

## *What the Girl in the Tank Said*

*Psalm 100, Isaiah 49: 15-16*

**First Presbyterian Church  
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Gerrit Scott Dawson**

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I once had a dream that moved me deeply. This dream seemed to speak to me a truth that lies at the core of our humanity. I walked into a dimly lit room. In the center of the room was an enormous tank, a kind of giant aquarium. A girl was floating in the water of the tank. As I looked more closely, I realized that she was burned all over her entire body. All of her skin was raw. She had to stay in this tank of water with some special solution to keep her alive. Every nerve on her body was unshielded. She experienced burning pain from toe to head. Only in the tank could she get enough relief to stay conscious.

I suddenly felt how I had always taken for granted that I could just move through the world *without* the very air around me causing excruciating pain. Compared to this girl floating in the tank, I had known nothing of hardship. Nothing of suffering. She knew comprehensive pain. It enveloped her round about. She was the supreme sufferer. But I moved through the air, across the world, inside my life with relative ease. I realized that by comparison I was wealthy beyond the greatest kings. My treasure was measured in the currency of freedom from constant, searing, all-around burning pain. I was filthy rich with non-pain. From a position of such wealth, what could I possibly say to her? I had the freedom to walk away into the world to live. She was suspended in this tank, unable to leave it, unable to stop hurting. In my suddenly realized privilege of simply *not* being tortured by burns, I was silent and dismayed. I just looked.

She crossed the distance between us. She spoke. “We’re the same,” she said. I looked at the girl in the tank. How could we possibly be the same? I had everything. She floated in agony. But she continued, “I too must repent. I too must submit.” The dignity of her confession slapped down my guilt like you would slap a summer mosquito. Her pain had, in my mind, given her a kind of immunity from all guilt. Who could possibly accuse a girl in a burn tank of any kind of sin or short coming? She could have been bitter and I would understand. She could have been weeping and I would understand. She could have been disdainful of my health and I would understand. But she found what was common to us. Suffering did not buy her out of responsibility. “I too must repent. I too must submit. We are the same.” We were both called to acknowledge accountability to the Creator. We

were both called to repent of having hearts that turned away from that Creator. No amount of privilege or poverty, strength or suffering changes that. We belong to God. We give thanks to him for life. We bow the knee to him in recognition that he is God and we are not. We make confession that we have turned aside from his way. We seek his mercy. We are the same.

I've thought about that dream for years. I look upon the world in its agony. I am dismayed. And I don't know what to say. I think about my skin color. My nation of birth. My time in the history of the world. The economic situation of my family. The genetic health I was born with and the level of health care I always received. The education I was given. The doors that opened. The influence placed into my hands. What can I possibly say to a pain-seared girl submersed for the rest of her life in a burn tank? What can I say to this broken and suffering world? On one level, nothing. I can say nothing. I cannot account for either privilege or pain so disproportionate to all deserving. I cannot answer the why of my life, the why of the girl in the tank, or the state of this world. There we are. What can I say? But in my silence, she spoke. Out of suffering she spoke a truth beyond the mystery of our fates: "We are the same. I too must submit."

The girl in my dream found the definition of her life in the greatest dignity afforded to humanity. To know, no matter the level of our pain, that we are both created and called. Unlike any other animal, I am aware that I am alive. I have a will. I can choose how I think about my life. This is the gift conferred to humanity alone in the vast diversity of creatures on earth. The pearl of great price. Awareness and will. I am alive. I am not self-invented. I am created. And I am called to acknowledge my Maker. To give my will *willingly* into his hand. As long as we have been left with enough awareness that we are alive and human, no amount of suffering can take that dignity from a person. The Creator made me and loves me. As long as we have the awareness that we are alive and human, no amount of suffering can take that responsibility from a person. The Creator calls me to give him thanks and place my will at his disposal.

This is just what Psalm 100 tells us: Know that the LORD, he is God! It is he who made us, and we are his. I love the King James translation of this: It is he that has made us and not we ourselves. I didn't make my life. The LORD made me. I am his. We, together, are his people and the sheep of his pasture. So we are called to give thanks to him, to bless his name. To bless God, I have to turn from myself. I look up and say, "Not I, but you, you are God!" And in doing so I find the joy of my life restored to me, no matter my circumstances.

This is what the dream of the girl in the tank taught me. Every life matters. We are the same. Created. Called. *Every life matters*. From conception to natural death. Every life matters right now and matters eternally. We desperately long for that awareness to rise in our nation. We ache for that valuing to flourish among us again. We are the same. We are created by God. Intended to be here from our creation in the shrine of the womb, the most sacred place any of us will live on this earth. We are called to submit to God, all the way to the last breath of conscious life, each of us. Vital life is found only down this path. Thanks and acknowledgement. Recognition of God and repentance from self. Taking up the gift of the human will and offering it back to the Maker of all. And then following where that leads us towards each other.

In these last days, the lid has been taken off the boiling pot of our culture. The stew of the contradictions we live in has steamed over into rage and violence. Our fair city has been torn with strife. I realize how I move in a bubble of privilege that suddenly got burst by the realization that more than half my neighbors live north across the great spiritual moat of Florida Blvd. Across that moat is little protection from family chaos, hunger, ignorance and hopelessness. And of course that's not the only moat, just one clear way to describe the reality that most of us in this room live in privilege while the majority of people in Baton Rouge struggle. And the racial divide in our city is not a fiction. We have conversations we need to have but have no idea where they are going. I have a lot of starts to dialogues I can imagine will happen when blacks and whites talk honestly to each other. But I don't know how to end them. Some of them go like this:

As a black man, I feel like I have a target on my back that says "Threat."  
As a white man, I feel like I have a sign on my back that says "Whitey will pay for it."

