

“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.” (John 3: 14-21)

John 3:16 – even if you are one of those people who struggle to memorize scripture or can memorize verses but not always remember where in the Bible they are located, you probably can all recite John 3:16 AND you can tell someone where to find it in the Bible. *For God so loved the world...* we see it on t-shirts, coffee mugs, road signs and protest signs. I would venture to guess that even people who do not consider themselves “religious” find these verses familiar. So this should be an easy message for a Lay person to write and deliver, right?

Not so much! Our Lenten journey calls us to take a deeper dive into the meaning of these 7 verses from the book of John – and maybe to challenge our understanding of how these verses have been used in harmful ways as well as finding new marching orders from God.

The beginning verses of Chapter 3 find Jesus talking with a pharisee named Nicodemus. Nicodemus starts with a brave statement for a member of the Jewish ruling council – Jesus must have come from God since no one could perform the miracle Jesus was performing unless God was with Him. Jesus then tells Nicodemus that “no one can see the kingdom of God unless they are born again”. There is then back and forth discussion between Nicodemus and Jesus about “being born” a second time. Then come the famous words: *For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.* These verses in the third chapter of John are part of the concept of being a Born Again Christian. This term has a long and complicated history and I will not pretend to be able to understand or explain all of it – but here are a few of the ideasXXXXXXXXXX

We are saved as soon as we say we believe that Jesus is God’s Son....and that is a true statement. But that can lead to the question: What if a person cannot speak? Do the words need to be spoken out

loud? Or can they be “said” in our heads? What about people who never achieve an adult mentality? If someone only functions at a three year old level their entire lives, can they really understand the words they may be able to mimic? Can they experience salvation?

Does our proclamation of faith have to be public experience? A one time only experience? Are specific words a requirement? Does a true proclamation of faith need to represent a 180 degree turn around in our life? I grew up going to church or Sunday School almost every week. I sang in the children’s choir and the youth choir, I participated in youth group and I helped, then taught, VBS and Sunday School. Through my childhood and youth, I never really had that earth shattering aha moment of sudden realization. I had an understanding that Jesus died for our forgiveness and that believing in Him meant I would go to heaven. This understanding deepened and became less theoretical and more personal as I matured. Then I went away to a tiny college in Pittsburgh that was at the end of a row of college in the area. It was a Catholic college and I worked in the office of Ministry. This is not a bash the Catholics part of the sermon, just an observation on the experiences of a few young women I met there. Part of my job was to facilitate the weekly fellowship meetings. There were just a few women who attended and our small group was part of a large group of fellowship that was held in a nearby Presbyterian church. Several of these women experienced an epiphany that their experience of the

Catholic churches guidelines and rules were not the path to salvation. They became convicted of their sin and confessed their belief in Jesus Christ as God's Son and they experienced a great inner peace. While I could understand how suddenly becoming aware, on a personal level, that Jesus died for their forgiveness and the changes that made in their lives – several of them had a tough time understanding how I didn't feel the need for that great transformational experience. For a few years after the one year a spent in Pittsburgh, I found myself worrying that maybe I wasn't "Christian enough" because my experience was different from theirs. See, they had no real experience with someone who had grown up knowing the path to salvation and I have no real experience with people whose awareness of sin and salvation was a sudden, transforming experience. Is one right and the other wrong?

Let's look a few verses later: *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.* Human interpretation of these verses can lead to a lot of judgement. I have to believe that Jesus meant something like *those who do not believe at the time of their death*, because a loving God will give His children to their very last second of life to believe and to receive salvation. But that has not stopped conflict about how we believe or how we interact with those who do not yet believe. While we are moving past the idea that there is one "right" denomination, one "right" way to pray or worship,

human history is full of conflict and violence supported by “faith”. Today, we are seeing an increase in anti-Semitic speech and behavior by some “Christians” who read verses like this to mean that all Jewish people are condemned by God, and if they are condemned by God, they should be condemned by Christians. Or that if other Christians do not teach the “proper” method of being born again, they are still condemned by God. Or that self identified Christians are not truly Christian because they don’t do enough good works, they don’t love the same way we do, they don’t support the “right” political party, they still sin or they don’t use the “right” words in worship. Or that nonbelievers must be convinced of their sin and the corresponding condemnation that will be a result of their sin. There is a dangerous amount of judgement that can occur if we aren’t careful.

