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October 22nd 2023
John 3: 16-21
Compassion for All People

Prayer...

Introduction:

Men's Fellowship shared our favorite Bible Verses on Thursday. My favorite one is "As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you. Abide in my love." (John 15:9)

Another Bible verse that I could have chosen that is also a favorite is John 3:16, "For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten son, that whosoever believeth in him shall not perish but have everlasting life."

This is the first verse I ever memorized. I know because I remember it in the King James version of the Bible, which means one of my grandmas probably taught it to me.

To me this is a beautiful verse because it speaks of God's love for the whole world and the plan of Jesus saving the whole world through his love. It is a text that highlights God's compassion for all people.

A Few highlights of this passage:

Jesus is talking to Nicodemus and he is teaching him heavenly things.

Earlier in John 3, Jesus tells the religious leader Nicodemus that he must be born again, which is very confusing to Nicodemus. In John 3: 16 Jesus reflects on being sent to reveal God's love. Our text highlights that in believing in the Son is found eternal life. This is really about an invitation to have a relationship with Jesus, which has always been a blessing to me. There is a promise that in believing in Jesus we have the assurance of salvation.

Also, in this passage is the wonderful message that Jesus does not come to condemn but to save.

Lastly, there is an invitation to come to the light and not fall into self-condemnation. This is a hopeful reading of our text today.

For me this passage is an invitation to appreciate the compassion of Jesus for the whole world. For God so loved the world translates to me that God so loved all people that God sent his Son to reveal God's love.

I recognize this text has also been used by the church historically to create an us/them mentality. The saved are the born again who accept Jesus and the condemned are those bound to hell who do not believe in Jesus.

But I believe there is another way of understanding this text.

God loves all and desires to save all.

All those that come to the light will be saved.

Last week I highlighted my view of the after-life. Based on my study of Scripture I believe that when we die, we go before Jesus who is Lord of All. I believe Jesus offers salvation and forgiveness to everyone who humbles themselves. Everyone who acknowledges their need for God and God's mercy will be saved. Because I believe in free will, I acknowledge that some people may say no to the gift of heaven and go

to hell. I do not know what hell exactly is, but I hope it to be a place of refinement rather than punishment. I hope it to be a place where those who experience self-condemnation are eventually brought to a place of reconciliation with God. This is my hope, but I do not know if this is true.

One question we might ask is what happens to people of faiths other than the Christian faith.

I personally believe that in heaven we will find more than just Christians. I believe in heaven we will meet people of other religions and people who did not have a particular religion. I believe Jesus is Lord and will offer salvation to everyone and anyone who humbly receives this gift of forgiveness and salvation will enter in.

In Barbara Brown Taylor's book *Holy Envy: Finding God in the Faith of Others*, she writes that when we look at other religions it is important to be kind. We are called to look at the best in another's religion rather than be moved to be judgmental.

The Rev. Barbara Brown Taylor is an Episcopal priest who is well known for her gift in preaching. Most seminarians of my generation studied her theology and preaching style as part of our studies in preaching, also known as homiletics.

In her book, *Holy Envy* Taylor talks about teaching a World Religions class at a small Christian college and how that experience shaped her faith. It taught her to respect other religions and to learn from them.

In my own life, my experience in high school continues to be a reminder of God teaching me through other faiths. As I have shared before my best friend in high school was Anthony Malk. He was Jewish and his family would often take me to special Kosher Jewish restaurants.

I also was blessed to be friends with a Muslim family during high school. The Kahn family were originally from India and identified as Muslim. My sister was best friends with Afroz Kahn and we spent a lot of time with this family sharing meals and other gatherings. Our favorite activity was going together to rock concerts like U2's Joshua Tree concert in 1987.

Today, Afroz Kahn lives on the East Coast near Boston and is involved in Peacemaking efforts currently among different religious groups. She posted on Facebook some of her recent efforts to work for peace between Muslims and Jewish people.

If you ask me, if I think my friends Anthony Malk and Afroz Kahn will be with me one day in heaven, I would say absolutely. I cannot imagine heaven without them.

Let me pause and also suggest that a more hopeful view of salvation when people of many faiths will one day worship together a loving God revealed in Jesus, can also bring hope to our world on earth.

Throughout history, the major world religions have been caught up in violence. Many wars were fought over religious viewpoints and religion has also been forced on people.

On October 9th, we celebrated Indigenous People's Day in our country. It is a day where we remember with gratitude the Native Peoples of this country and other nations. We also remember with sadness that in our

country and throughout the world Christianity was forced on indigenous people and often led to Native people being taught that their religious views were wrong. A better approach would have been to celebrate Indigenous religious views that honor a Creator of love and goodness. Today, many of us are turning back to Native American religion to understand a healthy connection to nature and our ancestries.

Here are a few suggestions on how we can show compassion to all people, including people of other faiths or those who do not identify with a particular faith.

Recognize the light of Christ is in each person.

Look for God's love revealed in people and partner with them to bring salvation, shalom- peace and justice to the world.

Keep sharing the good news of Jesus.

Work for peace in this world.

Embrace a God of love and do not feel pressured to believe in a God of condemnation.

Pray for peace among Jews, Muslims, and Christians in Israel and Palestine.

Conclusion:

One thing I notice is that many people I counsel share with me that they have experienced spiritual abuse in churches that emphasized a God of judgment over a God of love.

This is why we need a compassionate Christianity for this generation and for future generations. My prayer is that our church will remain compassionate. If we do, I believe we will thrive and remain a light in our town for God's love. May we keep highlighting a God of love and compassion who loves everyone unconditionally.

Please pray with me...

John 3:16-21

16 “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.

17 “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. 18 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. 19 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. 20 For all who do evil hate the light and do not come to the light, so that their deeds may not be exposed. 21 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.”[a]