

## **The Resurrected and Risen Lord Beckons**

**A Sermon by Pastor John W. Bengston  
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In reflecting on his days as a member of the Duke University Theological Faculty, William Willimon recalls a conversation he had with one of the secretaries at the school. This dialogue took place immediately after the Iranian hostage situation occurred, so that was in 1979 – 30 years old but still quite relevant.

This secretary got to know an exchange student from Iran who was at Duke working on an advanced degree. He was also on a scholarship from his government. The student's support included everything – tuition, room and board, books, fees, and a stipend. He had no worries about money, until the Shah fled and a new government assumed power in Iran. At that point all this student's support evaporated. This secretary had taken the student into her home, so that at least he had a place to live and something to eat.

She was also trying to find little jobs for this student so he could earn some funds to support himself. She asked Dr. Willimon if he had any odd jobs that this student could do for him or if the student might be able to do some yard work at this professor's home. She was approaching lots of faculty members with the same request.

Dr. Willimon asked, "Does he support the revolution?" Remember, the revolutionaries were holding 63 American Embassy personnel hostage, a confinement that lasted for 444 days. The conversation I'm relaying comes from the very early portion of that hostage experience. Back to Dr. Willimon's question, "Does he support the revolution?" The secretary's response was, "He thinks it's all just wonderful."

To which William Willimon said, "Well I think it's rather remarkable that you have befriended him and that you are working to help him out, and that you have taken him into your own home. How did you come to do that?"

She slammed her fist on her desk and said, "Because I am a Christian. You think this is easy?"

"This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you" (John 15:12). Now, if we could all agree on what the word "love" means, we might all be able to actually do it. Yet this secretary was not into definitions of love; she simply loved another out of obedience to Christ. This was no romantic, warm fuzzy kind of love, but the kind that Christ gave and gives us – a love that serves the other, not self. We heard earlier, "No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends" (John 15:13). This secretary had no regard for how the school administration or her immediate

supervisor would respond to the hospitality she extended to this Iranian student. She did know the Word of the Lord Jesus Christ, and his words compelled her to act.

Today in just a few minutes, we are going to celebrate the baptisms of Maia and Sonya, and we will witness the risen Lord Jesus choosing some more disciples – these two little girls. They will not know it, but their parents and the rest of us will be responsible to teach them what it means that the Lord Jesus has chosen them to love and obey. That's a mighty tough lesson to teach and learn, for at times our examples provide confusing and foggy lessons. At times it appears we are obeying other gods, other authorities, some formal structures of authority like laws, bosses, parents, and principals. At other times it appears that we bow before the informal gods of fashion and taste, prevailing opinion and persistent practice.

While on our recent trip, we visited Sydney, Australia. As we rode through an affluent suburb on our coach (actually, it was a bus, but an upgraded version), our tour director pointed out a Woolworths which now in Australia are basically supermarkets. Woolworths are the most prominent supermarkets in Australia. This one had its front windows painted white on the inside at least 2/3ds the way up, topped with a red stripe. Our tour director who has lived in Sydney for 16 years told us the history of those painted windows. No other Woolworths we saw had painted windows. When this store opened, it was expected to be very profitable, for it was in a prime location in a wealthy community. For four years Woolworths waited for this store to be a big earner for them, but it just wasn't happening. In order to find out what might be the problem, they did surveying in the area. Most everyone indicated that they knew that Woolworths had the lowest prices, the freshest produce, finest cuts of meat, widest range of choices. The problem was that those people in this wealthy area did not want to be seen shopping at a Woolworths. The simple solution was to paint the windows so people could not see who was shopping in that supermarket. Since then, that particular store has been Woolworth's top earner in Australia.

How do we bow down and obey the gods of "the proper image," "the right brand," and "the coolest style," and "the newest color" or worse "public opinion?" Probably more often than we'd like to admit.

One voice calls: I chose you. I appointed you. Love one another, and all others, even when doing so does not conform to the prevailing image, the public mood, and popular opinion. That secretary at Duke University heard the voice of the Lord Jesus, and did not let national identification stand in her way of sharing Christ's love with an Iranian student who supported the revolution of 30 years ago. Christ Jesus lives and rules, and we are to trust and obey. Love one another. As the secretary at Duke asked rhetorically, "You think this is easy?" Of course not. The voice of the Lord has authority like no other, and Maia and Sonya, it will take a lifetime of learning like it has for all of us to grow into your discipleship which begins this day. Amen.