

Sermon: "Love versus Literalism"
Sunday, March 20, 2011
The Rev. Peter Faass, Rector
Christ Church, Shaker Heights, OH
Lent II Year A: John 3:1-17

[Hold up placard with "John 3:16"]

Have you ever seen a placard like this one? Where? It's almost impossible to watch a professional football game without spotting at least one of these being held up by a fan in the stands.

Do you know the Biblical verse from John the placard references? We heard it a moment ago in our Gospel for the day.

"For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but have eternal life."

Martin Luther called this verse "the Gospel in miniature." Marcus Borg calls John 3:16, "the Heart of Christianity," this love of God for the world and Jesus who is the embodiment and revelation of that love.

Now mind you, the person waving the placard at sports events, concerts and other public venues is most likely not an Evangelical Lutheran and is clearly not likely to be in agreement with anything Marcus Borg believes!

You see, John 3:16 has become a code for conservative, Christian evangelicals who frequently append another verse from John's Gospel to it so to create what they would view as their own "Gospel in miniature." That verse is from John 14:6, which states, "I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the father except through me."

Combined together these two verses are used as a litmus test by these Christians to determine who's in and who's out of the faith; who's saved and who's not; who God loves and who God doesn't love. For these folks, Jesus – and I would be quick to say that this Jesus is one they have contrived so to meet their specific needs – is the only venue to salvation. More succinctly stated, Christianity as they present it is the exclusive way to God. All the rest of us folks, Christian and otherwise, are to quote a local evangelical pastor, "dangerous and deluded." If you carefully read between those lines you will see the phrase, "going to hell."

This interpretation of the two John passages is of course a literal one. If you don't believe in Jesus being the exclusive way, truth and life, you don't gain access to God the father. Ergo, no access to God means you don't receive salvation.

The profound irony in this literal interpretation of scripture is that the context of the story in which it occurs is itself a warning against the literal interpretation of scripture! Let's revisit the story.

Nicodemus, a Pharisee, and therefore a Torah scholar, comes to Jesus to have a scriptural debate with him. Nicodemus recognizes that Jesus is no ordinary man having either witnessed or heard of his teachings and his miracles. So Nicodemus wants to come and see for himself and pit his Biblical scholarship against that of Jesus to see if he's the real deal. "No one can do these signs apart from the presence of God," he says to Jesus.

Jesus replies, "Very truly I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above."

Puzzled, Nicodemus says, "How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother's womb and be born?"

Nicodemus understands what Jesus has said about the need for "being born from above" literally. He misses the point that Jesus is speaking theologically, which means metaphorically, with poetic license, if you will.

Nicodemus is imagining a literal second childbirth and he realizes that as an adult man this is impossible.

Yet Jesus is not speaking of a literal physical birth of a baby. When Jesus says we need to be born from above, he is speaking of the need for a radical change in our behavior, a change that touches our very soul, a change so holy that it can only come from above; from God.

Don't be so literal, Jesus is saying. Go deeper. To truly apprehend God's word and begin to understand the richness of its message you must go beyond the superficial meaning.

This anti-literalism message is clearly either lost on or simply ignored by many Christians.

I say this because Jesus clearly indicates in the Gospels that the radical, soul-shaking change that causes you to be born anew, occurs by following him. And by following Jesus I do not mean by the literal following of creeds, doctrines, rules or regulations of institutional religion.

What I mean by following Jesus – or rather what Jesus means when he calls us to follow him – is observing the actions of Jesus in his earthly ministry and then striving to

emulate them. These actions entail radical love and hospitality offered through the care and compassion for the least among us, companionship with all God's children, caring for our neighbor as ourselves.

Ultimately to follow Jesus is to love. To follow Jesus is to know that we can never look at any human being and place them in a "God doesn't love" category because such a category does not exist except in the minds of severely misguided people. The way, the truth and life that Jesus said he was, is the way of love. Love and only love is the authentic portal of salvation.

