First Presbyterian Church of Soda Springs

3/10/24

Good and Evil?

John 3:14-21

**14**And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, **15**that whoever believes in him may have eternal life. **16**“For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. **17**“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. **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. **19**And this is the judgment, that the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil. **20**For all who do evil hate the light and do not come to the light, so that their deeds may not be exposed. **21**But those who do what is true come to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that their deeds have been done in God.”

I’ll start, today, by stating the obvious. Today’s reading contains two of the most beloved and recognizable verses in the entire Bible. ***16****“For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.”* ***17****“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.”* For most, if not all of us, these verses are ones we’ve heard all of our lives; in Sunday school, from the pulpit, and in sacred song. We’ve seen them on placards waved by avid sports fans, during all sorts of sporting events, and we’ve heard them quoted by politicians and preachers alike. These verses are so well known, in fact, that even many non-Christians are familiar with them. If ever there is a time for Bible verses to be taken out of context, I’d argue that these two verses certain fit the bill.

That said, I’m a huge proponent of reading, and attempting to understand, scripture within the context of time and place. I believe it’s vital to understand the who, what and why of our sacred text. Who is the intended audience, what’s happening in the world at the time these words were put to paper, and why is it important to us in our twenty-first century lives.

So, with that formula in mind, let’s back up a bit. In the verses immediately preceding today’s passage, Jesus receives a visit from Nicodemus. This visit happens in the middle of the night, which doesn’t surprise anyone, since good ol Nick was a member of the Sanhedrin, the top governing body of the religious life of the Jewish people. I’m sure that Nicodemus had heard all about Jesus, (who hadn’t at this point), and it’s obvious that Nicodemus has doubts about how Jesus is being talked about by his fellow religious leaders. So, he’s come to see for himself. Yes, Nicodemus has come to see Jesus and to find out what the heck is going on, but he does so under cover of darkness. We can assume that this visit took place at night because Nicodemus was nervous about being seen with Jesus and worried about his position. In spite of Nicodemus’ reluctance to be seen with Jesus, John 2:3 tells us that Nicodemus’ opening words to Jesus were,“*…Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God, for no one can do these signs that you do unless God is with that person.”*

Nicodemus’s use of the word “we,” implies that at least some of the Sanhedrin believed Jesus was, a prophet sent by God and maybe just maybe, that Jesus was even the long-awaited Messiah.

Now, here’s where it gets a bit sticky. Starting in verse 19, we hear Jesus equating light with good and darkness with evil. Many commentaries make the argument that Jesus is referring to all of the Pharisees’, as if they were a monolithic group, all in lock step with the same views and opinions. As we all know, it’s very rare for any group of people to be in total agreement on each and every little thing. While there may be general consensus on an overarching idea, or concept, folks often hold back sharing thoughts and ideas that put them at odds with the majority, out of fear of being ridiculed or rejected. This can create a situation where folks prefer to go along to get along, even when their gut; their intuition, is telling them otherwise.

In equating darkness with evil, I think Jesus might be taking a swipe at Nicodemus, given the timing of his visit. Here’s a Pharisee, one of the most powerful men in all of Judaism, afraid to be seen talking to Jesus, even though he freely acknowledges that Jesus has been sent by God.

We don’t have any record of what happened after Nicodemus’ late-night visit, but I think it’s fair to assume that he went back to the Sanhedrin and assumed his duties. When he got back, maybe he argued Jesus’ case, maybe he tried to convince his fellow members that they were on the wrong path, maybe he even tried to convince the skeptics on the Sanhedrin that Jesus was the real deal. We simply don’t know. What we do know, is that nothing really changed and the Pharisees, *as a group,* continued to oppose Jesus’ ministry which ultimately would lead to Jesus’ crucifixion.

I think we’d all like to believe that if we had been in Nicodemus’ shoes, we would have acted differently. We’d like to think that we wouldn’t have been afraid to be talking to Jesus in the light of day, for all to see, no matter the consequences. We’d like to think that we would have joined with Jesus to condemn the darkness of evil and we’d like to think that we’d be in total agreement with Jesus that our deeds and our actions should be done in the light.

But, would we? And more importantly, for us living 2,000 years after this event, do we?

Do we condemn the darkness that evil brings into our world? Do our actions match any words of condemnation that we might utter? You see, my biggest problem with Nicodemus is that he wanted to have it both ways. He was happy to acknowledge that Jesus was sent by God, but he was afraid to break with the majority opinion, speak up and publicly work in the light of day, to combat the evils being perpetuated by his fellow religious leaders.

So back to my questions, are we willing to match our actions to our words, when confronting evil? Are we willing to be more than middle of the road Christians, mouthing platitudes and pious words, while ignoring the realities of the evil that seems to be all around us?

We are called not just to live in the light of the Gospel message, but to do everything in our power to bring that light to others. We are called to shine light on the evils of war, shine light on the evils of poverty, shine light on the evils of injustice, shine light on the evils of racism and classism.

Shining light on the darkness of evil, will not make us popular; it won’t necessarily put us in the majority and the risk of being rejected is very real. Yet, being middle of the road Christians, who simply go along to get along, really isn’t an option, if we are to truly count ourselves as followers of the risen Christ.

So, another question for you: Do we become perpetuators of evil through our inaction? Or do we become perpetuators of good, though the actions we take, even when it’s difficult?

Fear can be a powerful motivator not to move, it can be a powerful reason for us to say that fighting evil isn’t our problem, or to equivocate and say that perhaps the evil we see isn’t all that bad, after all. Our belief in the message of the good news of the gospel, compels us to take action, or at least it should, and I firmly believe that faith without action is no faith at all.

I’ll leave you with this quote attributed to Edmund Burke, an eighteenth-century Irish philosopher: *“The only thing nec­es­sary for the tri­umph of evil is for good men to do noth­ing.”*

Siblings, don’t let fear stand in the way of bringing light to those around us. However, we define evil, we have been given a job to do. It’s time to get to work. AMEN