

“Love That Does Not Condemn”

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Scripture:

Psalms 139 and John 3:16-17

Psalms 139 :1 O Lord, you have searched me and known me. 2 You know when I sit down and when I rise up; you discern my thoughts from far away. 3 You search out my path and my lying down, and are acquainted with all my ways. 4 Even before a word is on my tongue, O Lord, you know it completely. 5 You hem me in, behind and before, and lay your hand upon me. 6 Such knowledge is too wonderful for me; it is so high that I cannot attain it. 7 Where can I go from your spirit? Or where can I flee from your presence? 8 If I ascend to heaven, you are there; if I make my bed in Sheol, you are there. 9 If I take the wings of the morning and settle at the farthest limits of the sea, 10 even there your hand shall lead me, and your right hand shall hold me fast. 11 If I say, "Surely the darkness shall cover me, and the light around me become night," 12 even the darkness is not dark to you; the night is as bright as the day, for darkness is as light to you. 13 For it was you who formed my inward parts; you knit me together in my mother's womb. 14 I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made.

John 3:16 "This is how God loved the world: God gave up an only Son, so everyone who believes in him can have real life. 17 After all, God sent this Son into the world not to condemn the world, but to rescue the world through him.

Sermon:

John 3:16 we all know, right?
It's so familiar that even most non-Christians know it.
Or at least know of what it is?

It's part of our modern pop culture.
You see it all over the place.
Graffiti on bridges over the highway.
I've seen it on billboards.

It's pretty much a staple at major football games,
prominently held up in the end zone
so the cameras can catch it especially during a field goal!

For many of us it was likely the first verse
we memorized as a child.
And for good reason.
You could call it a one sentence summary of what we believe.
But it is more than just God's plan for salvation
as in God sending Jesus to die to save us.

It is about the power to save the world.

If we stick to the order the words are arranged;
God so loves the world, an entire world
which includes all plants, rocks and every single critter.

And of course, that includes you and me too!

And that God loves all of us (plants and critter included)
so much that God was willing to prove this love
by taking on human flesh and to recklessly risk humiliation,
persecution and death at the hands of some of those creatures.
God did not forget this old world but gave it another chance
as we humans kept on managing to screw it up!

This is God's "final solution," for this troubled old world.
This was/is God's follow up to that what had been created good,
That it wasn't a mistake, but indeed worth it.

Maybe you and me, aren't a whole lot different than those old coke bottles
I used to collect along the roadsides of Harper County as a kid.
After I would collect a gunny sack or two,
My dad would then take them and me
to one of the grocery stores in town
and I would get a nickel for each one of them.

God sort of thinks the same thing, that we too
are redeemable and usable over and over.
But God's solution, God's method of redemption is love -
patient, costly and suffering love.
And whether in football or in the game of life,
that is what, in the end, wins! Love!

This is a rather simple truth,
and most of the time I think we all believe it to be true.

But, I'm afraid, too often we live with uncertainty and fear,
insecure in the knowledge that we are loved without conditions!
And why is it that we can state categorically a belief that
we are loved unconditionally by God but then find ourselves in the company of
individuals, churches and even religions
who pile on one onerous condition after another?
What is it exactly about the word "unconditional"

that we do not comprehend?
Either it is or it isn't!

Is it just a Divine trick? A cosmic bait and switch?

"I know I said "unconditional," but if you read the fine print..."
I simply cannot believe in a God like that folks,
so I'm going to take this unconditional love to its logical conclusion.

Like the Psalmist says, "Ain't no mountain high enough,
ain't no river wide enough, ain't no valley low enough
to keep me from getting to you..."

Maybe one reason we fail to truly believe this
is we stop at the end of verse 16?

Maybe we forget that John 3:17 is part of the same thought
and just as profound and as important as verse 16?

How many of you quote it right along with verse 16?
Actually, I wonder if 16 isn't merely a preamble to 17?
A clearer articulation of what sending Jesus was really all about
and a reminder of what Jesus' life was all about!

After all, as much as I love the Old Testament,
there is sure a lot in there that might give one the impression
that God has lots of conditions and is eager to condemn.

And of course, we have seen throughout Christian history
that so many have also gotten it so wrong!

I don't know about you but it seems like most churchgoers
act as if verse 17 had nothing to do with following Jesus.
I mean... how more clear can it be?

God comes into our world unconditionally
and without condemnation to love us!

But then we know that that ain't no way to run a religion I guess.
Fear of not measuring up or of eternal damnation seems to be
a much easier way to motivate folks to stay inside the lines.
What I frankly hear too often from far too many Christians
is that God does not actually love everyone
but that God actually condemns a whole bunch of folks.

I hear this a lot in my own beloved Mennonite denomination.

And some folks have a really long list.
Gays, enemies, terrorists, non-Christians, poor people,
murderers, thieves, immigrants and on and on.
God is of course on my team and not yours!
God's love then, is really only for those,
like me who look like God and who are on God's team.

Now do not get me wrong,
I do think belief and behavior are important.
Actions do in the end speak far more loudly
about what we truly believe in our hearts than our mouths do!
We do reap sometimes both intended and unintended
consequences of our behavior and choices.

But far too often churches, even Mennonite churches',
can twist this in manipulative ways, using fear to coerce people.

But doesn't the Bible also say somewhere,
"...that perfect love casts out fear"!?

And yet I've met far too many folks who live in fear rather than faith.
I have met far too many who feel that they
are actually condemned by God rather than loved by God!

And I must be honest here, this makes me really, really angry!

Far too many folks have been told
that they are not good enough to be loved by God.

I have met far too many folks
who have been told that God will condemn them
for who they are or for something they have done.

But in the end, none (absolutely zero, nada, nilch)
of our mistakes alter the fundamental lens
through which God sees each and every one of us -
which is an aperture of pure unconditional L O V E!

God, my friends, does not gleefully punish us,
pricking us as if we are some kind of Voodoo doll!
Such a view of God is inconsistent I believe

with both verses 16 and 17 of John chapter 3!

But just such an unfortunate view seems to pervade many churches
seemingly giving some Christians the God awful
permission to act in the most unloving ways!

And of course, as horrible as it is to not accept God's love
when we do fail or come up short to what we know God expects,
it is even more tragic that we end up treating others
in the most unloving ways.

If we think God is condemning us, we easily condemn others.
If God is somehow withholding love from us,
we find ways to withhold our love from others.
And if we think that God's love doesn't reach to everyone,
then we feel free to exclude some folks whom we see as undeserving.

The relationship that the Divine Creator desires
is based upon love and not fear!

And on forgiveness rather and not condemnation.

It is a love that is unconditional and not a result
of what we do or what we look like.
It is a love that is based upon the Giver and Source of all love.

And so if I only get one simple truth,
just one verse to paint on a sign,
that I can hold up in the end zone, right between the uprights,
for all those TV cameras at the next Super Bowl.
My little sign is gonna say John 3:17!

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