

Numbers 21:4-9
Ephesians 2: 1-10
John 3: 11-21

Deeds Clearly Seen
March 11.2018
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When I was 11 and 12 years old, I went to a summer camp with a friend of mine. It was a Christian camp, a Bible camp. One of the activities was a contest, memorizing verses of Scripture. You didn't have to understand the verses at all – just memorize, the more the better, the faster the better. There was a prize at the end of the week for the girl who could memorize the most. One of the verses on the memorization list was John 3:16. I remember a girl going through it at top speed, with one word running into the next:

“ForGodsolovedtheworldthathegavehisonlybegottensonthatwhosoeverbelievethinhim ...”

– of course it was in the King James Version. When the camp counselor asked if she knew what it meant, the girl cheerfully said, “Yes, it means I win!”

We see this verse, John 3:16 everywhere, and so it's easy not to hear it. We see it on billboards and bumper stickers and at sports games. It has become a sort of code, a reassuring talisman that lets those “in the know” feel a certain bond of belonging. But when we use such a verse to define the group, to define a process for belonging to the group, we might not see some deeper meanings and some deeper work to be done by the faithful reader.

Perhaps more than the other Gospels, the Gospel of John has some special language, a special vocabulary, and John's Jesus has a particular way of speaking about himself. Sometimes this strikes me as beautifully poetic, and sometimes it seems remote and esoteric. Raymond Brown, a New Testament scholar, advised the preacher, writing, “Do not domesticate the Johannine (John's) Jesus. It is his style to say things that border on the offensive. Be puzzled and even offended, but do not silence this Jesus by deciding what he should not have said and what your hearers should not hear.” When this Gospel was written, it was addressed to a small Christian community that had no power. It could not use its influence to really marginalize anyone or harm them. But today, Christianity has been a powerful religion for centuries – sometimes aligned with a political entity, sometimes not – and it has the power to harm more people. The Gospel of John can do damage, in the sense of excluding or shaming others. So we want to be deliberate in our reading of John's special vocabulary, and to see if we can broaden its application.

Today's passage follows immediately upon Jesus' nighttime conversation with the Jewish leader Nicodemus, who is sympathetic to Jesus' teachings. This sympathy does not override caution, though: he comes to talk to Jesus at night, privately. So already there was a light – dark, night – day, secret – open - clear, unclear - dichotomy set up. Jesus reminds Nicodemus of the Exodus story, when Moses cured people of snakebite by displaying a bronze effigy of a snake on a pole and allowing them to view openly what they feared most. The bronze snake, “lifted up” on the pole is a symbol for the crucifixion, when Jesus will be “lifted up” on the cross, a terrifying thing, one that, paradoxically, leads to healing and life.

One of those “code phrases” of John is this “eternal life.” In his way of thinking, this is something that is already available, already present. It is not just a promised afterlife: it is grace-filled living, now.

And the starting point, the source for all this grace? The 16th verse: for God so loved the world. Or we might translate what’s there: “God loved the cosmos in this way.” Not certain people, not just people: God loves all of creation and uses Jesus to demonstrate this, as an avenue to this grace-filled, energized living. Before anything else, before the issues of belief and unbelief, before everything, there is this immense love for God for the entire created order, in fact, imbedded in the way things are.

With this way of understanding the relationship of the divine to human life, there is no condemnation. If there is a kind of judgment, it is more like “being clearly seen.” The word that John uses for judgment is related to the same word root for “criticism.” Criticism can be negative or judgmental, but it also implies a careful look at something, an informed, clear, well-lit examination. There is such a thing as positive criticism. So, in those few sentences about belief and judgment, we are led to imagining a reflection on one’s own life - one’s actions and intentions – in the light of Jesus’ life. We are invited to a kind of self-judgment, but only in that warm and loving light that calls us closer, and calls us to a fuller, more joyful and more free way of living. We might even call it a higher consciousness.