Black man: It might help if you didn't treat me like a criminal on the take.  
White man: It might help if you didn't resist arrest by officers of the law that governs our community.

Black man: It might help if I wasn't assumed to be a thug first and a man a distant second.  
White man: It might help if you worked a regular job during day light hours like the rest of us.

Black man: It might help if there were real jobs that paid better than welfare.

White man: It might help if you didn't expect every benefit to be free.

I want to be done with being considered "discarded black man."

I want to be done with being considered "white man guilty of everything."

I want to be done with complacent black man.

I want to be done with complacent white man.

We both want to be done with "Fix it for me!"

We both want to be done with "Fix yourselves."

We've got a lot of talking to do. Conversations whose endings we can't imagine until we actually start talking. How do we do that?

I wish I knew how to answer that. How we are can't stay the same. Hatred. Fortresses. Blame. Blame. More blame. The politics of polarization have been played from the left and the right. People use black pain and white guilt. They use white rage and black solidarity. They use shame and blame, power and silencing. They screw us every time.

Are there any bridges that already exist? Are there any places where we already recognize those core truths of our common humanity? We are the same. We are created. We are called to submit to the Creator in repentance and faith. Are there people across the ethnic divides and the economic divides who see this deeper unity? Yes, there are! Maybe that's the place to start.

Week before last, Pastor Albert White called me in North Carolina. I sort of wanted to stay on my mountain and not have to think about the city I love and serve in Louisiana. What did he want? A rally? A meeting? A statement? No, something much simpler. Something much more powerful. Albert said, "I want 50 on 50!" What are you talking about, Albert, a rumble? "Look," he said, "It's not going to work until people begin to have what we have: a real relationship. Only God's people can show this city a better way. I want my people and your people to meet together." More meetings? Is this going to work? Albert got more specific: your people and my people in each other's homes. Sharing a meal. A few black people go to dinner in white people's homes. Then those white people go to dinner in the black people's homes. Most of us have never done that. Ever.

It began to dawn on me. Yes, I said. We could put "A face to the race." Right. Real relationships. Cross the divide. Socialize. See what we have in common. Share our faith in Jesus. And as the relationships become real, then we

can talk. There it is, a vision Pastor Albert and I have together: 50 on 50, A Face to the Race. That's really just 20 to 25 couples or groups. Commit to four dinners over four months. Two in our homes, two in their homes. What do you think? A Face to the Race. There is already a connection between those who know we are the same, created and called. There is a bridge. It's just tangled and overgrown and seldom travelled. Could we clear it out? Could we walk across to each other? Beneath politics. Beneath difference. In Christ? You can sign up today at the Connection Center and we'll work out the details in the weeks to come,

I'd like to close with one of my favorite verses, from Isaiah 49: 16. The prophet hears the LORD speak to his people in words they would never fully understand until Jesus went to his cross: "Behold, I have engraved you on the palms of my hands." Such a graphic image. God said he has etched your name in his hand. Not just an indelible marker, those eventually wash off. Something more like a tattoo. Something like a carving that makes a scar that lasts forever. Except that this engraving is not self-harm. It is not destructive but life giving. The LORD etches us into himself. He writes us into his story. He enfolds us into his life. He sears us into his own skin.

But how could God, who is Spirit, ever do something so graphically physical? Isaiah must have wondered after he wrote those words. How will the eternal God carve my name into flesh he does not have? But in the grandest of miracles, the LORD I Am took up flesh and blood. He walked among us in Jesus Christ. He could declare from the inside out, "Now we are all the same. Created. Called. I, the uncreated Son became the created Son of Mary. I the Holy One submitted my life to my Father. All the way to the end. All the way to the cross.

"And when they drove the nail into my outstretched hands, my Father was actually engraving your name into my palm." Imagine that. Looking at Jesus nailed to the beams of the cross. Gazing at the open wound of the nail hole. And seeing there amidst the blood and skin, your own name written out. You look and you look and realize that your name has been there forever. He was always thinking of you. Your name will be there forever. No power can remove that engraving of your name on Jesus' palm. He stretched out his holy hands to receive you. To take your sin and return his forgiveness. To join you to himself forever. It is the truest thing about your name. Your name is written indelibly in the palm of Jesus' hand. You look upon Jesus on the cross and see what it cost to engrave you into himself. You fall to the ground. You stretch out your hands. You adore this savior who loves you so much. He loves you enough to write you into his life. Your name is engraved in his flesh which died, rose and is now in heaven at the

right hand of God. He has taken your name in his hand into eternity. Nothing else is more real about you than that.

But from that ground before the cross, look up at him again. Keep looking at his hand. Next to your name you see another name. The name of the person beside you. Keep looking. You see more names. Names of people you carried in your heart into this room this morning. Keep looking at those nail-pierced hands. Somehow, some way, there is room for names upon names in the wounds of his hands. You see names of people who marched in the streets last week. You see names of officers and their families. You see names of people you'd be scared to talk to. You see names of people your heart breaks for. Billions and billions of names. Of all kinds of people from every age and place. They too have been written into Jesus.

And then as you look to your left and to your right, you see that all the people who bear all those names are bowing before the foot of the cross just like you. By such amazing grace they have been called. By such wonderful love they have fallen to their faces and given over their lives. What happens when you see them and know you share the miracle of being included in the deep, deep love of Jesus? Do not all differences fall away? Do we not conclude, "We are the same! Created and called."

Now what would happen if you looked at each person you meet this week as if their names were engraved in the palms of Jesus? What would happen if we each looked at the players on the stage in the tense events of our town through the lens of grace? If we saw that there was room in the wounds of Jesus for the name of each one? That each has been created and called to be in the hands of Jesus?