



The Final Line – TouchPoint for March 10, 2021

John 3:14-21 NRSV ¹⁴ And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, ¹⁵ that whoever believes in him may have eternal life. 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. 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.

¹⁸ Those who believe in him are not condemned; but those who do not believe are condemned already, because they have not believed in the name of the only Son of God. ¹⁹ And this is the judgment, that the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil. ²⁰ For all who do evil hate the light and do not come to the light, so that their deeds may not be exposed. ²¹ But those who do what is true come to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that their deeds have been done in God.”

Grace and peace from the Mystery in whom we live and move and have our being.

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’s always the next line. The one, after the one you know, that is often the key.

You know, like... “The wages of sin is death,” You’ve all heard that one or read it on a billboard. But do you know what the next line is? “But the FREE gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.”

Or this, “Love the Lord your God with all your heart, mind and soul, and your neighbor as yourself.” But do you know what the next one is? “On this hangs all the laws of the scribes and prophets.” You see, we don’t just get to follow two laws and make up the rest as we go to rig the system in our favor. No, all the laws have to be tied into these first two about love of God and neighbor.

Now, John 3:16 is a very famous verse. Perhaps the most famous. And it follows on the heels of Jesus telling Nicodemus that life in the kingdom is like being born from above or like the wind. Two things, by the way, that you have no control over. I mean, how many of you decided to be born? Yeah, I didn’t think so. So how can you decide to be born again? Either Jesus is very bad with analogies or we’ve messed up the interpretation. I’ll go with the latter rather than the former.

Anyway, the kingdom seems to be out of our control. Like our birth or the wind. And so, when John 3:16 comes along, we jump on it.

“For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whosoever believes in him may not perish but have eternal life.”

Now there is something we can sink our teeth into. BELIEF. I can do that. And so, we focus on that and we begin to use it as a dividing line. Who believes and who doesn’t? Who is saved and who isn’t? Who is condemned and who isn’t?

But then the next line. It’s always the next line.

“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.”

Jesus cannot be a point of condemnation. Let me repeat that. Jesus is not the dividing line between condemnation and non-condemnation. You can't use Jesus to condemn people. Not even their belief and disbelief in him. He cannot be used for that.

Now I know what some people are going to say. "Jim, read the next line", and I will. The following verses speak to those who have condemned themselves because they did not believe. And the world condemns itself because it loves the darkness.

So, people and the world have condemned themselves. I will grant you that.

But here's my question.

Which is greater? The world's self-condemning behavior, or God's non-condemnation of the world through the Christ. Which is greater?

Which is greater? Your sin or God's grace. It really is that simple.

Which is greater? Your "No" or God's "Yes".

Now if you say, your "No" then you can't celebrate Easter Sunday. Your liturgical year has to end on Good Friday, which you should probably rename "Good Riddance Friday" ... because your "No" has the final word. And we humans finally got rid of that bleeding heart Jesus. If your "No" is greater than God's "Yes", then Easter is irrelevant. Insignificant. WORTHLESS!

You see, Easter is God's "yes" to our "no". We beat him, torture him, hang him on a cross, and he simply comes back three days later and says, "Nice try. What are you going to do now?" I'm sure God gives us an "A" for effort in trying to stop God's grace and forgiveness. But seriously, once you've killed someone you've pretty much used up all your ammunition to stop them. And when they come back to life and still forgive you, well, you're pretty much out of luck in trying to stop them, now.

Gerhard Forde put it rather bluntly when he said, "If we have free will, God is dead. And if God has free will, we are dead." No wonder we have to kill the Christ.

I mean, at least AA people believe in a HIGHER Power. Most of American Christianity does not. God isn't a HIGHER Power, but a USABLE Power. We believe in a CO-pilot. A booster rocket to my hopes and dreams. A steroid shot to make what I want possible. God is a secret weapon whom we use for ourselves and against others. God performs a function in our lives.

But a Higher Power, bigger than us? Greater than us? No, we want God at our disposal, whom we can use and have the final say over. Which is exactly the self-condemning behavior John is referring to. It is the darkness we prefer over the light.

