

“BIBLICAL GROWN-UPS”
Numbers 21:4-9; Psalm 107; John 3:14-21
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For God so loved the world that God gave the only begotten Son so that everyone who believes in him might not perish, but have everlasting life.” It should be good news for us. What a wonderful gift the gospel writer gives to us with these words. God so loved the world that God was willing to sacrifice God’s own son, for us, for our life, so that we might know how much we are valued and cherished by God.

But how many of us really feel good when these words are spoken? Most liberal Protestants I know inwardly cringe when this part of John’s gospel is read in church, or more often when they see the citation, “John 3:16” held up on placards at sporting events, or at rallies and demonstrations where groups of Christians are protesting supposedly un-Christian behavior. I remember when OSU was sponsoring the “God at 2000” conference here and outside of the LaSells Stewart center, the knots of protestors stood, aggressively pointing their John 3:16 signs heavenward. It seems that more often than not, when we hear these words, see this citation, it’s not in the context of good news, but bad. The point that is being made is that God so loved the world that God gave the only son so that all who don’t believe in him might be eternally separated from God, which, in my mind at least, in no way could be termed good news. I don’t believe in that interpretation of the text. I’m assuming you already know that. In fact, I hope that if there’s one thing you know about me theologically after all my years here, it is that I am not a Christian exclusivist. And yet, we have these bits of scripture, many of them in the gospel of John, that have been used by factions of the Christian community for centuries to dismiss, belittle, terrorize, or convert those of other religious traditions. How do we deal with these texts faithfully? It’s an important question for me because too often I find that many liberal Protestants take a very black and white, uncomplicated view of these passages. Either they’re true and we’ve just condemned at least 80% of the world’s inhabitants to eternal perdition, or they’re not true and should be dismissed out of hand.

But it’s not as simple as that. The Bible is not as simple as that. We who want to be biblically literate and understand the gifts the Bible has to give us need to be more discerning. We need to learn to read the Bible using every tool we know as grown-ups about nuance and subtlety, tone and audience. The biggest mistake I think we make, most of us, when we read scripture is to read it flat, without inflection or affect. If this is holy scripture, well then we think that every word needs to be read in our best stained glass window voice and taken entirely at face value without looking behind the words to the context, the motivation, the intent of the writer. Remember that the writers of these ancient texts had no idea, as they were writing, that their words would survive for centuries, for millennia, to be taken as holy scripture in a world they would not even recognize. If we would understand the Bible then, as much as possible, we need to enter into the world of the writers, understand their lives, their faith structure, their rhetoric and motivations.

That’s the end of your pastoral lecture for the day. Back to the gospel of John in general, and today’s text in particular. The gospel of John was written at the end of the first century or beginning of the second, at a time when Christianity was parting ways with Judaism. Up till this point, the Christians were seen as one

of the many Jewish sects; but over time, as the gentile church grew, and as Christian theology developed, it became clear that a separation had to occur. It was a painful moment when people had to choose sides. John's gospel was written by a Jew for his fellow Jews, trying to convince them in what felt to John to be a last-ditch attempt that Christianity was the right side to take in Judaism. So this was his audience, his religious family, and in the all-out way of family debate across time, he was trying to make his point with heat, vigor, even hyperbole, overstatement. Surely you've been part of a family discussion like this.

Or to use a different contextual image, think about how we do elections in this country. In the primaries, Democrats go after other Democrats and Republicans after Republicans at a level of rhetorical heat that makes you think they hate each other; and then the primary is over, and all these former enemies get together and make nice while they take on the real enemy!

We understand this, just like we understand family differences. Though the volume may be turned up high in the moment, what we are watching is, in essence, an internal dialogue not intended for an outside audience; and though we may smirk or shake our heads a bit when families kiss and make up or the rhetoric of electioneering turns from primary to general, we take in stride these complex, multi-leveled forms of communication.

One more example, then I'll quit. As most of you know, my daughter Sarah is engaged to be married. Earlier this week I got a text message from her: "Brian is the most perfect, wonderful man in the world." This is not an empirical statement of fact. It's a belief statement, a commitment statement, a declaration of love, and when you hear it or I hear it, we immediately translate to that context. The point I'm trying to make is that we differentially assess and value speech continually in our lives. We need to turn those same skills to our reading of the Bible.

So think about the author of John. He is a thorough-going Christian. He has found new life in Jesus Christ. He has found the essence of God's love in Christ's sacrificial love. There is nothing more real, more true, more important to him. And he wants the rest of his family to agree with him, to validate him, to find what he has found. He's not afraid to turn up the volume, to inflate his rhetoric to make his point. "For God so loved the world that God gave the only Begotten son." "I am the way, the truth, and the life." "No one comes to the Father except through me." John's entire gospel is a love song to his Redeemer, filled with the zeal of one who has seen the Word made flesh and been utterly changed by it, and who wants all the world to share in his joy. And if we accept John's words for what they are, written for this reason at this time, not as a general dictum for all people for all time, then we can muse on the beauty of John's words for us rather than being terrified or offended by them for others. God so loved the world that God gave God's own son for us. For us. Who wouldn't want to share the discovery of such a love? Who wouldn't want others to find that joy?

And the scary language about those who don't agree: well think of it in the context of Barack Obama berating Hilary Clinton one month as an incompetent and making her Secretary of State five months later. Or your favorite Uncle Fred who has found a new life with his macrobiotic diet and insists that you are killing yourself if you don't join him. It's grown-up talk, requiring of us that we understand the complexities of different kinds and levels of communication.

For every seemingly exclusivist text of the Bible, I could quote back to you alternate texts that speak to the wideness of God's love for all the earth, for all people, for believer and unbeliever alike. But that's not the point here. Our faith life is not best lived by hurling proof texts at each other like weapons, another level of insider squabbling. Instead, I would hope that we, for ourselves, can come to love and value our scripture on its terms, not our own, to take a text like this from John and hear in it awe and wonder, the deep fervor of significant belief. To we who are of the family of faith, John is reminding us of the inestimable gift we have been given by God in Christ. And it's good to be reminded of that gift, to remember again the deep riches of our tradition for us. For us.

And as for those who believe otherwise, we know that the God who comes to us in Jesus Christ is a God vast and knowable to us only in part. The scriptures of our own tradition affirm that. But I would close with a story from another faith tradition. In Hinduism, there is a sacred story told about Lord Krishna, one of the primary manifestations of the divine in that tradition. Krishna was out walking one afternoon, and beheld a large group of milkmaids working. Seeing that they had a hard life and wanting to do something kind for them, he invited them all to a dance. The evening came; the milkmaids assembled; and through an act of divine power, miraculously Krishna was able to multiply himself so that all the milkmaids might dance with him at once. It was lovely, until some of the milkmaids became possessive of Krishna's presence, and as they tried to keep him only to themselves, he vanished.

It's a charming story, and a deeply theological one. Perhaps we can learn something from our Hindu friends. The divine presence among us can be welcomed, embraced, danced with, sought, loved beyond measure; but when we try to bind it only to ourselves, it will elude us; it will recede rather than come closer. So let us live out our faith, dance with God in love, confidence, and devotion, knowing the Almighty is capable both of loving us entirely and dancing many dances. Thanks be to God. Amen.