

KGL+
Sermon
Trinity Church Boston
Year B, Lent 4
March 10, 2024

*O to grace how great a debtor, daily I'm constrained to be,
Let thy goodness, like a fetter, bind my wandring heart to thee;
Prone to wander, Lord I feel it, prone to leave the God I love,
Here's my heart Lord, take and seal it, seal it for they courts above.¹*

One of the most memorable assignments in high school was in my American History class during my sophomore year. My teacher was the venerable Mrs. Smit. While I went on to study history later in life, let's just say that I was not the prize student in history in high school. I didn't particularly like to memorize dates, write papers, or track cause and effect. I am proof that lots of things can change in the course of a human life, or even just after high school.

The assignment I kept harkening back to this week as I looked at and prayed over the scriptures for today was an end-of-term assessment. We were tasked with, in addition to our final papers, honestly and thoughtfully grading ourselves for the semester. We were to take into account our test and quiz scores, our homework assignments (both done and left undone), our note-taking, our participation, and our overall understanding of the material. She would take our assessment into her own consideration when doing her final grades. In a world of self-reviews and BuzzFeed quizzes now, this task doesn't read as novel. But to a 15-year-old 'back when', being asked to evaluate ourselves felt revolutionary.

The temptation, friends, was to give ourselves an automatic 'A'. You didn't have to be a numbers person to simply know that an A, however weighted in the end, would provide a nice boost to whatever final technical number she computed through our actual papers and assessments. On the other side of the spectrum, one could also pull out the modesty card—a trick of psychological bait and switch, coming up with a lower grade than she had anticipated we would give ourselves. That would thereby perhaps earn some goodwill for being appropriately self-critical and perhaps appear to be deeply contrite (with no need to actually change anything concrete) for a less-than-stellar semester.

My (read: all female) classmates and I agonized over the methods we would utilize in this assessment. Over? Under? Please note, in the mid-90's it did not occur to us to simply disagree

¹ *Come Thou Fount*, Hymnal 1982, #686, v.3. It's what I would have written on my headstone should I choose to have a headstone upon burial. It was the Sequence Hymn for the service when this sermon was preached, March 10th, 2024.

with the assignment and offer her ‘feedback’, as some may do now. Midway through this process, I realized that what I truly wanted was for Mrs. Smit to just tell me the grade I got—for me to stay out of this entire reflective process, to avoid this direct confrontation of what I had done or left undone. I knew that I hadn’t done very well. I had not performed, read, studied, grappled with the material to the best of my ability. I knew that I could not, in good conscience, give myself an A; I also know that I couldn’t bait for a pity-grade, because that truth was a bit too close to home, and I doubted that pity would save me and my GPA.

What I truly wanted was to not think about the ways I had fallen short, never mind committing them to paper. Sure, there were lots of good reasons why I hadn’t done my best—aren’t there always?—but I would have rather had Mrs. Smit, holed up, as I assumed all teachers were, in her office, surrounded by old dusty books, doling out judgment and me just taking it (or ignoring it, and grumbling about how unfair she was, first under my breath, and then to my friends).

Which brings us to our scripture this morning.

For many, John 3:16 is the one scripture phrase they know by heart, repeating it as a litmus test of accepting Jesus as a personal savior, or using it to defend the concept that Jesus paid a price for our sins through his redeeming death. It fits nicely on a sandwich board, on bumper stickers and on posters at football game end zones. It’s been called ‘Christianity in a nutshell’.

And yet context matters (look Mrs. Smit, I’m using what you taught me!). Today’s gospel lesson is pulled from the middle of a conversation between Jesus and Nicodemus, the Pharisee who comes to ask Jesus questions about his preaching in the middle of the night. In it, Nicodemus wants Jesus to tell him, clearly and succinctly, what it means to be born from the Spirit, what it means to follow him, how the signs Jesus has been doing points to the incoming Kingdom of God. Jesus’ response is part of this gospel lesson: that in God’s coming into the world, we are given a choice, placed at, in the Greek, a *kriseo*, a crossroads.

