

God Loves Us All
John 3:14-21
Colebrook Congregational Church
March 15, 2015

Our Gospel scripture this week comes from the middle of a discussion between Jesus and a Jewish man named Nicodemus, who is believed to be a member of the ruling Sanhedrin, which then transitions into either Jesus or John the Evangelist speaking to us. The issue here is that with many ancient languages, there is no punctuation, nor spaces between words. Some, like Hebrew, do not even depict the vowels. Looking at a page of ancient text, all you see is a block of text, kinda like a wordsearch! So a literate person back then would have to know the entire language to even have a chance of understanding of what was written.

The chapter begins with a discussion with Nicodemus in the first thirteen verses, which followed the usual formula of Jesus' interactions in John's Gospel. A question is asked by someone, and Jesus responds in a way that can be taken both literally and spiritually. The questioner or a disciple responds with a follow-up that shows that they misunderstood Jesus' response, and then Jesus has to correct them, which usually leads into a theological discourse.

What Jesus and Nicodemus talked about was Jesus' authenticity, using the test that God laid out in Deuteronomy: If a prophet or anyone who claimed to speak for God or performed signs in the name of God, and the prophecies come true or the signs conformed to that which we know to be true or consistent with the Law, then that person is authentic.

Then the conversation moved on to salvation, which is where the usual misunderstandings in the Gospel occurs. Our selection this week starts with what some believe to be the end of that conversation with Nicodemus, by quoting the Book of Numbers, which is our Old Testament scripture for today, and then transitioning into a theological discourse. The connection is how the Israelites were saved by looking up to the serpent, and so believers are saved by looking toward Jesus and the Cross.

Here is where it gets tricky. Remember how the text does not have punctuation? Translators and scholars disagree over who is speaking. Some translations, like the King James Version, indicates that Jesus is speaking all the way to the end of verse 21. Others, like the Revised Standard Version, show that Jesus stopped speaking at the end of verse 15, reasoning that verses 16-21 are effectively a summary of the John's Gospel message; and which seems like a different person, John the Evangelist, is now commentating. Then there is the New Revised Standard Version, the one in the pews, which effectively avoids the issue by providing open quotes at the beginning of the paragraphs, but no closing ones until the end, with a footnote that authorities disagree as to when Jesus when stopped speaking.

Then comes, perhaps, the most famous Bible verse, thanks in part to people holding signs at sporting events. "For God so loved that world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish, but have eternal life." Martin Luther calls this verse, "the gospel in miniature." This is followed by a verse that I think should be more on our minds as well today. It tells us that the Christ was NOT, NOT, sent to condemn, but save the world...and here the Greek word translated as condemn, κρινειν, also means judge. So it could also say, Christ is not coming to judge us, but to save us.

While the first of the two verses, I believe are eternally applicable, and should be at the forefront of our thinking about God, the second one seems to have been forgotten by some. They are those out in the world who say they are Christian, but are very judgmental. How can someone spread the Good News if they do what Jesus refuses to do? I have wondered how the Gospel message is received by listeners when that second verse is forgotten or ignored. That would be very off-putting to the listeners. Who would want to go and join a place, any place, that is telling you that you are being judged?

Whenever I hear anything about the Westboro Baptist Church, that extended family who picket the funerals of servicepeople, homosexuals, and others they have judged to be sinners, I wonder: How has that approach, signs and platitudes of hate-filled judgment and condemnation of others, how does that

spread the Word of God? How does that make Jesus accessible to others?
How can you expect to attract followers?

I have met many who have driven away or repulsed from their church or Jesus, because they been judged or condemned. Earlier in my ministry, I felt that God was putting me in positions to help show some of these, who have felt ostracized by churches, that this is not what Jesus really represents. My first posting as a Chaplain was at a Boy Scout camp in mid-south Pennsylvania. One of the other staff members was a Wiccan. When I did my first rounds, visiting the different program areas and networking with their directors, I met a young man who was a Wiccan. Once the introductions were over, he told me about all the other chaplains he had met at that camp, about how they judged his choice to be a Wiccan, and condemned him for it, and would then try to convert him. He looked me right in the eye and asked if I intended to try to convert him as well. I responded with, Are YOU going to try to convert me? He was taken aback, like that had never occurred to him, then he started to laugh. We played chess every day, where we debated many ideas, and I also shared with him my faith experiences, how it is based on God's Love, not Judgment, and also my experiences as a Congregationalist, and how the judgment he experienced was not indicative of all the faithful. I never tried to convert him, and so I respected his freedom to follow his chosen belief.

It is hard to spread the message of the Good News, that God loves us all, even with all our rebelliousness and disobedience of God's commandment to love one another, if it is done so using negativity, judgments, and condemnations. God sent Jesus to save us all, not to condemn us. And that should be at the forefront of spreading the Good News and of living our daily lives. Especially at a time of instant communication, where anyone, at anyplace in the world, can be heard worldwide...and negative-based messages seem to spread faster and farther than the positive ones, everyone of us should be mindful of the Good News' message of Love. We should always remember, that at the core of our faith, is that Divine Love, and that God is hugging us with Jesus.

Prayers of the People

[PAUSE]

Through Christ you make us a new creation, O God, for with him we pass from sin to the new life of grace. Accept our prayers in the warm embrace of your compassion, and welcome all people to the festive banquet of your table, where we may rejoice in your love and celebrate the inheritance you have given to us. We thank you for all the blessings in our lives. We remember those who are in need of your blessings, and we pray that they receive them. We pray for the unwell, We pray for our caregivers, We pray for those who put themselves in harm's way for us, and We pray for the lost.

We especially pray for:

We thank you again, and we offer ourselves to be your messengers, to deliver your blessings and Love in any way we are able to, to those we can reach. We offer and pray all this through Jesus Christ, our Savior, Amen.