

Psalm 107: 1-15
Ephesians 2: 1-10
John 3: 11-21

Loving the Light
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We belong to a very wordy tradition, we New England Congregationalists. We value the word of God in Scripture. Sermons have a prominent place in our services. Even our hymns - compared to the hymns in other traditions, like the African-American churches, and in churches that cultivate repetitive chanting, our hymns have lots of different verses, lots of words. We love to speak and sing our faith, sometimes at great length.

But sometimes, the very words we love seem to trip us up. They obscure rather than shed light on the subject matter. We misunderstand each other. We avoid certain words, afraid that they'll give the wrong impression. We spend 25 words explaining what we really meant when we said one. Language defines us, and we don't want anyone to get it wrong.

This is particularly difficult when we are speaking of the things of the Spirit: so hard to describe and pin down, so open to misinterpretation. Speaking of words, "Spirit", "spiritual" and "spirituality" are everywhere these days, but they often seem to be shorthand for something else. I read an anecdote recently, written years ago. The journalist Barbara Walters was interviewing Monica Lewinsky after the impeachment scandal of the late 90's: a 2 hour interview, which is mind boggling for a couple of reasons. At one point, Walters quoted President Clinton as saying that he had sinned in his relationship with Lewinsky. She then asked if Lewinsky thought that she too had sinned. Monica seemed a bit taken aback. She fidgeted in her chair and then said, "I'm not very religious. I'm more spiritual." "Religion" was obviously a bad word, but "spiritual" was a useful word, that allowed Lewinsky to avoid the question.

So we come to the Gospel of John, a wordy Gospel, a Spirit-filled Gospel, and we come to a passage with what might be the most frequently cited verse in the New Testament: John 3:16, the "For God so loved the world" verse. Martin Luther called John 3:16 "the Gospel in a nutshell" because it expressed so succinctly the depth of Gospel grace. That reference is also put on bumper stickers, and was famously written in Tim Tebow's eyeblack, and the In-n-Out Burger chain prints it on the inside bottom rim of their paper cups. In some ways, when the Bible verse is thrown about in this way, it becomes a slogan, shorthand for labeling who gets it and who does not. The words get in the way.

Speaking of words, it is interesting to me that the next few verses do not get as much attention as the 16th verse. It continues the explanation of how God goes about loving the world, or the cosmos, which is actually the word used. This powerful divine love gave the Son of Man, the Human One in the person of Jesus, as a gift for all humanity. Not as a special lifeline for a few, not as a condemning judgment, but as life and light for the whole cosmos. Words fail us, as they do the Gospel writer, in some ways. God is love. Love is what God does. This is not about emotion or "feelings." It is not transactional. It does not require a payment. Love is the logic and the battery of the Kingdom of God. It is in God's nature to love, and we see this most clearly in Jesus. Eventually,

the word “love” seems too small and the Gospel writer starts to use the word light, as he had earlier in the story. “The light, which enlightens everyone, has come into the world.”

In our book discussion on John Phillip Newell’s book, The Rebirthing of God, we have been talking about light recently. Newell talks about light in both mystical and scientific ways, “as the light that burst the universe into being at the beginning of time, and that still pulsates at the heart of everything that has been created.” He quotes the poet Mary Oliver, who wrote:

Yet under

reason burns a brighter fire,...

It is the story of endless good fortune.

It says to oblivion: not me!

It is the light at the center of every cell.

I like to think that divine light and love are part of us at a cellular level, ready to turn and respond to our Source. I like to think that, before anything else, before the issues of belief and unbelief, before all the sad divisions between people of faith and good will, before all else there is this immense love of God for the entire created order, this light 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.” It is more like focusing a light to get clarity. The word that John uses for judgment is related to the same word root as “crisis.” The “judgment” he talks about is not punishment but simply the crisis that confronts us all as we either love or fear the light. It is not judgment as punishment, but judgment as crisis, as opportunity, as potential change. It also has the same word root as “criticism.” Criticism can be negative or judgmental, but it also implies a careful look at something, an informed, clear, well-lit examination. 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.

You see how hard it is for me to avoid being wordy here, even though these possibilities are beyond words. ☺

As I see the verbal 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. But the nature of love is not to be coercive either. 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.

Speaking of words, I have been reading a book by the wordsmith and poet Christian Wiman. After writing about his struggles with illness and faith, with human love and human limitations, he says, “To experience grace is one thing; to integrate it into your life is quite another.” I have been thinking about this: moving beyond experience to integration. And it occurs to me that this is one of the tasks of the church. We can’t hand out grace here – God does that, in a million ways, mostly outside these doors. But here we come and sit – new members and old members and friends – we sit and listen and pray and sing. This is our liturgy – a **word**, by the way, that means “the work of the people.” The work of the people is to claim the many experiences of grace that are brought together

in this sanctuary so that they can be integrated into faithful living. This purposeful kind of gathering has been going on since the time of the Psalmist, whose pilgrim people repeat the refrain, “Then they cried to the Lord in their trouble, and he saved them from their distress.” It has been going on since the time of the Ephesians, who claimed, “For we are what God has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared to be our way of life.”

A community that encourages us to name and claim the ways we have been touched by grace – this is a community fueled by that divine battery of love, that divine logic of love. We are not satisfied with personal benefits, personal salvation, personal wealth or personal well-being. Those concerns are much too small for the light that burst the universe into being and that still illuminates the center of each cell. And that leads me to one last word discussion: that phrase “eternal life,” or literally, “life of the aeon.” Often this has been translated “everlasting life,” implying some sort of chronological framework, and with it a certain vision of post-death reward and punishment. Once again, this seems too small to me. Eternal life (and the Kingdom of God), are ways of describing life we can have right now. A fuller, broader, deeper, more illuminated, more compassionate life. As Emily Dickenson would say, “Forever – is composed of Nows.”

I hope that our Scripture readings today will open us up, broaden our horizons. What we are being offered is too big for a sound-bite, or a bumper sticker, or a single. It is Amazing Grace. It is Wondrous Love. It is the gift of God and the work of the people. It is the light at the center of each cell, the warmth of God’s embrace. Amen.