Instead of loving only on the-ubiquitous-as-flan John 3:16, look to verses 19-21 and therein lies the promise and challenge of this morning’s Word: we want to love what is good and righteous, but all too often, we choose, and continue to choose, that which is unmerciful; that which is convenient, rather than what is covenantal; we fall short, and murmur against God and one another (as the Israelites in Numbers were doing) when our confidence is compromised.

We may wish for judgment from a God isolated on high, secure in the knowledge that we are on the right side; or we may gripe about hypothetical judgment we imagine poured on us and others without our consent. That, however we are found, good or ‘needs more work’, we assume we play no part in the findings. Because we feel ourselves always the defendant, we can blame the one judging us for their harshness towards us, either because we are fine, and they rule against us; or because we don’t like that they don’t unilaterally approve of our actions.

But what if we are the ones who are called to do the judging first? What if Jesus isn't telling Nicodemus (and all the rest of us who come to him under cover of darkness) that judgment and salvation are handed down irrelevant of the individual, but that there is a mystery involved that asks us to reveal ourselves fully and honestly: our sins, our brokenness, our fear, our disappointments, our lapses, our too-pie-in-the-sky images of what life should be, and be truly *seen*. What if Mrs. Smit and God are more alike than I would personally care to imagine, that we are all called upon to see ourselves in the light of day, revealing the wrinkles in face and clothing and intentions, examining ourselves honestly?

I don't think too many people care for such examination because it will always mean that we fall short of what we have expected from ourselves, and what we imagine God expects from us. We sit in our confession, held in limbo between wanting to assert our 'A+' confidence and our pity-inducing 'C-' grades, tip-toeing gingerly around how well we are following Jesus' gospel of love, mercy, justice, and compassion.

The gospel of John repeatedly uses the image of light to point to the revealing nature of God, of Jesus, of us. But if the light of this scripture reveals the nature of judgment (think of all that we would rather keep nestled in shadow rather than on our front porches), that same light also reveals not only our sin, but our belovedness—that *God so loved the world*. That Jesus meets all those who come to him in the dark of night. That judgment is not handed down from on high, but rather came in the form of a human who knew all those things which we pretend we don't feel, which bring us out of our light-infused-beloved-child-of-God state. We are sinners. And we are beloved. We can be—and we are—both. That same light which reveals latent dust bunnies residing under our beds also assures us that no monsters lurk there as we turn off the lights to go to sleep.

In our first reading from Numbers today, the only thing which can heal the venom of the snakes is by looking into the eyes of the bronze snake itself. The sin is healed— not magically removed, but healed—by looking at it, recognizing it, responding to it.

Jesus is asking us here, on this fourth Sunday of Lent, to tell the truth. The judgment he speaks of is instead a revealing rather than a sentencing—even though we might wish to remain in our own smallness of individual certainty, God asks for something different, because God *is* different than we are. We tend to imagine a God who judges willy-nilly because that is what we are prone to do. But when our lives are revealed, when our sins acknowledged, when forgiveness sought—the freedom, the very lightness it brings actually hews us closer to the God of creation, the God made manifest in the lifting of his son from the cross and ending death. Our God does not stop at the cross. Our God does not end in the dark of the tomb. Our God not only defies sin and death, but rises up, asking us to rise with him, bringing our gaze from our navels to the light of the kingdom we are invited to build.

I'm not sure Mrs. Smit had all this in mind when she crafted this assignment. Perhaps she did, she knew the wiles of teenagers all too well. As I wrote this sermon, I kept trying to recall what grade I gave myself for that assignment. I can't remember. But what I do remember is the profound process of revealing and reflection that the assignment brought out of me. I can't imagine that God is too caught up in our final grade. But I suspect that our God is one who will dive deep into reflection alongside each of us. And that is Good News for all of u who come to Jesus in the dark of night.

Amen.