

Sermon by Pastor Renata Eustis
March 11, 2018
Lent 4B 2018
John 3: 14-21
“No Condemnation”

I’m going to guess that a number of people could say at least one verse of today’s Gospel by heart. That would be John 3:16: “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.” This is a lot of people’s very favorite Bible verses. Luther called it the “Gospel in a nutshell.”

But today I want to focus on another verse that I think could just as easily be described as the “gospel in a nutshell”—and that is verse 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.”

This is where I’m going to focus but I’m going to have to deal with the rest of it as well—because it seems to be saying the exact opposite.

But before that, I want to take us back to the beginning of chapter 3, so we have the context. Nicodemus, a very religious Jew who is interested in Jesus but not very sure about who Jesus is, comes surreptitiously, under the cover of darkness, to check Jesus out. So, the reading for today is part of a conversation between Nicodemus and Jesus where the focus is: who are you—really—Jesus-- and why are you here?”

An important part of Jesus’s answer is that God did not send him to condemn the world. I think it’s a *really* important answer because there are plenty of people who see condemnation just flowing out of Christians. Jesus makes it clear that this is not his mission—and, if we’re following Jesus, it’s not our mission either.

Condemn. It’s such an intense word—such a word filled with weight. It’s ominous—and total—and certain. There’s no fuzziness or wishy-washiness around that word “condemn”. There’s such certainty about the judgment—that it’s wrong, wrong, wrong. And you’re guilty, guilty, guilty.

Think about a building or a house that has been condemned. In the judgment of the inspectors, there is *nothing* worth saving—*nothing* that could be repaired or restored. It needs to be gutted or bulldozed or burned to the ground. There’s just not one scrap of hope for this building—being condemned is the ultimate statement of worthlessness.

The same thing happens when people are convicted of capital crimes and condemned to death. In the judgment of society, there is nothing worthwhile in this person—there is nothing to save.

Throughout my life, I’ve been very drawn to issues of justice—particularly of human rights. The very first issue that captured my attention was the death penalty. I was in the early grades of high school, and I remember being stunned that there was a

death penalty. At that time, what bothered me about it was that it made no sense—how could you kill someone to show that killing people is wrong?

But over time, there were other reasons that became important to me—like the possibility that someone was wrongfully convicted—and how there is no way to make it right after you've killed them.

But in later years, what's been most central to me is more spiritual than moral. I don't believe that any person is completely worthless. I believe that there is nothing, absolutely *nothing* we can do to separate ourselves from God's love. That doesn't mean that God thinks despicable acts are anything less than despicable. What it means is that we are always more than those awful things we have done—we are always someone God loves.

In God's judgment, we are always worth something—that's the radicality of God's grace—and it's a hard pill for some of us to swallow because we think that there are some people that are so bad and hateful *that they really would be better off dead*.

Some of the truest stories of life come from people who are condemned to die.

Anthony Ray Hinton is one of those deep truth speakers. He was wrongfully convicted and eventually exonerated and freed—after 30 years in prison. Not just in prison—but 30 years in solitary confinement--as an innocent man on death row—condemned.

The truth was that Anthony Ray Hinton was working in a locked factory at the time the crime was committed. But that truth did not prevail in his trial. When he was sent to death row, Hinton was understandably bitter and hopeless. He withdrew into himself and stopped talking. When the guards needed information from him, he wrote it on a piece of paper.

But one day, going into his 4th year of silence, Anthony Ray Hinton heard the man in the cell next to him crying. The way he tells it, "The love and compassion I received from my mother spoke through me and asked him what was wrong. He said he had just found out that his mother had passed away. I told him, 'Look at it this way. Now you have someone in heaven who's going to argue your case before God.' And then I told him a joke, and he laughed. Suddenly my voice and my sense of humor were back.

For 26 long years after that night, I tried to focus on other people's problems, and every day I did, I would get to the end of the day and realize that I had not focused on my own."

During those 26 years, Anthony Ray Hinton watched 54 people walk by his cell on the way to the execution chamber. Five minutes before an execution, he got his fellow death row inmates to start banging on their bars.

In his words: "I discovered on death row that the other inmates had not had the unconditional love that I had had from my mother. We became a family, and we did not know if they had any other family and friends there, so we were banging the bars to say

to those who were being put to death, ‘We’re with you, we still love you right up to the end.’”

Anthony Ray Hinton was an innocent man, condemned to death. And there he was offering what death cannot kill—love—in that very place of condemnation. He and the others who followed him—some of whom may have been innocent but many of whom were not—showed the most basic and essential kind of love. They could not stop the executions but they could counter the lie that there was nothing worth loving in the person being killed.

And isn’t this also true of another man who was innocent and condemned to die—and who did die? Not by lethal injection or the electric chair but by crucifixion.

On Friday night, in the youth group, I felt it was important to talk about the school shooting in Parkland. And I asked the teens where they saw God in it or how their faith came into it. It was a hard conversation because mostly it was about how God wasn’t there because how could God allow such an awful thing to happen. There was anger and questioning and hopelessness.

And then one young woman, shared a word of faith. She said it’s really hard but when terrible things are happening, you just have to trust that God is there and that God will give you strength and see you through.

The awful and awe-ful message of the cross, is that God *is* there—fully—taking on every bit of the pain—even death. In the place of condemnation—in the place where death seems to rule—God is *right there*. In *that* place where it is easy to ask, “what is the point?”—where it is easy to question the meaning of our lives—in that place, God says, “you matter—your life matters—you have worth.”

On the cross, Jesus is like Anthony Ray Hinton—shaking the bars—saying to the students and families in Parkland—and the 96 people across this country that are killed every day in gun violence—Jesus is saying, “your senseless death is not all there is to say—or even the most important thing to say about you.”

I said I would deal with some of the other verses following verse 17. Verses like 18, “those who believe in him are not condemned but those who do not believe are condemned already.”

There’s a lot that could be said but I think the most important is the understanding in this Gospel that eternal life is not something that starts when we die. Eternal life is life right now, right here—we experience it in those times when we know the deep truth of God’s unending and unalterable love for us.

Believing in Jesus—being saved by Jesus is knowing how much we are worth in God’s eyes.

There are many voices that condemn us—maybe not to death but voices that take the life out of us. They can be from outside of us—people who tell us that we don’t measure up. They can be experiences of failure that consume us. And I think that pain—in its many forms, including grief, can also make us question our worth—especially in God’s eyes.

These condemning voices are part of what it means to be human. It is so easy to miss the word of our ultimate worth because the voices of condemnation are so constant and so loud.

So, just like the Israelites were told to look at the serpent on the pole, so they could live, Jesus is telling us: “Look at the cross and live. Yes, you get distracted by all these other voices—all these other places where you look for worth and meaning.

But, take another look at the cross—because it is there where you will see how precious you truly are.”

Thanks be to God. Amen.