

“Belief and Condemnation”
John 3.14-21
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Fourth Sunday in Lent
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“Charges Filed on Church Union Services,” the headline blared on the front page of the Baltimore Sun, April 20, 1937. “Brown Memorial and First [Presbyterian] Linked to Heresy of Modernism.” I was excited to find the headline if for no other reason than it’s proof that you had problems long before I got here. You can’t blame me for your heretical beliefs. You were that way before I got here. The complaint was actually filed by 3 members of the Franklin Street Presbyterian Church who had asked their Session to “cease and desist” from participating in the joint services between Franklin Street, First, and Brown Memorial Church on Valentine’s Day, 1937. “Brown Memorial” the complainants wrote, “has actually welcomed to its pulpit an unconverted Jew.” It was true. Brown Memorial had been exchanging pulpits with synagogues since the Rev. Maltie Babcock first preached in the pulpit of the Har Sinai Hebrew Temple on January 26, 1900.¹ Babcock, whose memory is enshrined in one of our two large stained glass windows, received a standing ovation that day in 1900 to an overflow crowd of both Jews and Christians unaccustomed to such fraternization. Indeed the Sun headline that day registered the significance of the event with three simple words in all caps – “NO PREJUDICE THERE.”²

I’m not sure whether the headline was referring to the host congregation, to the people who had gathered that day to it, or to the content of Maltie Babcock’s message. But it speaks to the assumption that when people of different faiths get together there is bound to be prejudice, bound to be judgment, bound to be condemnation. The assumption, reinforced by those heresy charges, that what God demands from the church is allegiance to a set of dogmas that can only be true by converting people of other faiths or annihilating them. It’s a similar approach that now undergirds many in our government. The belief that what the country demands is allegiance to one ideology that can only be true by converting the opposition or destroying them.

It’s belief that at first glance seems reinforced by the text today. Those who believe in the Human One 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. They’re condemned already. The Jews who don’t believe. The Muslims who don’t believe. The heretical Brown Memorialites who don’t believe. They’re condemned.

¹ The temple used to be located on what is now Fitzgerald Park here in Bolton Hill before it was sold to the Cornerstone Baptist Church which then burned in 1969.

² *The Baltimore Sun*, January 26, 1900.

“Well, I don’t believe that” someone said in Bible study on Wednesday speaking about a different text. “I don’t believe that God is watching everyone waiting for them to say ‘Jesus is my Savior’ before God chooses to love and save them.” “Well, what do you believe?” I asked him. “I believe that God loves all people, God wants all people to be saved.” Obviously he was just as heretical as those Brown Memorialites from 1937. So I asked him the question that I think the Gospel of John seeks to answer. “How do you know that? How do you know that God loves all people? How do you know that God wants all people to be saved?” And he told me, “that’s what I believe.” But I pressed him more. “How did you come to that conclusion? You’ve never seen God. How do you know what God is like?”

It’s that question that I think John’s Gospel is trying to answer. How do you know that God loves the whole world? You’ve never seen God. How do you know that God is loving? How do you know that God wants to save all people? “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.”

We know because in a world with empires building walls, God chose not to stay out of the mess but to enter it. We know because a world divided by race and station, by nation and tribute, God chose not to stay out of the divisions but to locate herself in the center of it. We know because in a world at war, God chose not to stay safe and at a distance but to enter the world’s pain, to take it on, because God loves us that much. This is why we need Jesus – not to win some religious “we’re number 1” rally, not to turn the world’s people into individual conversion units for a privatized faith that has as its goal insulating people from the pain of the world, not to create another set of insiders and outsiders – but because we could say nothing about God unless God had first revealed herself to us. And more importantly we could never know enough about what love is without that love having been revealed to us by somebody who has seen more than just the world that we find ourselves in.

And I know that most of us would just prefer to hear about God’s love without the believing in Jesus part that follows it. If God really loves the whole world, why not just say that with no strings attached? Rewrite the verse to something like - “For God so loved the world that God sent Jesus to share that message of love so that everyone could see what God’s love means.” For God so loved the world that God sent Jesus to demonstrate how to love your enemies instead of shooting them, how to get to know your neighbors of races different than your own instead of fearing them, how to respond to those who are excluded from systems of privilege and power instead of ghettoizing them. If God really loves the whole world, then why not just say so with no strings attached?

But love requires a response. At a certain point we have to decide whether or not we believe this story of God’s love is true. I don’t mean that we have to give our verbal assent to a Christian doctrine. I mean we have to decide whether or not we believe that this God who comes to us in Jesus is who God is for our world. We have to decide whether we trust that this is how God acts in our world. We have to decide whether we believe that this is how God responds to hatred and fear. We

have to decide whether we really believe that the pathway of love that Jesus opens for everyone is one to be trusted or not.

Because the real issue for John (or maybe for us) isn't making sure that people say the right things about Jesus to please the church's theological attorneys. Believing in John's Gospel is a verb. It's a lot more than an affirmation of a doctrine. It's something we do. "For all who do evil hate the light," Jesus says, "But those who do what is true come to the light." Belief is not just what we say about Jesus, it's what we do as a result of what we say about him. In fact the opposite of belief isn't really disbelief, according to John. It's disobedience. "Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life" Jesus says later in the chapter, "whoever disobeys the Son will not see life. . ."

The testimony of John's Gospel is that the only response that leads to life, is the one that trusts in God's self-giving love. It means choosing to love your neighbor, even and especially the one who doesn't like you. It means choosing to cross the barriers that continue to divide us by race and the vulnerability that brings to us all. It means continuing to believe that peace is possible not because human beings are not capable of evil but because God is more capable of good. It means choosing to live a life in obedience to Jesus and his way of love even though you know the world resents that way, thinks it's naïve, the thing of storybooks.

Howard Thurman, in his watershed book *Jesus and the Disinherited* wrote of his grandmother's speeches to him about his own sense of self-worth and belonging. She had grown up as a slave and learned her faith from a slave minister who would gather slaves together in secret at night and preach to them the true Gospel. "You-" she would drill into her grandson, channeling that preacher - "You are not niggers! You- you are not slaves. You are God's children."

"This alone is not enough," Thurman concedes, "but without it, nothing else is of value."³

Jesus is like Thurman's grandmother to us – telling us the truth about who God is in a world that is drenched in violence, division, and brutality. Telling us the truth about our ourselves – of the human beings that we are - so we can love in a world that teaches fear, so we can relate in a world that teaches we can never trust anyone who's different.

If some call that heretical, then so be it. To me, it is the gift of faith. The assurance that when we're pressed as to why it is that we believe that God loves all of us, why it is that we believe that peace is possible between Christians and people of other faiths, why it is that difference in community is not to be feared but worthy of a headline in all-caps, we can say with confidence, because we believe God is loving and just and trustworthy. And we know this because of Jesus.

³ Howard Thurman, *Jesus and the Disinherited* (Boston: Beacon Press), 1976 (first published in 1949 by Abingdon Press), 39-40.