If we focus on these seven verses as a whole, not just pieces, our focus should not be on the “those who believe are not condemned but those who do not believe are condemned...” part but on the sentence before that. *“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.* The generations that have focused on condemning those who are not saved, or not saved the “right way” forgot that Jesus was not sent to condemn the world! He came to provide salvation – not through following the laws, not through good acts and not through the “right” words or the

“right” voting record. Jesus came to offer us salvation, forgiveness of the sins that the laws were trying to prevent, that **litmus tests were trying to show we overcame**. Not all people will come to believe on the same time table – some of us understood salvation as small children (as a child can understand it) and some of us received our salvation far into adulthood, some may not receive it until near the end of life but we all receive the same salvation. Not all people will experience the same changes in our lives – some of us were living lives full of huge, visible sin and had to make massive changes in our lives but others of us were living life full of more hidden sins that required times of learning and self reflection to change. Not all people pursued knowledge of Jesus the same way – some of us took a deep dive into the Bible after our salvation and other choose to find worship and fellowship communities in which to learn. Jesus came to offer us a forgiveness, a salvation, based solely on believing in Him and human kind has struggled to agree what we should do after that salvation.

Let’s look at the last few verses: *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.* People who are sinners (all of us,

right) prefer the darkness so that our sins are not seen. Sinners (all of us) do not want to have a light shining on our actions. So this light, is it only Jesus? The Light was here but now is no longer on the earth, to shine on good? I don't think so, John says "the light has come into the world" and that implies that it is still here, right? Where? It is here, and there, and there. It is everywhere that there is a believer of Jesus Christ. When we asked for forgiveness, how ever we asked, how ever many times we asked, the Light of Jesus became part of us. When we proclaimed Jesus as God's Son, as our Savior, how ever we said it, wherever we said it, the Light of Jesus became a part of us. Each time we catch ourselves sinning, stop and ask forgiveness, the Light of Jesus shines from us. When we live our lives, out there in the world, as saved and forgiven people, the Light of Jesus shines through us. When we accept people, just as they are, as children of God, the Light of Jesus shines through us. When we love those who look different than we do – family structure, dress, skin color or language spoken the Light of Jesus shine out into the world. When we meet people and we don't stop to look for their sin but only see them as children of God the Light of Jesus cast a warm light that will draw others in.

I personally do not believe that we win hearts for Jesus by hammering people with all the mistakes they have made, all the sin we believe they are committing and what eternal condemnation might look like. Hellfire

and brimstone sermons may work to convict people, but I have a hard time understanding how. Presenting God as vengeful and angry scares people away. Our anger when we address what we perceive as the sin of another person only creates more anger and division. It seems to me that pointing out the things that people are doing wrong will drive them into the darkness to hide. But light, that is a powerful ??????. When we go out into the world and light it up with acceptance, support, understanding and love we will find people drawn to that light in us. What does that light look like? It can be a smile and a cheerful “hello” to a person we might have previously given the side eye to. It can be listening to someone’s problems without pointing out how their choices have led to their situation, but instead ask how we can help. It can be seeing people in need and provide support without judging how they found themselves in need. It can be an listening to an opposing idea without trying to convince them they are wrong.

“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. That the world might be saved through Him. But He isn’t physically here, in human form, to interact with the world. We are! His light was left with us, all of us who believe, in order to be His physical form here on earth. I stopped

worrying that I wasn't "Christian enough" when a person I worked with, who had left church because it was judgmental, asked me why my faith seemed different from his experiences. I hadn't tried to talk him about Jesus or his faith, I thought I was just being myself. But, in hindsight, I was being myself while allowing the Light of Jesus to shine. He saw a difference from actions and attitudes, not words. I don't say that to toot my own horn and I am sure that you could find people I have interacted with since then that did not see His Light in me! We all need a faith reset from time to time. And isn't Lent a great time to stop and see where we need to reset? Are you lighting up your corner of the world with the Light of Jesus? Can people see Him in your actions and words? Has your experience of salvation led to judging others or to lighting up other? This Lent, lets reclaim John 3:16 and 17, 18, 19 as not only how we received our salvation but how we shared that salvation and the Light of Jesus with the world around us.

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.” (John 3: 14-21)