

**Sermon: June 16, 2019 – Acts 17: 16-21 (and 17-34)
Ralph Connor Memorial United Church, Canmore, AB – Rev Greg Wooley**

Bible teacher Kenneth Osbeck wrote in 1990 that *Jesus Loves me* was “without doubt the song that has been sung more by children than any other hymn...and is still one of the first hymns taught to new converts in other lands.”

As a child of the 1960s, I can attest to that popularity in my growing-up years. So I had a look at the old 1930 United Church Hymnary to check the lyrics that I would have sung in Sunday School (and Kindergarten). What we had then, were quite different from the words we just sung:

Jesus loves me, this I know, for the Bible tells me so;
little ones to him belong, they are weak but he is strong.

Jesus loves me, He who died Heaven's gate to open wide;
he will wash away my sin, let his little child come in.

Jesus loves me, loves me still, though I'm very weak and ill;
from his shining throne on high comes to watch me where I lie.

Jesus loves me, He will stay close beside me all the way:
If I love him, when I die he will take me home on high.

Those lyrics – written in the 1860s and sung by little me in the 1960s, represent quite a different theological perspective than I'd be comfortable with in the year 2019. The words of weakness and the focus on death are jarring for a children's hymn, and the theology isn't a fit, either. I am pleased that the 1996 version we sang this morning had moved along from some of that.

Our words of faith do change over time. Last fall, our cross-border book study engaged a book by Marcus Borg: *Speaking Christian: why Christian Words have lost their Power and how they can be Restored*. Borg's basic premise (p.1) was that “Christian language has become a stumbling block in our time” due to two main factors. First, the tendency, not just amongst Christians and not just when speaking of religion, to bring only a “literal-factual” understanding to language (p.21); Second, the way that “‘heaven and hell’ Christianity” (p.1) has come to dominate the religious landscape in North America.

As we consider becoming an Affirming Congregation, it's really important for us to be clear about where we are coming from on both of these. Do we read treat the Bible as dictated by God, or an expression of humans seeking wisdom for their lives? Is our relationship with God founded in hopes of heaven vs. fears of hell, or something else? And furthermore, does the community OUT THERE know where we are coming from?

Back in the late 1980s and early 1990s, the United Church of Canada was deeply conflicted about gay ordination, which we formally made possible in 1988, and in the midst of that debate came to realize that we'd never really talked to one another about how we interpret scripture, and what authority it has in our lives. In those divisive days we also, sadly, came to learn how hurtful it is when scripture gets turned into a weapon. So over a thousand United Church congregations did a study, which concluded that

“To engage the Bible faithfully is:

- to participate in a discussion of power, justice, and right relationships;
- to engage in a dialogue that is life-affirming;
- to enter into a journey that takes seriously the pain of the world and God's and our response to that pain.” And,

“Engaging the Bible is:

- a dynamic activity where we do not simply engage the text but are engaged by it;
- most faithfully done in community;
- enlightened by the power of the Spirit;
- authoritative when it is experienced as liberating.”

Just look at those key-words: power, justice, right relationships, life-affirming; responsive to the pain of the world; a dynamic communal journey of engagement, enlightened by the Spirit, liberating...all within a participatory process that assumes that interpreting the Bible is about working it out, not just memorizing. Those words from nearly 30 years ago, still come across to me as “progressive” while still holding up the Bible as book that can illuminate our life’s path.

Before I go much further, I need to acknowledge the context in which I see my Ministry with you. While this congregation is very much outward-looking, and generally liberal/progressive in its approach to scripture, I know that the group that gathers here on Sunday has a pretty broad spectrum of belief, from traditional to post-theist. There is no expectation that we’re all going to think the same, which keeps me on my toes in a good way. So please don’t feel targeted if some of this doesn’t fit for you, as I do speak in fairly general terms.

For mainline Churches in general, it is common to embrace the Bible as a collection of books of many styles over many centuries, a collection which describes the very human struggle to discern God’s presence and purpose. Sometimes the Bible does so with beauty and clarity, sometimes with self-aggrandizing boorishness; some parts of it answered the questions of its day perfectly but fit our day very poorly. To treat the Bible with respect, is to bring hard questions to it, just as we should bring critical questions to everything we read. We seek to understand as much as we can about the purpose and audience of the author of a scripture, to understand their context and their hopes and their worries – a process that Marcus Borg called, understanding “their then” in order to know what it might say to “our now.” (p.29) I do take the Bible as sacred text, and believe it has the power to both challenge and strengthen me, but I don’t worship it as being word-for-word, directly-out-of-the-mouth-of-God inerrant, nor do I believe that any of its writers have imagined that it would be taken this way.

There is a vast sea of people out there whose lives would improve immensely, simply by hearing that they are valued: that God loves them, that Christ wants them to be set free from whatever presently puts them down. And yet as soon as the word “Christian” gets attached to a thought, even life-giving proclamations like these ones, it tends to be dismissed as narrow and irrelevant. Some of those folks may have no first-hand experience of the Bible, or Church, while others may have had negative Church experiences 20 or 40 or 60 years ago & figure that nothing will have changed since then. In that environment it’s really hard to even get a hearing for alternative approaches... *and*, really important to keep on trying.

