

The Message of the Cross: There is Grace

John 3:14-21

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And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.

'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.

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. 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.

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.

For all who do evil hate the light and do not come to the light, so that their deeds may not be exposed.

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.'

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Our firstborn son came into the world early – a week early – on a Monday morning.

At that time, Lindsey and I lived a good drive away from our families. Our plan was that when Lindsey's labor started, we would call both sets of grandparents-to-be and tell them to start driving toward our home in Richmond, Virginia.

Things didn't go according to plan. It turns out that Wells was in quite a hurry to see what was happening on the outside – so much so that he was delivered just a few hours after we arrived to the hospital...while both sets of his grandparents were still hurtling down the interstate in the hopes of beating the labor-clock.

When I called my parents – while overjoyed that both Wells and Lindsey were happy and healthy – they were a little disappointed that they had missed the event. Hanging up the

phone, with a few hours left to drive, they flipped on the radio. As if the good Lord knew that Mom and Dad needed a lift, Louis Armstrong's voice floated out of the speakers:

*I hear babies cry, I watch them grow
They'll learn much more, than I'll ever know
And I think to myself...what a wonderful world.*

And it is, isn't it?
A wonderful world?

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You know, I've discovered that you look at the world differently when you bring someone into it.

I remember our drive home from the hospital with Wells. Things are a little different the first time you strap a car seat into your backseat. All of a sudden drivers who – only days before – I perceived to be good, law-abiding citizens – magically turned into crazed, reckless, lunatics!

You look at the world differently when you bring someone into it.

I remember having to go on an emergency trip to Wal-Mart at 1:30 in the morning when Wells was very little to get some diapers (because somebody...I'm not naming names...was supposed to have a reserve supply and they had neglected to follow through). When I arrived at Wal-Mart at 1:30 in the morning I was shocked and not the least bit judgmental when I saw other parents *with their children* – at 1:30 in the morning – who were shopping...at least I was shocked and judgmental until I realized that when you work a double shift to make ends meet, starting at 7:00 a.m. and ending at 1:00 a.m. and you don't have the money for child-care, going to Wal-Mart at 1:30 with your children is the only time when you can shop. I remember thinking about the stark difference between the lives of those children and of my own.

It wasn't too many years ago that we had to help Wells learn how to negotiate a bully in his classroom at school. I remember the pain of hearing him ask the question for the first time: "But why are some people so mean, daddy?"

It wasn't long before Wells started to notice some other things about the world: Like who has a bigger house. Who has a nicer car. That there are people who are homeless. That some neighborhoods are mostly white and others are mostly black. That soldiers have to fight.

You look at the world differently when you bring someone into it.

I watch those of you who are teenagers (and those of you have teenagers) to see how you are navigating the challenge of too many choices, and too much access to adult content and conversations, and too much pressure, and too little time.

I read with horror what is happening in the part of the world we call “the cradle of civilization.” I am shaken to the core about what I read about ISIS and Boku Harum. I worry about what is happening to our environment. I lament the reality of how polarized our politics are – where we have allowed our pride and self-righteousness become the priority instead of the common good.

And I think to myself...what a wonderful world?

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A long, long time ago – as in the third century, during the same time period that Christianity started to emerge as a religion instead of just a movement – a long time ago the Persian philosophers of the day created a theory to help them explain what they were experiencing as the reality of the world. That theory was called Manichaeism, which was pronounced to be a heresy by the early church.

Manichaeism believes that the world exists in two spheres: good and evil, light and darkness. According to this philosophy, the God of good and light is in charge within that sphere and the lesser gods of evil and darkness are in charge within their sphere. When faced with the perplexing question of how evil can exist in the world –Manichaeism’s answer is easy...the lesser gods created what which is evil, while the higher God created what is good.

At first blush, you might think that the gospel writer of John thinks the same thing. Throughout its account of Jesus’ life, John’s gospel describes the world in terms of light and darkness, of good and evil, of love and hate...God on the one hand and “the world” on the other.

