

March 11, 2018

John 3:14-21

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Born to Love

Outside of the church, this season of Lent really doesn't mean much—if anything. Those not attached to a Christian community in some way are not seeing evidence of Lent around them...what they are seeing now is the emergence of coming Easter, so that in stores—for a while now, there are stuffed rabbits and chicks; potted daffodils and cut tulips are appearing...the promise of Spring, just out there a little bit now...embodying the promise of the emergence of life, newly sprung; fresh, bright and warm.

After a strange sort of winter, in turns snowy and very cold...the sight of chocolate bunnies and eggs and such has a way of lifting the spirits, whether you are attached to a church or not.

But, ask anyone who isn't 'churched' (as we say) what impact the season of Lent is having on them this year and it is likely that you will get a blank sort of look or you'll get a vague response gleaned from the person's recollection of childhood, along the lines of...'oh, Lent...right...ashes...no fun food...lots of praying.' Well, let's face it, the language of Lent is not evident in the community. The journey from Ash Wednesday to Good Friday is not clearly evident outside these walls—and walls very much like these.

But the truth is, for those of us in the Protestant tradition, the season of Lent was simply not observed, in any real way, for a very long time. When I was a kid, the only Lent I knew about was the experience my Catholic friends had with ashes, confession and going to church more than usual. Most Protestants went from Palm Sunday to Easter morning without experiencing a whole lot else...Good Friday was always an option, and one not taken by many...too sad.

Over time we have come to appreciate this time of the year in different ways...as more of an internal journey, when we step back from the everyday...from whatever defines our everyday, to venture inward...to personally do some theological reflecting—asking ourselves some of the deep life and faith questions we tend not to have time or take time for in the rest of the year—like, 'what *is* my relationship with God? Why am I here? What is my purpose? How am I relating to my family and to those within the circles of my life. Am I in right-relationship with them and with God?

These Lenten days invite us to take the time to unpack the burdens and stresses that keep us weighed down or stressed to distraction. The invitation in this time is to clear some space—some sacred space—to consider our lives—and the place we have cleared to consider the God who created us and who wants for us—what we want for ourselves...love in abundance, both given and received...wellness...groundedness and peace.

Now, you may not even know how to orient yourself to even consider those things...like preparing the ground of your being for an indwelling—that is, making or creating that space to let the love in—to consider those places within ourselves that have been parched for a very long time...and then, considering further, what it would mean to feel refreshed/renewed again.

Sounds like an awful lot of work doesn't it? And who knew Lent was so complicated? But it can be as simple as willing our spirits to be open to our belovedness in God—to rest in the possibility that our lives could be different from what they are now by letting the love of God ruminate in us—find its place in us.

A lot of people continue to struggle with the thought that God loves the world-and us...because, as the logic goes—if God truly loved us and the world—wouldn't things be different? Wouldn't my life be different.

Diana Butler-Bass, known for her work in these last twenty years or so on the emerging/changing church, offered the thought, in her book, 'Christianity for the Rest of Us', that people no longer want to know *what* to believe but *how* to believe. How do we continue to believe that God holds the world—continues to love the world? What evidence do we see that God still loves the world and us?

A lot of people have walked away from faith—and certainly the church, partly because they can no longer reconcile God's supposed inaction toward the crises of this world to a faith that keeps expecting God to fix everything and also the growing distrust of the institutional church's ability to be relevant in the new millennium. We live in an evidence-based world anymore...'prove it to me...let me see your data.' Well, I guess that would be us...embodying/expressing the love of God in the world...*we* are the evidence/or lack thereof, of God's love in the world.

John's gospel was written about sixty years after Jesus' death and resurrection, for a community of faith whose sole focus was on Jesus as the only pathway to God. It defined their community, giving them meaning and purpose—but down the days of history, this passage of scripture has been used in some church communities to condemn anyone who did not or who could not believe it—or whose life in faith is committed to another pathway to the divine.

Which is odd on the face of things...Jesus has just spent considerable time, in the first part of this scripture passage, with Nicodemus in conversation...speaking in concept, symbol and metaphor about being 'born again'...and yet somehow there are those who have taken Jesus' words so literally that it still has power to condemn people today—setting them aside/demeaning or diminishing other religions and faiths.

For a lot of contemporary people...they just don't want to be a part of that fight...where, because of that literal, straight-jacket interpretation of scripture, Christians can come across as mean-spirited, exclusionary and judgmental...it's easier to just not participate. In this age when people are free to determine their own path and the church holds so little sway anymore—we have an incredible opportunity to cut to the heart of faith—to reclaim the essentials and simply live by them—embodying them as a church community and then sharing what we can with our neighbours...and I think that that's where *we* are, not only as Aurora United Church but as the United Church of Canada. You cannot just tell somebody--'you know, God loves you' and have them believe it if they don't experience some of that love from you. If you tell people that God loves them and then take their language and culture away from them-or condemn them for who they are, essentially—how does that embody or convey God's love?

There was a time in the church—even in our own church, when we were sending missionaries out into the world to spread the word of God...with not a lot of appreciation that the people of that world had their own belief systems, spirituality and faith practices. This missionary zeal caused a lot of damage for a long time...but in time we came to a broader understanding of what reaching out and sharing the love of God meant—what being a disciples of Jesus meant...caring, healing, educating...no strings attached—no conversion intended or practiced...just love.

That's part of how we have changed as a Christian community—we speak now of partnership—of stewardship—of being the hands and feet of Christ in our ever-changing world—of loving the world around us—its people (in all their diversity) and the land—emulating the first creative impulse which was and continues to be—love. And, born again? Apart from past memories and all the negatives attached to that old chestnut—being born again in this time speaks of newness—of vision and insight into the presence of God in all things. We should all be born again...and again...and again...as we grow and change.

And Jesus being the *only* way to God? Well—Jesus is certainly *our* way to God—and we follow in his way, living out, as we are able, his teachings which includes the respect of others who live and choose differently.

You know, the apostle Paul said that we were to all work out our own salvation—to choose our own way—well then, let it be love.

Amen.