As I see the logic here, it is **not**: believe or else. It is **not**, if you believe, **then** God will love you and save you from hellfire. Salvation, or soul-healing, is not a reward for belief. God is not withholding love and forgiveness from us. The nature of love is not to be coercive. There is an invitation to engage, to draw closer. And that is not a time-limited offer. That light cast by Jesus’ life shines and glows and illuminates constantly, whether we are aware of it, whether we use it for our own benefit or not.

I had a thought while thinking of all this: the way we avoid light sometimes. I am thinking of a really bright bathroom light, the first thing in the morning. I look in the mirror, and I am revealed. Not so much fun. That’s one kind of illumination. Luckily, we are offered something different, something more constructive, something more transformative is in “the light that has come into the world” through Christ. In times of honest reflection, we allow that loving light to enter the nooks and crannies of our souls, until the love of God allows us to feel some self-love. It seems to me that this is the work of Lent: hard work at times, but with that deeper grace-filled life as the reward. Not a one-time decision of belief, a one-time assent to certain propositions, but a life-long journey into the light.

There is a hymn, written by a Congregational, later a United Church of Christ minister, Ferdinand Blanchard, for the Lenten season. It describes the kind of judgment we find in our Gospel passage:

*The hopes that lead us onward, the fears that hold us back,
Our will to dare great things for God, the courage that we lack.
The faith we keep in goodness, our love, as low or pure,
On all the judgment of the cross falls steady, clear, and sure.*

When we work on this process of self-judgment and self-love, we do not just think of private shortcomings, of personal “misdeeds.” We are called to love the world in the ways that God does. So we let the light of Christ’s life fall on our will “to dare great things...and the courage that we lack.” How we relate to the society that surrounds us matters. In 1933, in Germany, the Protestant church was divided. About 2,500 of the Protestant clergy sided with Hitler, about 2,500 actively opposed him, and about 15,000 took no position at all, either way. About 15,000 said to themselves, “ This is not a religious issue for me, there is nothing compelling about this, I don’t have the evidence that this situation requires any action.” So we might wonder, what darkness in our world, in our own time, calls out for attention, for notice, for divine light. As Bishop W. Darin Moore of the AME Zion Church, who I met on a work trip in North Carolina said, “The church doesn't exist for your salvation; it exists to give you a way to participate in the saving of the world.”

I have been speaking about the grace-filled life, and grace is the word used in the letter to the Ephesians. “God, rich in mercy, out of great love for us, made us alive together with Christ...by grace.” It is a gift. But this is not grace we receive as passive partners. The shape and development of this grace is formed in our responses. In the world of possibility opened up by Christ, faith is the creative response to the gift, and draws us into a divine family. The creative response makes us graceful, makes us a blessing to others, sheds more of that life-giving, healing light. That is the power of divine love, using us to be bearers of the light. As John would say, “**This** is the way that God loves the cosmos.”

The reading from Ephesians also describes us as God’s handiwork or God’s workmanship. In the phrase, “For we are what he has made us,” the translation there is actually, “we are God’s workmanship.” I like to think that God finds us, as the work of God’s own hands, too valuable to throw away. So God mends. We will always see the tear in the fabric when we look closely. But there is an art to God’s mending: in a way the repair adds to the beauty of the community, because it is testimony to its value. “**This** is the way that God loves the cosmos.”

What if, especially during this season of Lent, this church were a place where we take hold of both John 3:16 and John 3:17. Not as quick memory verses, to be displayed proudly and triumphantly, but as a starting point for mutual growth and support. What if we reminded ourselves about the ways God loves the world, and all the people in it. What if we reminded ourselves of the ways Jesus illuminated a new way of being in the world. What if we reminded ourselves that it is not about condemnation, but about the self-awareness that leads to self-love. What if we reminded ourselves that this is all not for personal salvation, but for the healing of the world...the one God loves with us. All this reminding takes a lot of work. But in large and small ways, we can do it together. You hold the light for me, and I’ll hold the light for you. Amen.