but ending up praying and became up convinced she should become a missionary. Now she was an unmarried

woman and Southern Baptists didn't send single women overseas. But after teaching in the U.S. for several years, her denomination eventually changed their position on women missionaries, and in 1873 they sent to China two best friends: Lottie Moon and Anna Stafford, a daughter of a Presbyterian missionary. Most Baptists today are aware of Lottie Moon because there is a special Christmas offering named for her that is received every year in support of overseas mission work. Last year the Lottie Moon Christmas offering raised over \$150 million.

Now, Lottie Moon was of a generation that definitely thought in binary terms about the world—those who had heard and responded to the gospel of Christ and those who had not; who were, in their eyes, heathen. Even though the book of Revelation talks about how a great multitude from all nations shall stand before the heavenly throne (Rev 7:9), historically the position has been that anyone who has not heard about Jesus Christ is not included in that great multitude. To make this seem less harsh, evangelical brochures illustrate this topic by showing pictures of remote jungle tribes as examples of heathen to be saved—which is an insult to South American tribes who are likely horrified at some of things we do in our supposedly civilized modern society.

In college history classes, missionaries are often presented in a negative light. They are seen as pawns of imperialism, trying to force conversions and impose their culture on others. That is far too simplistic a narrative, as Lottie Moon's story reminds us. When Lottie Moon traveled to the central China town of Tengchow, she went alone. She practiced a ministry of presence. She learned the language. She sat and talked with poor peasant women near the threshing floor of the village. She wore a version of their native clothing and respected their local customs. She taught their children, and eventually that work spread to her teaching their mothers and, later, their fathers. And even though Southern Baptists didn't condone the idea of a woman teaching men, Lottie Moon began training up Chinese teachers of the gospel. From her humble, quiet, faithful presence, the story of Christ was shared and dozens of schools and churches were founded.

Our Presbyterian Church has a long history of supporting mission work overseas. It is simplistic, binary thinking to argue that missionaries are unnecessary since we shouldn't force the Christian faith on those who have different beliefs. The gospel of Christ is not a light switch that is either in the "on" or "off" position. It is a message of hope and love that is shared as much as by what is done as by what is said. Lottie Moon was a woman able to be a friend and teacher, offering instruction to Chinese children so they might have a better future; giving the tools of reading and bible learning so their lives may grow into the fullness of God's intent. There is an ancient Chinese proverb that says "women hold up more than half the sky." Believe me: If you want to change the world and reduce global poverty, make sure that every girl has a chance at a solid education. That has never been more true than today.

It's funny: I decided several weeks ago to focus on Lottie Moon this Sunday, not knowing that we'd also be baptizing Leandro Claire, the son of our church's mission co-worker Chenoa Stock and her husband Jose Claire. Chenoa's work in Bolivia

embodies the best of this ministry of presence. She is part of the UMAVIDA “Joining Hands” program, working alongside citizens of Bolivia to protect the critical resource of water in one of the poorest and most isolated lands in South America. Your support of offerings like the One Great Hour of Sharing or direct support of Chenoa given to the Presbyterian Mission Agency, is the equivalent of the Lottie Moon Christmas offering for our denomination.

In honor of the work of Lottie Moon and Chenoa, I choose to pose an awkward question this morning. Even though the language feels oppressive and binary, it is right to ask “What is the opposite of heathen?” If we desire not to demean non-American people of the world—if we honestly want to avoid calling them unsaved heathen, then what words should we use? I suggest we use the term God uses—“beloved children of God.” If God is the creator and sustainer of all life, and in Jesus Christ, God took on human flesh and dwelt among us, incarnating what is divine in the flesh that is common to all humanity, then what is anyone else anywhere in the world but a child of God?

Does that mean everyone is saved? Does that mean God is gracious to non-Americans who may never hear the name of Jesus in their life? God hasn’t whispered in my ear the answer to that question, but scripture assures us that the one who is at the gate of heaven is the same one who came to the dust and dirt of our earthly roads to show all prodigal children the way home. I’ll defer to the humor and grace of Archbishop Desmond Tutu, whose picture is in our sanctuary, who once said with a smile: *We may be surprised at the people we find in heaven. God has a soft spot for sinners. His standards are quite low.*

In the end, binary thinking about saved/not saved serves us very poorly. Lottie Moon went to China to share the love of Christ, perhaps grounded on a 19th century theology that heathen were being lost due to not hearing the gospel. But deeper than that theology was her faith—and her example should be our example. Lottie Moon so identified with her Chinese friends that when they endured food shortages, she starved with them. She eventually died in 1912 even though others intervened to try and get her medical care. Three years after her death, in the Tengchow Baptist Church, a simple shaft of stone was erected in her honor. It bore her name in Chinese characters and noted that she was an American missionary. During the Chinese Revolution, that church was abandoned. No Americans were able to visit the site for decades. When Baptists from the U.S. finally returned in 1985, they found the monument to Lottie Moon lying on its side under a pile of rubble, as if buried for protection. The word “American” had been obliterated from the stone, but underneath it was still legible a one sentence summary of her work. It didn’t tell of her evangelistic work or her school teaching. It simply said, “How she loved us.” Whether God sends us into the world right here or far away, may the same be said of us.

AMEN