

A communion meditation delivered by the Rev. Timothy C. Ahrens, senior minister at the First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, Trinity Sunday, June 3, 2012, dedicated our state champion Faith Washington and our newest beautiful baby boy, Grant Elijah Washington, and always to the glory of God!

“Saved to NOT Condemn”

John 3:1-17

++++
May the words of my mouth and the meditations of each one of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our rock and our salvation. Amen.
++++

Our Gospel story begins in darkness. Under the cover of night, a Pharisee named Nicodemus comes to Jesus. A very religious leader of the Jews, a powerful man from a powerful family of Jerusalem comes to the son of a carpenter, a Jewish peasant of Nazareth to find out about the truth of God.

The two men - Nicodemus of Jerusalem and Jesus of Nazareth could not be more different. Nicodemus is a power broker. He is one of only 6,000 Pharisees - men fully and completely dedicated to following the Law of Moses and living it completely. We would call them ultra, ultra-orthodox Jews in our day and age. Jesus is a man of simple tastes and extraordinary ability. He lives into the fullness of God’s love by radically and clearly teaching love and justice in the temple, the synagogues and by the seaside and by healing in the streets and towns - everything done outside the pockets of religious and social privilege. Jesus is an Outlier.

What is an "Outlier?" Malcolm Gladwell says this of a term he has claimed and written about in a book by the same title:

“ ‘Outlier’ is a scientific term to describe things or phenomena that lie outside normal experience. In the summer, in Paris, we expect most days to be somewhere between warm and very hot. But imagine if you had a day in the middle of August where the temperature fell below freezing. That day would be outlier. While we have a very good understanding of why summer days in Paris are warm or hot, we know a good deal less about why a summer day in Paris might be freezing cold.”

Gladwell continues: *“In this book I’m interested in people who are outliers—in men and women who, for one reason or another, are so accomplished and so extraordinary and so outside of ordinary experience that they are as puzzling to the rest of us as a cold day in August in Paris.”*

Jesus is so extraordinary that a scholar and religious leader comes to find out what God is REALLY about. Jesus teaches Nicodemus and all of us that God is about love and justice. “The Kingdom of God” and “eternal life” are readily at hand, our “Outlier” tells us. They are not far off so we cannot attain them. They are close at hand. In addition, the Kingdom of God is not for the afterlife, it is for the earth. *The Kingdom of God is what “life would be like if kings didn’t rule the world, a transformed world of justice and fairness, where everyone has enough for life.”* (quote from Marcus Borg) And eternal life begins in the here and now not the sweet by and by in life beyond life.

And salvation is not about afterlife either. Salvation is about transforming ourselves and the world in which we live. We are called day by day to live into the love God has given us. We called to be “saved” - which means to be “healed” - for this life and our times.

What makes our “Outlier” Jesus so special and his message so clear is that he calls us to live and to love fully in this day. He heals and teaches as one who has been taught and has healed already.

In a recent address to progressive Christians, theologian and author Marcus Borg asserted that salvation has been

"systematically misunderstood" in Christian doctrine. "It has never been about an afterlife," he said.

In the same address, Dr. Borg called all of us as progressive Christians (that is what we are in case you have never heard that before) to speak out and live out of our local congregations. He said, *"Local congregations play key roles in serving as 'midwives' to such faith and active transformation."* As we practice Christian formation and socialization, we are called to be the church as the community, which centers itself in peacemaking and nonviolence (Borg).

Dr. Borg notes: *"The dream of God, if you will, is to see us transform ourselves and our society as we face the difficult challenges of America and our world. Statistically the United States is the world's most Christian country, and yet US defense spending comprises half of all the military spending in the world. . . . (And) nobody in public life challenges this reality."*

Furthermore, America has the greatest gap in economic inequality in the world, and that gap is growing. As a local congregation and as individuals within our community, we must become the agents of transformation challenging this way of life and living.

Along with Nicodemus, we must wake up, get up and go to Jesus seeking the truth from our Outlier King. In him, we will find the truth of God's love worth living for.

In recent weeks, crazy, (so-called) Christians have been preaching hate and it has been streaming all around the world. When a pastor in North Carolina stands in his pulpit and spews venomous hate against gay people, declaring that gay people should be fenced inside electrically charged fences and left there to die, or when a pastor in Kansas says the Bible declares that gay people should be exterminated by our government, we in communities of faith like First Congregational United Church of Christ must speak out just as clearly about the true Gospel of Jesus Christ - to love God and love one another.

What pastors Charles Worley and Curtis Knapp have preached has NO value, NO truth, NO love, NO justice and NO Jesus in it. Poison has received millions of hits on-line from believers and non-believers alike. Sadly, it is the only Christianity to which all too many people across the globe are exposed. As such, it appears to be the only Jesus that some people will meet - for the first and the last time. If I were not a Christian and saw this, I would run as far away from this faith as possible.

I am personally and pastorally sickened to the deepest part of my soul by this vitriol. Instead of speaking to and from the heart of Christianity, it speaks to and from a cancer of hate in the human community and in our land, which has absolutely nothing to do with God the Creator, God the Son, or God the Holy Spirit. Nothing whatsoever!

However, the media and the internet feed on this sickness.

So, we must become the treatment for this cancer. We must get God's true word of love out to the world. We must celebrate the bold congregation in the heart of the Bible Belt who put up a billboard on Billy Graham Highway in Charlotte, N.C., reading: *"the Mission Gathering Church is sorry for the narrow-minded, judgmental, deceptive, manipulative actions of those who took away the rights and equality of so many in the name of God. Our hearts are with you. Christianity for all."* And thanks be to God for the 1,000 people who showed up to peacefully protest at Charles Worley's church - holding up signs of love and calling him to repentance for his words from the pulpit.

We must be the transformative church of Jesus Christ who brings hope to a hurting world. There is hope when people of faith speak out against hate and speak up for love. We are called by God to be a beacon on Broad Street and beyond. And the beacon begins with the little light shining inside of each one of our hearts - because the heart of Christianity begins in the heart of Christians!

In John 3:16-17, Jesus breaks it down for Nicodemus and all of us - for all time - are invited in to hear him say, *“God so loved the world, that God gave his only Son so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but 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.”*

It sounds to me that we have been saved (or healed) by Jesus so that we will NOT condemn. Condemnation is not of Jesus. Condemnation is not of the Holy Spirit. Condemnation is not of God. In fact, the same one who has come into the world for the salvation of the world is one in whose name we will take, bless, break and give away the bread, the cup and our very lives. That is right. In the action of Holy Communion, we are blessed to be a blessing. We are consecrated for service in Christ’s name. We, his saved, redeemed and loving followers, are taken, blessed, broken, and given to the world to be a healed and healing presence in the world.

Our story, which begins in darkness, ends with the Light of the World shining bright. So, do not be crushed by the hate. Rather, be lifted by the Son of God who is our Lord and Savior! He is calling us to live, to love and be a light for him and for the hurting world for which he weeps. So, let us join him in his passion and victory. Let us follow our Outlier Lord. Let us begin, by coming to the table. Here we will find strength for the steps that take us out in the world, which he loves! Amen.

Copyright 2012, First Congregational Church UCC