

Lent 4B 2021 Sermon

March 14, 2021

John 3:14-21

Jesus said, “Just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.

“For 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.

“Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him. Those who believe in him are not condemned; but those who do not believe are condemned already, because they have not believed in the name of the only Son of God. And this is the judgment, that the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil. For all who do evil hate the light and do not come to the light, so that their deeds may not be exposed. But those who do what is true come to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that their deeds have been done in God.”

This past Thursday, March 11, we observed the one-year anniversary of the pronouncement, by the World Health Organization, that the novel coronavirus was, officially, a global pandemic. We have read or heard a lot of commentary in the past several days about the 1-Year Anniversary of the pandemic. And I have been pondering about how our perspective, the way we see things, has changed over this past year.

In the first month or so of the pandemic, there was a widespread sense of camaraderie and mutual support. People would stand outside hospitals at shift changes and clap, in support of those front-line health care workers who were risking their lives caring for people critically ill with COVID-19. Large corporations such as Walmart, Kroger, and other companies temporarily offered increased pay to their employees who were exposed to the public, day in, day out. We came to appreciate these “essential workers” – people doing necessary and indispensable jobs that we never paid much attention to before. Many of *us* had the luxury of being able to work from home; **they** did not.

People sewed masks and donated them to people who had none. They volunteered to run errands for those who could not leave their house. Donations to food banks increased. Yale University offered its most popular course, a course on Happiness, free, online, recognizing that the pandemic brought psychological and emotional, as well as physical, dangers.

Cellist Yo-Yo Ma established a movement called “Sounds of Comfort,” with the purpose of having musicians, like himself, offer their music online as a free gift to a hurting world, and a reminder that each of us has *something* to offer the world.¹ A “virtual” Hallelujah Chorus was performed by musicians around the world, in

recognition of our shared common life on this planet, our shared suffering, our shared hope.²

Actor John Krasinski, star of the NBC Television show, “The Office,” launched an online evening news show which he called “Some Good News.” Recording from his home, he related uplifting stories of people around the world expressing gratitude or giving of themselves sacrificially for others.³

Now let me ask you: How did you feel after watching that short video clip? Did it make you feel a warmth, an energy, a sense of loving community, a sense of hope? That’s what it did for me. When we can connect with one another in our common humanity, we enter into the flow of God’s Spirit, divine Life; and it uplifts us! It’s what we will say at the beginning of worship with our Bishop next week: “There is one Body and one Spirit; There is one hope in God’s call to us; One Lord, one Faith, one Baptism; One God and Father of all.”⁴ The words of a popular folk hymn come to mind: “We are one in the Spirit, we are one in the Lord...” Just singing that hymn causes a warm energy to flow through my body, mind, and soul, giving me a sense of peace and belonging.

But somehow, over the course of the year, our perspective seems to have changed – at least, I have noticed that my perspective has. Rather than seeing the world largely through the lens of our common humanity and our common suffering, we seem to be seeing the world more through lenses which focus on our differences: our differences in our politics, to be sure; but also our differences in the degree to which we trust or distrust our scientists; differences in how we perceive wearing masks and social distancing and gathering together at this time of pandemic. In far too many instances, I’m afraid, this has resulted in an emotional *distancing* from one another, even from people we have known and loved our whole lives. This is in stark contrast to the coming together which we experienced one year ago.

My friends, rather than seeing one another through eyes of openness and generosity and oneness and love, we tend to see one another through eyes of judgment. At least, I know I do. It is my first, unconscious reaction to any situation. Is this good, or is this bad? Is she one of *us*, or one of *them*? Rather than John Krazinski’s scenes of people clapping for health workers or YoYo Ma’s Songs of Comfort, we have scenes of a passenger in an Uber car refusing to wear a mask, purposefully coughing in the face of the Uber driver and ripping off **his** mask.⁵ If you saw that video clip on the news, how did **it** make you feel? For me, it elicited a different kind of energy inside: not a warm, supportive energy, but an oppositional energy. It is a kind of energy which doesn’t *connect*; it **divides**.