In fact, there was a point – early in the third century – when Manichaeism competed with Christianity as the most influential philosophy or “religion” of the day. Indeed, a main reason why Manichaeism did not eclipse Christianity is because the church’s greatest theologian – Augustine...someone you have probably heard of before, the early church father who said “our heart is restless until it rests in thee.” Augustine, who was a Manichaeist, converted to Christianity in 387 AD. The reason that Augustine converted is because he realized that the world is more complicated, and that God is much bigger than what Manichaeism allows.

Still, it is tempting to view the world in that way, isn’t it? Light and dark, good and evil, holy and unholy, us and them? It makes things simpler.

It’s pretty easy for those of us who make up the church to believe that our job – that the church’s job – is to protect the world of light from the world of darkness...that our job is to

be able to point out the darkness from our safe-place of being in the light...that our job is to hunker down and focus just on the parts of the world that are worthy to be saved...leaving those other parts of the world to their own devices.

Yet – right there gospel of John, in a verse that is one of, if not the, most recognized pieces of scripture – something that Martin Luther called “the gospel in miniature” right there in the gospel of John we hear this testimony:

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. 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.

The *world*? The whole world? Wonderful parts and not-wonderful parts? Light parts and dark parts? The world the way God intended it and the world the way we have rendered it?¹ Really?

Yes. Really.

Really? Does God know just how messed up the world is? Does God know how violent, how corrupt, how immoral, how racist, how faithless, how unfair, how dog-eat-dog competitive this world is?

Well...yes.

And it was into this world that God sent his only son.

You know...you look at the world differently when you bring someone into it.

So when the time came for Jesus to enter the world – a world that didn’t match up with the expectations of the One who sent Jesus into it – it is interesting and instructive to think about how he interacted with our world: welcoming the sinners, sharing a table with those who were hated, touching the unclean, speaking truth to the corrupt and powerful.

God knows – literally – what has happened to the world. God knows the places in our world, and in our city, and in our church, and in our hearts that we cover in darkness because we don’t want to stop doing them, or benefitting from them...even though we know they are destructive and wrong.

Yet – rather than choosing to steer clear of the parts of this world that are shrouded in darkness – God in Jesus Christ chose to engage – not to withdraw, not to avoid. To engage.

¹ With thanks to the Rev. Jarrett McLaughlin and his great paper on this text (The Well, Austin, 2011). Jarrett helped me see just how outrageous a claim this love is – especially with the rest of John’s gospel that operates in a dualistic manner (God vs. the world, light vs. darkness).

God in Jesus Christ chose to overwhelm the darkness with light. God looked at the world into which he sent his only son – and God chose to love – and that love had a cost – and we see that cost when we look at the cross.

At 11:00 pm on Christmas Eve, just before we turn down the electric lights to fill this space with the warm glow of candles, we have a new tradition of celebrating communion. And on that night, when I invite you to come to the table to share the bread and cup I use a liturgy that was written in Scotland. It captures well our scripture for today. I say:

Light looked down and saw darkness. "I will go there," said Light.

Peace looked down and saw war. "I will go there," said Peace

Love looked down and saw hatred. "I will go there," said Love.

So it is that he, the Lord of Light, the Prince of Peace, the King of Love, came down and crept in beside us.

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Here's the challenge: can we – as Christ's body in the world – take the message of the cross so seriously that we might realize that the grace God offers in Jesus Christ is not just for us and for those who are like us? Can we – as ambassadors of God's grace in Jesus Christ – resist the temptation to see the world out there as so dangerous, and so immoral, and so beyond hope that we are left with no choice but to circle the wagons and just focus on ourselves?

Instead – how might we summon ourselves to see that, while far from what God wants it to be, the world in which we live is wonderful enough to love? And how might we see ourselves as God's instruments of that love – as bearers of light into places of darkness? At our work, at our schools, in our homes?

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A final word: It is interesting to note that throughout the gospel of John, the word he uses to describe our response to God's grace is a verb, not a noun. It is an activity, not an abstract idea. The scripture does not read "everyone who has faith in him," rather it reads "everyone who **believes** in him will not perish but will have eternal life."

May that active belief – born of a grace that we do not deserve but that has been showered upon us...and the whole world – may that active belief give us the courage to go where the gospel needs to be proclaimed the most – trusting that the light does shine in the darkness...and the darkness shall not overcome it.

Amen.

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