

March 15, 2015

In the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen

'God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him"

In my homilies I talk a great deal about context...as you know, I believe that scripture comes alive when one understands the circumstances surrounding the particular snapshot prescribed for a particular day in the church's year

Today, in what is perhaps one of the most well known Gospels, Jesus is speaking to Nicodemus....a Pharisee...a leader among the Jews. We have a teacher coming to speak to another teacher...and coming by night to affirm Jesus' identity as one sent by God.

When Nicodemus questions Jesus about the birth from above, he finds out that this saving birth depends on God's acceptance of him, Nicodemus, and God's transformation in him, not on his works and not on his moral achievements in his life.

Apparently astonished that Nicodemus does not understand the very basics of God's love, Jesus asks him, "Are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things?"

Imagine this Nicodemus, this Pharisee, a guy from a group of people who so often get a bad rap in our churches. Imagine this one who knows the Torah and who so steadfastly tries to follow it.

Imagine his surprise and his confusion and perhaps his dismay when he realizes that this teacher sent by God is proclaiming a different sort of birth into God's reign...a birth through water and the Spirit...and even more, that Jesus is proclaiming a different sort of

love active in God's reign...a love not dependent on human action...a love free from condemnation...a love reaching the entire world and all its people through this embodied God, Jesus.

Imagine this Pharisee's heartbreak as his Jewish brother and teacher displaces Nicodemus' religious values.

I can hear Nicodemus saying, I thought I knew what you wanted me to do, God! I thought I knew what to believe! and now I find I was wrong?

We human beings are masterful at creating artificial boundaries and divisions in life that separate us from each other. It is as if there is an innate need for people to feel more powerful, more knowledgeable, richer, wiser, better dressed than "that other person over there".

As human beings we are unbelievably creative in coming up with a reasons for dividing ourselves. Gender, sexual orientation, politics, religion, then subsets within religions, skin color.... we know them all and they don't get less they seem to grow by the day.

IRA out.....ISIS in.

In my opinion the reasons behind the need for us humans to create these divisions lie in the negative characteristics of the human being. There is nothing heroic or righteous about these divisions because they are based on jealousy, fear, greed, ignorance, mental illness and addiction, vengeance and criminal behavior. In other words divisions arise from human frailty not from an intelligent assessment that one is better or more worthy than another.

If we stop to think, we know that we live in ambiguity, that is to say we live in a world of uncertainty. Is Putin a nuclear powered maniac? Will we wake up tomorrow and a 10.0 earthquake consume California?

Will New York and Florida disappear next week under a massive tsunami?

We do not want to label the actions and attitudes of our church and our society as either good or evil—even though our text for today might lend itself to such an evaluation. We do not want to stake claims that would build barriers between the members of this church...or claims that would split this church. What we can do is listen to Jesus' words as recorded in the gospel of John: For God loved the world in this way, that God gave the Son, the only begotten one, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.

God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world but in order that the world might be saved through him. Jesus goes on to talk about our tendency to love the darkness—a problematic concept in view of racism and white supremacy—and our inclination to turn away from the light. Jesus has hope that some of us will come to the light—which is Jesus—and that the Spirit of God will motivate our actions.

In all of Jesus' words about light and darkness, however, he does not mention what constitutes light and darkness or good and evil; Jesus does not draw lines in the sand around certain opinions or actions. Jesus only speaks of God's love and God's light, made manifest in his own saving life. Jesus speaks of a love that penetrates the whole world, a love that does not condemn but rather saves.

Some years ago I attended a wedding of some close friends in the very north of Sweden. It was in mid July, but the sun never set.

Cows were grazing in the fields at 3 am and the sun, though bright and quite warm, was like a dime shining in the sky.

Last week, Karen and I were talking with some friends who have just returned from a safari trip to the Serengeti National Park....a huge game reserve in Tanzania, that is in fact so extensive that it runs into northern Kenya.

They described the setting sun as a huge red fireball with a fiery aura that looks as if it is about to consume the earth. They took a great picture of this fireball.....

Then there is our view of the sun and whether you believe it or not we see the sun much more often in Chicago than they do in Wales.

Whether we in Chicago see the hot sun in July or August or the weak sun in January or February...the sun is the same size and color. Higher in the sky in the summer but the same size and color.

Whether you see the sun in northern Sweden, in Tanzania or in Chicago....we are all looking at the same Sun.

I suggest it is the same with God our Father in heaven. Whatever prism you look through.....Islam, Judaism, Odom, Roman Catholicism, Buddhism, Hindu, Tiki in the French Polynesian islands.....whatever our perspective from this life...we all believe in the same God. We just see God differently and I am certain that he is just fine with that.

When we reflect on the enormity of our One God, we realize the fullness of Him or Her, and it's not quite what we expected." We don't expect this One, who comes into the world to save the world but to condemn it, to condemn at least those who we think don't follow in Jesus' footsteps.

We would be happy with some laws and some requirements, but this One comes to love us—to love us and to love all people—that means all people of all political parties and ideologies, of all religious systems, of all cultures and languages, of all abilities, of all genders, and, of course, people of all sexual orientations.

We may even be a little disappointed or dismayed by how freely God loves. We may question God's desire to be in a loving and saving

relationship with the whole world, yet Jesus assures us that he came not to condemn but to save, no exceptions.

As the Spirit comes alive in us, that same Spirit given to us in Holy Baptism, we give up our condemnation and truly see one another as sisters and brothers committed to the proclamation and embodiment of the gospel. We move toward the light about which Jesus spoke. Though we may feel stuck in our sides of right and left, liberal and conservative, the Spirit nudges us into community, into faithful dialogue, into love, into seeing one another the way God sees us.

In the same way that we humans see the same sun but it just appears in different sizes and colors depending on where we stand on the earth, so it is with God. Whatever the division and difference we create between ourselves, God sees us all on a level....loving us unequivocally and totally, no exceptions and no one person more than another.

God doesn't condemn the world...it is the absolute opposite... and to prove it..He sent his only son Jesus Christ into our world so that we might be saved.

..... Amen.