In today’s Gospel, Jesus says, “God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.”

Now, an equally valid translation of the original Greek text is, “God did not send the Son into the world to judge the world, but in order that the world might be healed through him.”

Why does almost every English Bible translation use the first way of translating this verse – the one that chooses the words “condemnation” and “salvation?” I have a suspicion that it is because dualistic thinking in most of Western human society is part of our mother’s milk. It’s the way the ego functions. Richard Rohr notes, “If we’re honest, culture forms us much more than the Gospel. Up to now, Christianity has largely *mirrored* culture instead of *transforming* it. Reward/punishment, good guys versus bad guys... This is the only way that a dualistic mind, unrenewed by prayer and grace, can perceive reality.”⁶ Within this mindset, you are either saved or condemned.

David Lose notes that “Jesus urges his disciples – then and now – to look at those around us differently than the culture does.”⁷ If we want to be followers of Jesus, we need to face the fact that Jesus did not come to judge, but to heal; and we must do the same.

It is a very difficult task – leading with openness, with “Yes” instead of “No;” because judging **is** the way the *ego* functions, **and** the way our *culture* functions. To be able to perceive a person, or group of people, openly and generously, without any pre-judgment, filters, or commentaries, is hard. Jesus says so himself, when he states, “. . . it is a narrow gate and a hard road that leads to life, and only a few find it.” (Matthew 7:14, NJB)

“The ego doesn’t trust this [non-judgmental] way of seeing,” writes Richard Rohr, “which is why it is so rare... The only way we can [come to this way of seeing the world] is by recognizing... our practiced ways of judging, critiquing, blocking, filtering, and computing everything. [We]... have to catch ourselves in the act and recognize how habitual our egoic, dualistic thinking is. Each person must do this homework for themselves. It cannot be achieved by reading someone else’s conclusions.”⁸

One way I have found helpful in catching myself thinking or judging dualistically is by intentionally noticing the **energies** inside myself. Are they freeing, encouraging, and unifying energies, such as so many of us felt last Spring when we discerned that we were all in this pandemic together, and we acted gratefully and sacrificially for the benefit of other people? Or are the energies I find within myself oppositional energies, which raise my level of adrenalin and lead me to want to criticize, confront, resist, verbally attack, or condemn?

Besides discerning the kind of *energies* that are active within myself, another way I have found helpful to get past the judgmentalism of my ego and culture is to remind myself that each person or group of persons I meet is doing the best they know how, as am I. It’s true of all of us, as Richard Rohr (and others) said: We

don't see things as they are; we see things as we are.⁹ That's why we see things so differently.

Finally, I have found it helpful to remind myself that there is so much I don't know; so much I see through a distorted lens; so much I have gotten wrong in my life, and am probably getting wrong right now. Not a one of us is completely whole; each of us is, in some way, broken or unwell. We don't need someone to judge or condemn us; we need someone to heal us, to make us whole.

And we have that someone. "For God did not send the Son into the world to judge the world, but in order that the world might be healed through him." The Divine Physician came to make us whole. Let us do the same for one another.
AMEN

1 <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/show/yo-yo-ma-on-encouraging-songs-of-comfort-amid-global-crisis>

2 <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/church/news/virtual-hallelujah-chorus-combines-mormon-tabernacle-choir-and-2500-video-submitters?lang=eng>

3 https://youtu.be/F5pgG1M_h_U

4 *Book of Common Prayer*, p. 413

5 <https://www.cnn.com/2021/03/12/business/uber-driver-mask-dispute-california-trnd/index.html>

6 <https://cac.org/an-economy-of-grace-2017-05-23/>

7 <http://www.davidlose.net/2017/01/epiphany-4a-recognizing-blessing/>

8 <https://cac.org/doing-the-homework-2019-10-13/>

9 <https://cac.org/confirmation-bias-2021-03-02/> See also how this idea has cropped up in the Talmud and in the writings of many others, here: <https://quoteinvestigator.com/2014/03/09/as-we-are/>