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John 3:14-21
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Unconditional Love?

You've all seen John 3:16 on billboards, For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten son that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life. Sometimes these billboards just say, John 3:16, you get it right. We all understand exactly what this text means, right?

For some this text is permission to gloat, "we're getting into heaven, and you're not unless you join our church." For others, it is a call to arms against all those unbelievers who are ruining everything. The others are whoever belongs to a different racial, religious, or political orientation. But when I read this, I find a contradiction, how can God love the whole world, but only give this everlasting love to an exclusive club of believers? How can the Christ who has come to heal the world, exclude part of it? Let's explore together.

Prayer: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be pleasing to you, Our rock, and our redeemer.

Is God's love unconditional?

One of my favorite theologians that I learned about in Church History was Origen of Alexandria. I think I was initially attracted to him because he was also a pacifist and was branded as a heretic because he believed in universal salvation. This

means that the love of God is so powerful, so irresistible that all people will eventually reach salvation. That even the darkest soul could be saved, even after death. I guess you could say that I am a believer in second, third, and many more chances. But more than that, I want God to be bigger than just “my team” Bigger than my nation. Bigger than the world. Yes yes, God is partisan, God is on the side of the oppressed. But God so loved the whole world is a great comfort to me in these divided times.

So God’s love is unconditional, but did you notice my hesitancy, the little, but but but, that you heard about God caring for the oppressed. This is an important uncomfortableness that we need to confront this text and I believe is necessary to our participation in how God heals the world.

God’s love being unconditional is brought into doubt with verse 18, “but those who do not believe are condemned already.”

I know that many here just felt that uncomfortable feeling when you hear a text you do not like. Perhaps people have named you or your loved ones as part of the condemned. So let’s take a deep breath. Breathe in, and out.

The Gospel of John was written by a community that felt rejected. John 16 reads, “They will put you out of the synagogues. In fact, a time is coming when anyone who kills you will think he is offering a service to God.” This gospel was written at a time when Christians went to the synagogue on Saturday night and then their

smaller Christian house church on Sunday morning. They thought of themselves as both Jewish and Christian, as though those two things were like being Christian and Mennonite. However, things were starting to change, their religion was slowly splitting apart because not everyone saw the light as they did. Or to say it another way, those two groups could not agree on Jesus's plan to bring healing to the world.

So John's Christian community lashes out, they look out at a world that is black or white, us verse them. Everyone who learns of Jesus, but does not accept that he is obviously the son of God must have some ulterior motive.

Nevertheless, let us take them seriously, both John's community and ourselves live in a world where humans are cruel to each other. What do you do if someone from your community is being harmful to others in your community? What do you do when you look out at people of your faith and conclude that they love darkness rather than light? This community chose to judge those people. What do we choose?

But it also conceded that God loved the whole world and would not condemn the world. That God's love is unconditional, but we will still call our fellow humans to do better.

And maybe we can live with that paradox of God's love and God calling all of us to do good deeds to one another. God's healing of the world happens within this paradox.

Or to put it another way, while I detest the idea of God condemning people for not believing the right sort of things, everyone who does not believe that Jesus is the only Son of God gets put on God's naughty list. Instead, any community must have healthy boundaries, must decide for themselves what is right behavior and what is harmful. And yes, communities often get this wrong, choosing instead to reject people based on race and sexual orientation, but so take John's argument with a heavy dose of humility. Let us judge people by their fruit, let us judge people by their acts. I can appreciate the anger of a community that feels rejected by their religion. But I can also hold them to their previous statement that God loves the whole world. No exceptions.

Instead, I would argue that verse 18, "those who do not believe are condemned already" can be interpreted as an invitation. God's invitation for us humans to choose to love God and neighbor of our own free will. That we humans are not just passive pawns in a cosmic game of dice but instead are active and critical participants in God's plan to bring abundant life and healing to the world. When we care for the widows and orphans in our midst. When we raise the banner of the disenfranchised, oppressed, and downtrodden, our acts are being done in God. When we call for the kingdom of God to be made manifest on Earth, where people

are able to build houses and live in them, work and have enough to eat, we are joining in the ongoing project of God.

Jesus calls us to an uncomfortable midground where God simultaneously loves the whole world but also calls people to do good deeds to each other. Jesus calls us to participate in a type of healing that maintains both universal love and boundaries. Where we do our best to forgive, but also to expect others to repent so that they do not continue to hurt us. That is where healing lies. At the center of forgiveness and repentance.

Yes, God is the great spirit that guides us forward, gives us human reason to make our own decisions, and proclaims revelation that the impossible is possible. The God who proclaimed that soon there would be no slave or free is also a God who invites us to make the impossibility of slavery's end possible. So too does God call us to participate in the impossible! Because when we do good deeds, we do them in God. For God so loved the world, the whole world, but humans still have a part to play.