To an extent, the situation Paul faced in Athens was like this. He brought new spiritual ideas and shared them at the synagogue and in the public square, and the initial reactions were not favourable. Some heard his words and said, “what is this ignorant show-off trying to say?” Others said, “he seems to be talking about foreign gods.” (Acts 17: 18, GNB) Even in Athens, where philosophical debate was so popular, it was hard for Paul to break into the discussion. But eventually, there was enough curiosity for him to get a hearing – and a positive reception.

It’s important to let people know that the Church of 2019 isn’t what it was in the 1950s – or at least it doesn’t need to be. We’re open to new people who will bring their own take on things and will push our thoughts and actions, as challenging as that will be. And along with this, Churches who are willing to take this more “progressive” approach need to clearly address Borg’s second point. We need to be clear, amongst ourselves and in relation to the community

around us, that a “heaven and hell” reading of the Bible does not describe our understanding of God’s hopes for our lives.

I admit that I haven’t spoken very explicitly about heaven and hell from the pulpit, because it’s so clearly NOT central to my theology. I don’t believe that the basic state of humanity is that we’re going to hell unless we believe and speak traditional Christian understandings. I can’t imagine that God would set up the majority of the world for failure in such a contrived way. If there is a hell – and *that’s a big if*, given how little it’s even alluded to in scripture– it would be reserved for those who make others’ lives a misery, those who profit by the suffering of others, those who intentionally leave an environmental wasteland for our descendants to clean up, rather than those who have broken some ancient behavioural code.

I simply do not believe that heaven-or-hell is the end game that God has given us, and I don’t believe it’s what Jesus was about, either: Jesus came to break whatever chains diminish life here and now, not to take our attention away from the world’s injustice by dangling before us hopes for an afterlife. (Promising a glorious afterlife while doing nothing to make earthly life more just or livable is how *oppressors* try to keep the masses subjugated, that’s not what God is about.) Jesus came to challenge anyone who disrespects life on this planet to let go of that hurtful, selfish agenda. Jesus pushes us to love courageously, not out of fear of damnation, but out of a desire that ALL people will enjoy life in abundance. Jesus does invite us to an eternal way of being, and that begins here and now as we give ourselves over to love. Life is a holy, beautiful gift, designed to be enjoyed by ALL people, without barriers or boundaries. So as a Church, as we engage in an outward-focused mission, we do so not out of fear of a vengeful God, but out of celebration for the Divine eternal presence which is found amidst love.

So if this heaven-and-hell framework describes “somebody else’s theology,” why even mention it this morning? Fair question. And the answer is, because of something Pam Rucker said last week, at the first meeting of our Chinook Winds Regional Council.

In Pam’s experience, many LGBTQ2 people have told her that the only time they hear themselves referred to by Christians, is by people telling them they are going to hell. How heartbreaking is that!?! With the good news of Jesus Christ at our fingertips, the life-giving affirmations of the One who includes us and loves us and reconciles us to one another, what gets said, and heard, is exclusion and judgement. And while I think of it, Indigenous people in this land and other lands have centuries of similar experiences, as missionaries and conquistadors told them that their traditional beliefs in Creator God will have them on the fast track to damnation unless they turn their hearts over to Jesus.

Pam Rucker’s encouragement to all of us, is to acknowledge that this wounding continues to happen, and for that to motivate us to be explicit in telling people that they are beloved of God; to be clear in our relationship with the LGBTQ2 population and anyone who has felt judged or excluded by Christians, that the person they are, is a holy blessing. And if we see the goal of life as something other than the avoidance of hellfire, we need to make that clear too; and for those of us whose approach to scripture is something other than full-on literalism, that needs to enter the discussion as well. Some thirty years ago, the great Presbyterian preacher William Sloane Coffin Jr. said that he was not nearly so concerned about how the lives of homosexuals square with the 18th chapter of Leviticus (or other “hot texts” about same-sex relations), as he was concerned about the hatred expressed by Christians toward homosexuals, and how *that* squares with Jesus’ law of love. We need to know that scripture is being weaponized against people, and in response to that need to recommit ourselves to be a people enlivened by the expansive love of Christ Jesus.

No matter who walks in the door, no matter who we are talking to out there, our call as a congregation is to ground ourselves in the boundless love of Jesus, and make sure that

EVERYONE knows that this love is for them, too. As we approach the day when we become an Affirming Congregation, we are thoughtful in the words we say and the beliefs we express, not because we are trying to be hip or nice or politically correct. We speak the good news of Jesus Christ, because we believe that ALL people ARE loved by God, and if we can play a role in providing safe space for people to discover where Christ's loving presence can live in their lives, well, why in the world wouldn't we want to do that. Whether or how that gets taken up by people, is for them to decide; what we say and how we are won't be to everyone's tastes, and we need to trust the gracious influence of the Holy Spirit just a little bit, too. One way or another, speaking an inclusive word of love makes our community a better place, whether it makes a visible impact on this congregation or not. Jesus looked at the world around him, and saw hurting people who needed to be loved into fullness, and he did so. That is our task, now.

The way we engage The Word, and the words and actions we choose in response to The Word, will shape so much of our interaction with the community around us. May we find clarity in our efforts to know in our hearts, and convey to our neighbours, that everyone in this world bears the image of God. And may we give thanks to the Holy One, who makes this so. Amen.

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