So, I'll ask you again...

WHICH IS GREATER!?

Your self-condemning behavior, your "No" ... or God's non-condemnation and God's "Yes"?

And I'm not asking as a question of theology. I'm asking in terms of your life. What is your experience? Which answer is the truth that has set you free? Which answer is 'good news'? In your faith? In your life? Don't tell me what the book says, tell me what your life, your relationship with God says. You see, the day you start worshipping and following a book is the day you stop worshipping and following God.

So, WHICH IS GREATER!?

Now, before you answer that, let me remind you of this meal we participate in every week. In the night Judas betrays Jesus, I think we could call that a self-condemning behavior on Judas' part. And the night in which Peter denies Jesus, another self-condemnation. I mean, I think it's safe to say denial and betrayal are self-condemning actions, don't you?

In that night, Jesus takes bread and drink and says, "This is me for you. You are membered to me. RE-membered to me. I forgive you."

So, which wins out? Which is greater? It really is that simple.

But ok, let's say you still think our self-condemning actions are greater. You still want to hold out for the illusion of free will and that you are greater than God. And you can separate yourself from God if you so choose.

Let's keep reading... you know... the next lines.

You see, the next day, after this meal, Jesus becomes the CONDEMNED. He becomes the condemnation of the world. He is condemned by the religious leaders. He is condemned by the political leaders. He is condemned by a democratic vote of the common people. "Crucify Him. We have no king but Caesar."

But even worse, he is condemned by His Father. "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" Forsakenness is the condition of condemnation isn't it? Forsakenness is not a state of love and acceptance. Forsakenness is condemnation!

So now, even in your condemnation, you are not separated from God. God has become one with you even in condemnation. God has become the condemned.

God has participated in self-condemning behavior.

This is what we mean when we say in the creed, "He descended into Hell." This is what Paul means when he says, "He became sin for us."

This is AT-ONE-ment. Even in our own self-condemnation, God is at one with us. This is what the word "atonement" means. It is not a term referring to some celestial, spiritual bookkeeping done in the accounting office in heaven. Atonement means AT-ONE-ment. The Mystery at one with us. Even in our condemnation. Actual, here and now, AT-ONE-ment. In real life.

And in that AT-ONE-ment, transformation happens. Resurrection happens. New life happens. That's the next line after the crucifixion story. RESURRECTION! Or as my dear friend Henry Rojas likes to say, "Healing begins when broken meets broken."

That's what happens in this meal. That's what happened on the cross. We are not alone in our brokenness or condemnation. God is AT-ONE with us.

And in that AT-ONE-ment, transformation happens. Resurrection happens. New life and healing happens.

And that just isn't the next line.

THAT'S THE FINAL LINE.

Amen.

Spirit in the Desert

Opening Songs

Be Still

(The London Fox Taize Choir)

Be Still, know that I am God

Create in Me

(The Concordia Choir)

Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me. Cast me not away from thy presence and take not the holy Spirit from me. Restore unto me the joy of thy salvation and uphold me with thy free spirit.

Bible Passage

(A passage takes us from one place to another)

Touchpoint

(Where God's story touches our life story)

See Him

(Keith Duke)

See him: 1) silent and lifeless. 2) alone and forlorn 3) broken and helpless...Crowned with a garland of thorns 4) as son and as brother 5) related to all 6) through the grief of a mother...hurting the most of all 7) as healer and teacher 8) as helper and friend 9) as prophet and preacher...

Ignore Him??? I doubt if you can.

The Meal

The Lord's Prayer

(Our Father 3, Choirs of Annunciation Byzantine Church)

Benediction

Gaelic Blessing/Deep Peace

(John Rutter, The Cambridge Singers)

Deep peace of the running wave to you. Deep peace of the flowing air to you.

Deep peace of the quiet earth to you. Deep peace of the shining stars to you.

Deep peace of the gentle night to you. Moon and stars pour their healing light on you.

Deep peace of Christ, of Christ the light of the world to you.

Deep peace of Christ to you.

