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St. John's Episcopal Church
11th March 2018
Lent IV (B): John 3:14-21

According to the Gospel of John, Jesus says there's a whole lotta people in trouble. There's a whole lotta people who, because they don't believe in him, or don't even *know* him, are condemned.

Condemned to *what*, Jesus doesn't say, but interpreters, especially those of a more conservative bent, have said that all those people are condemned to hell. Because they don't know Jesus. Because they don't *believe* in Jesus.

So that's about 1.3 billion Muslims, 900 million Hindus, 376 million Buddhists, 14 million Jews, 23 million Sikhs, 394 million who practice Chinese traditional religion, 100 million who practice African traditional religion, and a whole bunch of people who follow another tradition and about 1.1 billion who follow no religion at all. There's about 2.1 billion Christians, by the way. (Source: https://www.theregister.co.uk/2006/10/06/the_odd_body_religion/)

Moreover, what about Abraham, Moses, Sarah, Ruth, Jacob, Isaac, Naomi, Esther? And all *their* people! What about them? They didn't have a chance to even *know* Jesus. Neither did the First Nation people of the Americas.

That's a whole lot of people who are condemned. It says so, right there in the Gospel of John, Chapter 3, Verse 18, "Those who believe in him 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."

According to some interpreters Hell's really crowded with all those non-believers and non-knowers.

And that's awfully strong stuff and it doesn't fit with my belief in the God of love.

Chapter 3 Verse 16 says that God loved the world *so much* that God *gave* his son – that's Jesus, if you're following me here – God *gave* his son to the world. Verse 16 doesn't say God gave Jesus only to a few people – God loved the world and God gave Jesus to the *whole dang world!* The God whose love knows no bounds *gave* the world *Jesus!*

God simply did it. *Gave his only Son. A free gift.*

Because the world is broken.

The great playwright Eugene O'Neill said, "Man is born broken. He lives by mending. The grace of God is glue."

And I would add: The glue of God is love.

But I have *another* question: What is this eternal life Jesus is talking about? Does it mean living forever? If it does, then there's a lot of believers who got gypped. Does it mean going to heaven? It surely means more than being alive forever, because our limited imagination can't

even grasp the meaning of forever. Perhaps eternal life is something closer to life outside time – which might make our eternal life something like the life of God. A return to God time.

By enacting his forgiving grace, God gives humankind the ultimate outpouring of love – generosity in the face of Jesus Christ.

And I cannot believe that such generosity is limited to thirty-three percent of the world's population.

There you have it: I'm a Universalist. You probably knew that already. Not a Unitarian, mind you, for I am absolutely Trinitarian – but for me, the God who is Love does not hand out report cards: "You're a Christian. Enter heaven." "You're a Buddhist. Go somewhere else."

It's not like heaven is supposed to be a gated community.

And by the way, I think Bishop Whayne knows this already so don't even think of reporting me.

For me, *for me*, Jesus Christ provides a unique pathway to the divine. For me, Jesus is the unique child of God. For me, Jesus is the unique gift of God.

But I'm not sure about the requirement that people *believe* in Jesus in order to have eternal life with God.

Heck, as I've said, I'm not even a hundred percent sure what eternal life *is*. I just know that it is a promise.

And God doesn't make promises God doesn't intend to keep.

And so, there are things for us to consider when we hear this Gospel passage.

First, we need to remember that Jesus didn't write it. John did. And John wrote it anywhere from the year 60 to the year 140, depending on which scholar you believe. He was not an eyewitness reporter and was not a stenographer. He was handing down oral history – ask one of our resident anthropologists or sociologists what that means.

Second, John wrote it in Greek. There were no punctuation marks – that is, no quotation marks. So inserting "Jesus said" may *or may not* be questionable. Putting quotation remarks around John 3:16 may *or may not* be questionable. My point here is that in the theology of John, God's astonishing generosity is fundamental. To attribute this saying to Jesus supports John's theology of Jesus Christ as the outpouring of God's love for all humankind.

Third, John writes quite a bit about eternal life. If this is the same John who wrote the book of Revelation, he was a Christ-following mystic. Mystics have a certain style, a certain flair for metaphor and symbolism. Eternal life was very real to John – and it is very real to me, too; I just don't know what it is.

Fourth, and probably most important, we must return to the message of God's gift. God *gave* Jesus into the world. God *birthed* Jesus through our sister Mary. God didn't have to have a reason that made any sense to you or me – he just loved us that much.

And he still loves us that much.

Believe in Jesus. Believe in God. Believe in Love, which conquers all the darkness of the world and brings us all into eternal light.

Amen.