

John 3:1-17            *How to Love a Broken World*  
First Presbyterian Church, Birmingham, Alabama  
May 30, 2021 (Trinity Sunday)  
The Rev. Terry Hamilton-Poore

Now there was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews. He came to Jesus by night and said to him, “Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God; for no one can do these signs that you do apart from the presence of God.”

Jesus answered him, “Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above.”

Nicodemus said to him, “How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother’s womb and be born?”

Jesus answered, “Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit. What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit. Do not be astonished that I said to you, ‘You must be born from above.’ The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit.”

Nicodemus said to him, “How can these things be?”

Jesus answered him, “Are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things? Very truly, I tell you, we speak of what we know and testify to what we have seen; yet you do not receive our testimony. If I have told you about earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you about heavenly things? No one has ascended into heaven except the one who descended from heaven, the Son of Humanity. And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Humanity be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life. For God so loved the world that God gave the 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.”

\*\*\*\*\*

I recently finished reading John Archibald’s memoir, *Shaking the Gates of Hell*.

The title comes from a quote of John Wesley, the founder of Methodism, in which

Wesley declared, “Give me one hundred preachers who fear nothing but sin, and desire nothing but God;...such alone will shake the gates of hell.”<sup>1</sup>

Archibald’s father, the Rev. Robert Archibald, was a Methodist minister in and around Birmingham from the nineteen-sixties into the two thousands. By all reports, he was a wonderful father and a deeply caring pastor who truly believed in justice for all, yet, as Archibald combed through his father’s old sermons from during the height of the Civil Rights struggle here in Birmingham, he could find almost no direct mention of race or of the brutality that was going on all around them. Just silence. So the memoir is largely an account of Archibald’s struggle with how to reconcile the love and esteem he had for his father, with the profound disappointment he felt in his father’s failure to take a stand on the most pressing issue of his day. He understood the fear of reprisals—homes of African-Americans and their white allies were being bombed, right and left; and he was aware of the institutional pressures his father was under from Bishops and church members to remain silent on anything that would provoke controversy; still, he says, “what I couldn’t understand...was having a good heart, and a pulpit, and the inability to use it.”<sup>2</sup>

It’s something we all face, isn’t it—the question of how to love people who we know should do better, but don’t. How to love a world that could be so beautiful, and yet, is so clearly broken.

As we mark the one-year anniversary of George Floyd’s very public murder; as violence explodes yet again in Gaza and we have yet another mass shooting in

---

<sup>1</sup> John Wesley, in a letter to Alexander Mather, 1790.

<sup>2</sup> John Archibald, *Shaking the Gates of Hell* (New York: Knopf, 2021) p. 50.

California; as we look at leaving Afghanistan with little to show for the blood that's been shed by both Americans and Afghans; as the voting rights that were so dearly won here in the United States are being clawed back; as the ability of women to make decisions about our own bodies is suddenly under direct attack; and as we observe Memorial Day weekend—the annual reminder of how much our nation has lost through war upon war upon war--it seems like, every day, we are confronted with a pile-up of disappointments—in our family members, in our neighbors, in our leaders, in our world. Even in our churches, where we're supposed to know better, supposed to *be* better than “the world.” There are days when all we can feel is disappointment and disillusionment.

You can hear that same, weary disillusionment in Nicodemus, when he asks Jesus, “How can someone who has grown old be born again?” You can hear that same wariness of embracing a hope that might only break his heart, all over again.

But Jesus, who had every reason to fear; Jesus, who had every reason to give up on humanity, will have none of that. “God so loved the world,” he says to Nicodemus and to us, “God so **loved** the world that God sent the only Son...not to condemn the world, but that the world might be saved through him.”

Yes, God sent the Son. And today, on Trinity Sunday, we are reminded that the Son isn't the only way in which God has come near to us. In the very beginning, it was the Creator's hands that shaped us, molding us with love into God's own image, and breathing the breath of life into us like mouth-to-mouth resuscitation. You can't get much closer than that! And last week, we read of the Holy Spirit swooping down like tongues of flame and infusing the church with the energy and the language to break down every barrier in the world.

