

Love and Light
John 3:14-21
March 11, 2018 – Fourth Sunday in Lent

Today's lectionary reading contains the most popular scripture verse in all of Christendom: John 3:16 – "God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life." It's a verse that's been translated into more languages than any other statement, secular or sacred. It's a verse that's held up on signs at football games. And, indeed it is hugely important. There is rarely a sermon that I preach that I don't speak of God's amazing love for God's people; and I have repeatedly told you that's the whole story of the Bible. God loves us, God's people; and God wants to be in relationship with us; and God sent Jesus into the world to further that relationship. In the person of Jesus, God came to earth, took on human form, and walked with us that we might walk closer with God.

But the verses that immediately follow John 3:16 are also hugely important. "God sent not his Son into the world to condemn the world." Well it happened again. I was reading that verse in the new Common English Bible translation, and I read, "God didn't sent his Son into the world to judge the world." "Judge" – "Condemn," that's not exactly the same thing. So, of course, I went scurrying to my Greek text; and, yes, the Greek word is a legal term; but "judge" is probably a more accurate translation; and I like that. Jesus did not come as a judge, but as a loving savior.

The Great Evangelist Billy Graham died a few weeks ago at the age of 99. Now I admit that I had a bit of a love/hate relationship with Billy Graham. I do not agree with all of his conservative Southern Baptist theology; but I certainly do agree with his portrayal of God. In fact, I have come to learn that, when Billy Graham entered the preaching circuit as a young man, he was unique among evangelists. Other preachers were preaching about a vengeful, judgmental God. You can almost hear them shouting: "You better straighten up, you better get your act together or you are going straight to hell." But Billy Graham preached about a loving, accepting, forgiving, merciful God. "God sent not his Son into the world to judge the world, but that the world might be saved through him."

Of course, my judgment-preaching, Bible-pounding counterparts will point out the next verses - "You've got to believe," they will say. "If you don't believe, you've already been judged and you're going straight to hell." Now, I've said before that I have a problem with the concept of a loving, merciful God condemning anyone to eternal torture in hell.

And so, I look to the next verses where again we have the light vs. darkness paradigm. Remember the beginning of John's Gospel: "What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it."(John 1:4-6) And here, in the third

chapter, we're told how evil, wicked people hide in the darkness, while good people bask in the light.

I love the light vs. darkness metaphor. Jesus said, "I am the light of the world," and you and I are called to bask in that light, to live in the light. In fact, I can take this metaphor one step further, because in Matthew's Gospel, in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus tells his followers: "You are the light of the world." So, not only are we called to live in the light of Christ, we are called to *be* the light of Christ, spreading the light, the warmth, and the love of Christ to everyone we meet wherever we go. I like to speak of radiating the love of Christ. I like to think of the love of Christ literally pouring off of us, as we live the Good News of God's Amazing Love.

Now, not every person is a "church goer." Not every person is what we might call "a believer." And still, I tell you that I know non-believers that live in the light. I know non-believers that are hugely loving, caring people, and I fully believe that Jesus loves those folks. Don't hear me saying that I don't think belief in the risen Christ is important. I think non-believers have something missing, something vital to provide meaning to life. I believe a strong faith is essential for a truly healthy life. And, so I work to bring non-believers to a personal knowledge of the living God; and personally, I believe the best way to experience the love of God is through a relationship with the risen Christ. Still, I've said before and I say again, Jesus was more concerned with a way of life than he was with Christological dogma.

That having been said, we all know there are those folks who "hide in the darkness," those who are truly evil, wicked, those who almost seem to be possessed by the devil, living on "the dark side." And I believe Jesus loves them as well. I have a friend whose son was sentenced to several years in prison for doing some truly awful things. His mother will never understand what possessed her son, why he did the things he did. But, you know what? That mother still loves her son as much as any parent could love a child.

So, yes, I believe God loves those who are hiding in the darkness. In fact, I believe that part of the reason God sent his Son into the world was to try and bring those who were hiding in the darkness into the light; and sometimes that works, and sometimes it doesn't. But I also believe that Jesus never stops trying. "God sent not his Son into the world to judge the world, but that the world might be saved through him."

So where does this all leave us? Elsewhere in the scriptures we are told, "Judge not that ye be not judged," but oh how judgmental we can sometime be. It's easy for us to be judgmental, and I include myself among that number. I am sometimes very judgmental, especially when I feel that those in leadership positions are not acting in accord with the Gospel of Jesus Christ; and I will not stop criticizing those individuals. If they are representing me, they better be acting according to the Gospel, or they will get my criticism, I might even say my judgment.

That having been said, we might all do well, myself included, to walk a few more miles in their moccasins. We might do well to understand the forces and the experiences that formed them. I suggest that through that understanding we might better shine Christ's light on them. Through that understanding we might better bring them out of the darkness into the true light of the world.

Finally, as I speak of those nasty, evil, wicked people living in darkness, we should recognize that each of us spends at least a little time in the darkness ourselves. Each of us has a dark side, that jealous side, that selfish side. So it is that each of us is called to confess our sins on a regular basis; and, each of us is call to repent, to turn from our sinful nature into the light of Christ. And that's what Lent is all about. Lent is a time to reflect, confess our dark side, and to repent, to turn to the light and to enter an ever closer relationship with the living Christ, as we seek to always walk in the light of his way.

Christ came into the world, not to judge the world, but that the world might be saved through him. God so loved the world that he gave his only Son. Praise God for the saving grace of our savior. Praise God for God's amazing love. Let us bask in the light of God's love. May that light shine in our lives this day and forever more.

Let us pray. . .

Holy Lord,

May we truly bask in the light of your amazing love.

May your light shine in us and through us,

that we might radiate that love to all whom we meet.

And as we shine forth, may your light truly envelope the entire world.

that the world might truly be saved through you.

Amen.

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