

Sermon: Sunday, March 10, 2024, Lent IV. John 3: 14-21.

Ralph Connor Memorial United Church, Canmore AB – Rev Greg Wooley

Every time I hear something really mean-spirited has happened to someone, my spirit grieves, and if put into words it goes something like this: every life needs love, dignity and hope, so why is it so hard to live and let live?

Every time I read something divisive that splits the world into camps, assumes that “the other side” is centrally organized around evil intent, and feels justified in treating them like trash, my spirit grieves, and if put into words it goes something like this: every life needs love, dignity and hope, so why is it so hard to live and let live?

Every time I learn about a government, nation or religious grouping making life impossible for the LGBTQ community, especially when the “will of God” gets quoted as if God would endorse what’s been done, my spirit grieves, and if put into words it goes something like this: every life needs love, dignity and hope, so why is it so hard to live and let live?

I know it’s the way of the world these days, but this kind of reckless, arrogant, disrespectful behaviour still catches me off guard. I expect people to be kind, I expect people to “live and let live”, and yet emboldened ugliness seems so present these days. At a time when our best selves are needed more than ever, leaders are pandering to people’s worst selves. There is a thought pattern out there that not only do I have the right to do whatever I want to someone else who is different from me, but that I’m somehow letting down the side if I don’t treat them as enemy. Women and girls, queer folks, people of colour, so many people have to deal with this all the time. And as they do, my spirit grieves, and if put into words it goes something like this: every life needs love, dignity and hope, so why is it so hard to live and let live?

Today’s gospel lesson speaks to this, but it needs some unpacking. Today’s reading is actually the second half of an encounter in which a Pharisee named Nicodemus comes to Jesus by dark of night, afraid to be seen with him, and a conversation ensues about unlearning what we think we know and being born anew from the darkness of the womb into the light of a new day. And if we go back a couple more chapters, to the very beginning of John’s gospel, we have John’s mystical story of the origins of time, with the One who was side-by-side with God in the process of creation emerging in full human form in Jesus Christ. “The true light that gives light to everyone was coming into the world” is how John puts it.

We approach today’s reading, then, from a foundation that calls us to live in the light of Christ who is integrally connected to God’s love of all the world. And with that we read John 3:16 and 17 once more, with all its male pronouns mostly intact “¹⁶ For God so loved the world that [God] gave His only begotten Son, that whosoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life. ¹⁷ For God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world through Him might be saved.”.(NKJV, alt.)

An expanded paraphrase, then, might be something like this: “God, who loves the world – the *whole* world - passionately wants the world to experience life to its very fullest. God wanted this so much that God-in-Christ walked with us in deep, trustworthy, sacrificial love to model for us what it is to live a life only guided by love. God did this, not to judge or condemn, but to save people from any and all ways that are contrary to love; to draw humanity and even the earth out of the shadows, into the open, into the fullness of love’s glorious, endless light.”

If John 3:16 means something like this – and if anything, I think my paraphrase undersells the big, gorgeous, inclusive hopes that God intends, now and forever – then I am even more certain that the patterns of division and specifically targeted hatred that are so popular in our world, are completely opposed to the will and character of a loving God. And I wonder, yet again: since we know that every life needs love, dignity and hope, and we believe that God’s love transcends any limiting factor we could try to place on it, why is it so hard to live and let live?

The late author, teacher and pastor Sharron Blezard, addressing the way that these words from the 3rd chapter of John are often read as a blanket endorsement of a form of faith that sets good, believing Christians in opposition to lesser beings, wrote “We convince ourselves that Jesus came because God loves us and other people like us. Everything is fine and dandy as long as our notions of who is worthy of God’s love aren’t challenged too much. But here’s the thing: John 3:17 does challenge us because we learn that God doesn’t want anyone to be destroyed, that all of creation is worthy of salvation”. All of humanity. All of creation. And Theologian Alicia Vargas recalls a story from the early 1900s, which speaks to the transformative power which these words from John 3:16 have spoken into contexts filled with hatred. She writes, “Black leader Mary MacLeod Bethune (1875–1955) grew up as a young girl in the Jim Crow South ... [and in adult life was] educator, activist, and presidential advisor [to Franklin Delano Roosevelt]. About John 3:16, Mary MacLeod Bethune wrote ‘With these words the scales fell from my eyes and the light came flooding in. My sense of inferiority, my fear of handicaps, dropped away. “Whosoever,” it said. No Jew nor Gentile, no Catholic nor Protestant, no black nor white; just “whosoever.” It means that I, a humble Negro girl, had just as much chance as anybody in the sight and love of God. These words stored up a battery of faith and confidence and determination in my heart, which has not failed me to this day.”

The words shared by these women confirm to me that the message at the heart of John 3:16 is the precise antidote to mean-spiritedness, to exclusion and prejudice and persecution, to divisiveness. Rather than further defining the boxes we are to stay in, and locking us into an “old-time religion” motif, this beloved scripture opens us to the core agenda of the God of all creation: an inclination to open, dignity-affirming, life-giving love.

Throughout this season of Lent, my hope has been to build familiarity – for myself, as well as this Community of Faith - with the call of the United Church of Canada, unveiled

in 2022. This calling has three aspects, deep spirituality, bold discipleship and daring justice, and by spending time with each aspect of this calling, week after week, it has come so clear to me that being bold in following Jesus, and daring in engaging issues of social justice are almost inseparable. Furthermore, that bold discipleship, characterized by its daring justice, rests on the promises of these great words from the third chapter of John. We dare to engage injustice, because Jesus did. We are bold in our discipleship, because the restoring, saving light that God shines in and through Jesus is so starkly different to the brokenness of hatred, that it's virtually impossible to actually trust and follow Jesus without being blatant about it. Even for those of us who do not consider ourselves bold or daring, the simple act of choosing love in the face of hatred, the companionship of standing with someone targeted by opinion or policy so that they might live in the full light of dignity, is way more bold and daring than we think.

As disciples of Jesus, trusting that his words and ways lead us into the light of an expansive, inclusive, amazing love which is for ALL God's children, let us celebrate the breadth of Divine love. Let us open ourselves to this light, living with openness and joy and with a commitment that such joy is to be the norm for all. May we allow God's love to heal us, strengthen us, renew us, as those who proclaim by our lives the holy love embodied in Jesus. Amen.

References cited:

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