U.S. history buffs may know this, but are you aware that Thomas Jefferson once created his own rendition of the Gospels. Using a razor, Jefferson cut and arranged selected verses from the books of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John in chronological order, mingling excerpts from one text to those of another in order to create a single narrative. What Jefferson deleted were all references to Jesus' deity including his miracles. What remained was a humanistic Jesus that Jefferson titled "The Life and Morals of Jesus of Nazareth."

Many claim Jefferson's "translation" amounts to little more than a paraphrasing of the parts of the Bible with which he agreed. He decided that the rules of the club to which he wished to belong were not the rules he wanted to play by. So instead of changing clubs, he changed the rulebook by literally cutting and pasting together only the sections that he found relevant to his interpretation.

Biblical literalists engage in this same Jeffersonian approach to the scripture as they cut and paste together only the sections they find useful for their interpretation. And while they may not literally edit the Bible with a razor like Jefferson did, they certainly achieve the same results in their theology.

I recently read an article with the startling title, "Why Evangelicals Hate Jesus," written by Phil Zuckerman who is a professor of sociology and Dan Cady a history professor. The title should really say "Conservative Evangelicals" because there are progressive evangelicals as well who don't as the authors say, "hate Jesus."

Here is an excerpt from the article.

"The results from a recent poll published by the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life reveal what social scientists have known for a long time: White Evangelical Christians are the group least likely to support politicians or policies that reflect the actual teachings of Jesus. It is perhaps one of the strangest, most dumb-founding ironies in contemporary American culture. Evangelical Christians, who most fiercely proclaim to have a personal relationship with Christ, who most confidently declare their belief that the Bible is the inerrant

word of God, who go to church on a regular basis, pray daily, listen to Christian music, and place God and His Only Begotten Son at the center of their lives, are simultaneously the very people most likely to reject his teachings and despise his radical message.

Jesus unambiguously preached mercy and forgiveness [and love]. These are supposed to be cardinal virtues of the Christian faith. And yet Evangelicals are the most supportive of the death penalty, draconian sentencing, punitive punishment over rehabilitation, and the governmental use of torture. Jesus exhorted humans to be loving, peaceful, and non-violent. And yet Evangelicals are the group of Americans most supportive of easy-access weaponry, little-to-no regulation of handgun and semi-automatic gun ownership, not to mention the violent military invasion of various countries around the world. Jesus was very clear that the pursuit of wealth was inimical to the Kingdom of God . . . and that to be a follower of Him means to give one's money to the poor. And yet Evangelicals are the most supportive of corporate greed and capitalistic excess, and they are the most opposed to institutional help for the nation's poor -- especially poor children. They hate anything that smacks of "socialism," even though that is essentially what [Jesus] preached. They despise food stamp programs, subsidies for schools, hospitals, job training -- anything that might dare to help out those in need. Even though helping out those in need was exactly what Jesus urged humans to do. In short, Evangelicals are that segment of America which is the most pro-militaristic, pro-gun, and pro-corporate, while simultaneously claiming to be [the] most ardent lovers of the Prince of Peace."

On some level I already knew this to be true. The rhetoric and beliefs of conservative evangelicals has always been dissonant with the Jesus of the Gospels. But to have Zuckerman and Cady delineate it so clearly still is astonishing and sad. I can only begin to imagine the fears and misconceptions that drive such a misguided belief in Jesus. So why do I tell you this? Well, most of us know people who believe this way about Jesus. We meet them in the workplace, school, and even our families. We intersect with them throughout our lives. And they can be quite assertive and even aggressive in their faith statements and behavior toward those of us who not believe as they do.

Our only response when we encounter people who profess a faith in Jesus but actually engage in behaviors not even remotely identifiable with his life, is to show love and witness to the authentic way, life and truth which comes by following Jesus.

One way we can show that love is the next time we see someone holding a placard that reads, John 3:16, we can literally or metaphorically lift one even higher that proclaims John 3:17: "God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him."

Amen.