

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."*

Yesterday I snuggled down on the couch with my grandchildren to watch a movie. We watched the Tom and Jerry movie that came out a few years ago, a weird mixture of animation and live action. As the movie started, my six-year-old granddaughter asked a lot of questions so she could start to understand the story unfolding. As with most movies there were opening scenes which introduce us to the characters, and I noticed that she would watch for a few minutes and then ask of one person, "are they the good guy?" and then of another she would ask, "are they the bad guy?" Even though neither character had done much in those opening scenes that could be defined as good or bad, she was already on the lookout for who to trust. Of course, it is hard to explain the complexity of Tom and Jerry to a six-year-old – sure Jerry seems like the good mouse being picked on by the big bad Tom cat, but how do you explain to a child the stereotypes and societal expectations that predefine roles and responsibilities of cats and mice. How do you explain that sometimes Jerry isn't innocent, and Tom doesn't always deserve that anvil to the head? Of course, you end up explaining none of that and lamely say things like, "Well, that wasn't a nice thing to do but I don't think he's all bad."

As I was trying to explain to her the Devil and Angel that pop up on Tom's shoulders at one point, tempting Tom to be good or to be bad, I thought about John's scripture. I know. Weirdest connection of all time to a verse that might be the most memorized and recognized by all of Christianity. John 3:16 is plastered on everything from coffee mugs to billboards and it is a comforting reminder that we are loved, so loved that God gifted us with God's son. It's a beautiful verse that can serve as an affirmation of faith and an easy snapshot of our doctrine...but it isn't a complete snapshot.

See, the other thing I noticed about my granddaughter's questions was that she has already come to expect that every story has a good guy and a bad guy and that they will be neatly and clearly distinguished. She has already discerned that life comes with opposition and conflict and people who will make it better or make it worse. If we read on past John 3:16, we will see John holds the same understanding that life will present opportunities to choose good or to choose evil. John loves to use the contrasting images of light and dark to talk about choosing a path that leads to God or choosing a path that doesn't lead to God...he's talking about hitting the mark or missing it in terms of God's desires or expectations for our lives. But what John also loves is grace...and mercy...and redemption. What John is wanting is for us to not look at ourselves, or others, or the world around us and see only a good guy or only a bad guy, it's always more complex than that.

What John is wanting is for us to look at ourselves, and others, and the world and see that we are loved by God in such a way that God isn't going to dismiss us in the opening scenes as bad guys that will deserve all that is about to happen to them. What John is wanting is for us to understand that God doesn't look at us with condemnation but looks at us with an offer for a better way of living and loving.

In Bible study this week, we explored the life of Ignatius of Loyola, a Spanish priest who helped found the society of Jesuits. He was born in the late 1400's to minor nobility and lived a wild, womanizing, grandiose lifestyle, flaunting his privilege and wealth. I loved the romantic chivalrous life of a soldier until he was severely injured in the battle and was sent home to his father's castle to recuperate. Bedridden, he asked for some books to read but the only ones in the house belonged to his sister-in-law and were on the life of Christ and the Saints. In reading those books Ignatius began to look harder at his own life and realized how far removed he was from God. He gave up his life of luxury and devoted himself to repenting for his sins. After some time of this, however, he came to understand that this isn't what God wanted – this devotion to suffering and shame for all the ways he had failed – God wanted a transformation. Ignatius came to the revelation that he...that all of us...are loved sinners. That God loves us as we are but invites us to be something more.

Verse 19 says, "And this is the judgment" – this is the place where God looks and says, this is where you miss the mark. This is where God offers us a chance to look at ourselves and our actions and see if Christ is reflected there or not. This is, after all, the point of Lent...to look inward at where we have missed the fullness of God in our lives...not so those places can become points of shame or pits of guilt, but so that we can see where we are and what changes need to be made to get us somewhere different.

Maybe the point of the judgment, as verse 17 says, isn't to condemn us but to simply create a desire do better...be better....to recognize ourselves as loved sinners on a journey to healing.

All afternoon yesterday, after the movie was over, I kept thinking about my granddaughter watching people and trying to discern who she could trust and who she couldn't, who was bad and who was good. And even though I know life is more complicated than those simplistic labels, I also know I want her to see good reflected in me, I want to be better for her!

God has given us the most incredible gift, a Son to show us what it looks like to live better...to choose the way of God consistently and with a pure heart bent toward sacrificial love. And that is the thing about John 3:16. We love to memorize it and put it on bumper stickers, but without verses 19-21 it is nothing more than a slogan for our faith. Those verses remind us that while belief is important, our judgment isn't based on what we believe but on how we behave, how we live out our beliefs.

Shouldn't we also want to be better for ourselves? For God? Shouldn't we want to flip on the light switch of our soul and take a hard look at our choices and our behaviors? Take an honest assessment of what we have been hiding in the dark?

The great poet and writer Maya Angelou once said, "Do your best until you know better. Then when you know better, do better." I think that might be a great description of what we are seeking to do during Lent. We are doing the best we can, and we are learning to do better.