

"Not To Condemn" - John 3:14-21

I'm beginning this message with an example involving my wife Elizabeth and I think I'm safe since she's at her own church. This example relates to the way she comes into the living room while I'm engaged in that most ancient of male pursuits – channel surfing, moving from one TV channel to the next, staying at most 10 seconds on any one channel – 3 seconds max if the scene involves passionate silent eye-gazing. The problem is not that she comes in but rather that she shows immediate interest in whatever random channel I happen to be passing by, and starts asking me questions about the plot. Now apparently "I have no idea" is not an acceptable answer, and so I get trapped in that particular program until she moves on to her next activity, thus releasing me from the channel I never had any real intention of watching.

I thought of this example because our reading from John's gospel is a lot like that situation. We have dropped into and have begun to eavesdrop upon the middle of a conversation – a dialogue between Jesus and Nicodemus. You may remember how it started, with Jesus talking about being born from above and Nicodemus asking about how is it possible to be literally and physically born again, and Jesus becoming frustrated that people are missing the point. Jesus rolls his eyes and asks "if I have told you about earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you about heavenly things?", points out the heavenly origin of the Son of Man, and goes on with some examples.

This is where we came into the room and into the conversation, with Jesus talking about Moses lifting up the serpent in the wilderness and so also must the Son of Man be lifted up. Just like with the TV channel surfing, here "I have no idea" is not an acceptable answer to the question, "what is this all about?!" Those who really, really know their Hebrew scriptures, for example the original listeners to John the evangelist, would undoubtedly understand what Jesus meant. Those who were listening carefully as Philip read the passage from Numbers might also get what Jesus meant. Just in case, however, some of you missed the connection I'll elaborate. As the Israelites traveled through the desert after escaping from Egypt they mumbled and they grumbled and they complained. They also ran into snakes in the desert and believed that the snakes were sent by God as punishment for their mumbling and grumbling and complaining. They repented and Moses followed God's instructions to make a bronze snake on a pole and raised it up high. When those who were bitten by a snake looked up at this figure they were saved, and did not die. (Note how the medical community has adopted this same symbol, although many use the two-snake version called the caduceus which is not quite the same.)

Jesus, drawing upon a scriptural reference as he was often wont to do, used this lifting up of a saving symbol as an image. John the evangelist extends that further by drawing on the image of the Son of Man being lifted up, evoking thoughts both of Jesus lifted up on the cross and Jesus lifted up into heaven. Here is an example of God's grace – saving the people of Israel in the desert in their faith – used as an image of God's grace – saving people who look at the uplifted Christ in faith.

Apparently not everyone got it, though, because the much fuller and now famous phrase follows to make it explicitly clear: "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." Everyone. Not some, not only the pure and righteous, but everyone who believes, even with a teensy faith that makes a mustard seed look big.

This is a simple yet profound message of grace and mercy. But it must have been really, really hard for the religious righteous to hear that message of mercy. They had grown up in a system of strict religious rules, a system in which there was little if any room for mercy. Rigid

adherence to the letter of the Law was the standard; ignoring the Spirit of the Law seemed to be the norm. The clamour of the righteous proclaiming to God and people alike their rightness made it almost impossible to hear the gentle testimony of God's love in Christ.

It's still hard today to hear that same graceful testimony of God's love in Christ. We live in an age in which proclamations of absolute and unique truth are dismissed by the secular population. Set against this rejection are those churches that use simplistic practices of self-identification to make it comforting to define themselves as 'insiders' and easy to condemn everyone else as 'outsiders'. In the midst of such rampant self-congratulation (you know the kind: "thank God we're not like *them*!") it becomes more and more difficult to hear the testimony of grace and mercy from God in Christ. What is both difficult to understand and depressing to observe is how especially people of faith focus upon this text from John's gospel to endorse their exclusivist behaviour and condemnation of other people. To be sure, they recognize condemnation as being 'not nice', and protest vigorously that they are not condemning, but actions speak louder than words. Failing to grasp that their limited definition of what it means to be a Christian may not quite match Jesus' description of what it means to be one of his, these people are ever-ready to misuse this text to immediately reject others as non-believers, as somehow condemned.

Why do they so quickly move to condemnation, and fail to hear and receive the testimony of God in Christ? Because they stop reading at verse 16, the all-familiar verse that says, "For God so loved the world ..." Once, just once, I would love to see someone read on, and hold a sign that said "John 3:17", "For God sent the Son into the world not to condemn the world, but that the world might be saved through him." My hope, of course, is that in reading on into the next verse, they would actually hear the motivation of God in sending his Son Jesus into the world, "not to condemn the world". How could it be otherwise? God was, and is, and will forever be perfectly capable of enforcing faith and belief in Him, but He chose not to do so. Instead of trying to win the hearts and minds of people with the threat of condemnation, God – in grace, mercy and love – gave us Jesus as a model of self-sacrifice, proclaiming God's love, grace and mercy and offering the opportunity for the world to respond.

Jesus was clearly frustrated that Nicodemus missed the point, and I suspect is most likely still frustrated today that so many people continue to miss the point. The point that many people lose sight of is the grace and mercy of God's actions, and that God was acting in grace and mercy toward the whole world. Not to condemn the world, but that the world might be saved. Might be, not would be. People have the choice to listen and respond, or not. People even have the choice to listen and get the message wrong, as is so abundantly clear. Yes, there is judgment associated with God's gift in Christ; Christ is the Light of the world, and the brighter the light the deeper and darker the shadows. Lifting up a lantern illustrates how lifting up the Son of Man makes the distinctions between right and wrong much clearer. But our testimony is to the Light, instead of being concerned with the darkness. The Light is a beacon calling people to come, not a weapon to search and destroy, to chase and condemn. Christ is calling us to come into the open light and we are drawn to that Light, basking in the warmth of God's love just like we soak up the Spring sunshine.

The nature of God's action is clear, even if the understanding of it goes so quickly off the rails. The record of our scriptures is that God has acted time and time again with grace and mercy, has inserted himself into the lives and affairs of the world, and finally in one overwhelming act of self-sacrificing love sent his Son Jesus to proclaim his message of forgiveness and reconciliation. Sent his Son in an act of mercy and grace so complete, so

unselfish that it carried through to the cross, and beyond to Christ's rising again. This was not the action of a capricious God looking for the first excuse to condemn a person for incomplete or inadequate faith or belief. This was not the action of a spontaneous and vengeful God looking for a neat way to entrap people so that they might be dropped at their first hesitation or wandering astray. This is the testimony of a God who loved, and loves, the people of this world so completely that He was, and is, and continues to meet them not half way, but all the way.

God's activity in the lives of the world has been evident since the beginning of time and He continues to be active in the world today. We are often afraid because it seems as though we have wrested control of the world from Him, and it is going very badly. Many times we wish and pray that God would manifest himself mightily, and smite the 'bad guys' sorely. Thank God that because of his grace and mercy He does not act the way we want Him to, and it is to our benefit that He doesn't act exactly the way we think He should. For if God were to act with vengeance the way we would like, we would soon discover to our horror our need for Him to act graciously and mercifully toward us.

Our responsibility is to receive and then proclaim the testimony of Christ, that he was sent into the world by God in love, that the world might be saved, that those who believe would have eternal life. Our responsibility is to testify to that love, mercy and grace of God through following Christ in whom we believe, confident in God's continuing activity in us and in the world, assured of his love and sure of our reconciliation. We are blessed to be part of God's continuing activity in the world, empowered in the Holy Spirit, sustained in our faith in Christ, continuing to testify to God's grace and mercy.