The Holy Trinity, however you name it--Father, Son, Holy Ghost; Creator, Christ, Spirit; Speaker, Word, Breath; Creator, Redeemer, Sustainer; or whatever names are descriptive of your own experience—the Holy Trinity is the sign that

God so loved the world, God so loves the world, God will so *continue* to love the world that God comes to us not in just one way, but in three, persistent, distinct ways which, somehow, create one, unbroken band of love that holds the world within it. And we need that. We really need to feel held in that love.

In this past year, as those of us who are white have grappled with the failings of our own forebears to fully live out the Gospel, one question that keeps coming up is, “Is it fair to judge people who lived in the past, by the standards of today?” Is it? Well, if you look at the world today, I wouldn’t say that the standards are that much higher. And the fact of the matter is, what those of us in the church are committed to is not the standards of any particular time or place, but the standards of Jesus, which transcend all times and places. So, is it right to judge Christians for not following Christ? I think it’s fair—but only if we are prepared to accept that we, ourselves will be judged by those same standards. Only if we’re prepared to acknowledge that we, like our forebears, and like the larger world around us, are broken.

It can be terrifying, can’t it? Terrifying to know that we will be judged as we have judged. No wonder we might hesitate to speak up. But here’s the thing: while scripture is very clear that Christ will judge the world, scripture is equally clear that Christ was not sent to condemn the world. So: to judge is not the same thing as to condemn.

I made a fun discovery this week—“discovery” might be a bit strong, since I’m sure I’m not the first to notice this—but, on a hunch, I looked up the original, Greek version of Matthew 7:1 where Jesus says, “Judge not, lest you be judged.” That passage has been used to shut down our ability to hold one another accountable. But, what I saw is that the Greek verb that’s translated “judge” is the same verb that, in our passage from John, is translated: “condemn.” So the Matthew verse really means, “*Condemn* not, lest you be *condemned*.” That’s different, right?

Furthermore, the Greek verb, *sozo*, which is usually translated as “save,” can also be translated as “make whole,” or “heal.” “God sent the Son into the world not to condemn the world, but that the world might be healed through him.”

A few weeks ago, our youngest son fell while skateboarding and broke his right arm. It was a bad break—you could see it. My husband took him to the emergency room, where first, they x-rayed him so they could see the full extent of the damage. Then, they took him to surgery to piece the bones back together the right position. Then, they put a splint on his arm and wrapped it tightly with a bandage to hold the bones in place so they’ll knit back together in the way they’re supposed to be.

What that x-ray did is what judgment does for us: it identifies what’s broken. If we ignore what’s wrong—in the larger world or in ourselves, the brokenness hardens in place. We’ve seen that with the sin of White Supremacy, haven’t we? How the same bone of racism has to be broken and painfully rebroken over and over because we never set it right?

But if judgment is the x-ray that calls out our wrongs, the Trinity is the bandage—stretchy with grace—that surrounds us and holds us in a tight embrace so that we can finally knit back together into wholeness.

As John Archibald's memoir continues to trace his father's life and his sermons through his later years, he sees a shift beginning to happen. While his father's approach would always be more gentle than confrontational, he finds more and more direct calls for justice, first on race, and, later, on LGBTQ issues, as well. His father never loved a fight, but he finally began to find his voice on the things that he knew truly mattered.

God so loved the world, that God sent the Son, not to condemn, but to heal. *That's* why we *can* judge the world and ourselves without fear; and that's why we can also love this world, broken though it is: because it's judgment based on love, with the goal not of punishment but of restoration and healing.

It's also why we can judge our forebears where they were lacking. Because if we truly believe in the resurrection, then the story isn't over for them, either. In some, mysterious way, they, too, continue to live. Late in his life, the poet Robert Frost was asked if he still had hope for the future. He responded, "I still have hope for the past." If the people from our past are still alive in God, then they, too, can heal and grow whole; and so can we.

So, how do we love a broken world? The same way that God does. With clear vision of what the world *could* be; with courage to call out the brokenness and set it right; and with a strong, elastic grace that holds it close, binding up the wounds and striving to heal. Because we, and this world, were made in God's goodness,

and good, we *can* be, knit back together with the all-embracing love of the Holy One-in-Three, who comes, not to condemn, but to bind us all together in healing love.