

God Loves Us Both
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Recently I read a courageous letter that a Superintendent wrote to his school system concerning diversity. In the letter, he addressed intolerant behaviors that have come to light. Specifically, there have been several instances of anti-Semitism--with a swastika and "kill the Jews" written in graffiti. Just last week, a Jewish student reported to her parents that a peer refused to give her a cracker because Jews don't believe in Jesus Christ. This letter was written by Jon Sills, the Superintendent of the Bedford Public Schools right here in Massachusetts, right next door to Lexington.[1]

In light of this letter, John 3:16 and the story of Nicodemus being born-again we heard today, and Holy Week on the horizon, I'd like to speak about how we Christians can be inclusive and stay true to our faith. The tenants of our Christian faith can help us celebrate diversity. I'll speak about Jesus and the earliest followers first and then move to John 3:16 and the theological concept of being born-again from Nicodemus' story. I'll end by explaining how we can be devoted Christians and inclusive of other religions.

So first and foremost, let's talk about Jesus and his earliest followers. It's simple--they were all Jewish. It's ridiculous for Christians to discriminate against Jews. We have to always remember that Jesus was a Jewish man. As scholar Amy-Jill Levine states, "Jesus of Nazareth dressed like a Jew, prayed like a Jew (and most likely in Aramaic), instructed other Jews on how best to live according to the commandments given by God to Moses, taught like a Jew, argued like a Jew with other Jews, and died like thousands of other Jews on a Roman cross." [2] Let's remember this as we get into Holy Week soon--Jesus died a Roman death under Roman rule. Crucifixion was used to execute runaway slaves and political insurrectionists as a deterrent to others who dared consider disturbing the peace of Rome.

So Jesus and his earliest followers were all Jewish--they held the Torah and the Prophets as sacred and they prayed the Psalms. Jesus continued in the line of Jewish teachers and prophets like Isaiah, Amos, Hosea, and Jeremiah. Like these prophets, he was a phenomenal public speaker, used symbolic actions, called for a moral and religious renewal from within, and risked political persecution. Jesus proclaimed what he believed God wanted, the Torah taught, and the people must do. Levine remarks, "This historical anchoring need not and should not, in Christian teaching, preclude or overshadow Jesus's role in the divine plan. He must, in the Christian tradition, be more than just a really fine Jewish teacher. But he must be that Jewish teacher as well." [3]

So now that we remember that Jesus and his earliest followers were Jewish and that Jesus was in line with other great Jewish teachers and prophets, let's move onto John 3:16. When I went to a friend's conservative church camp when I was little, this was one of the mandatory verses we had to memorize, in the King James Version of course, "For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, so whosoever believeth in him shall not perish, but have everlasting life." I've still got it.

John 3:16 seems pretty much as exclusionary as you can possibly get, right? God loves the world so much that God gave humanity Jesus. And if we believe in Jesus (as Lord and Savior), we won't burn in hell. Instead, we'll have everlasting life in heaven.

Marcus Borg has a fabulous analysis of John 3:16 in *Speaking Christian*. Let's keep in mind a couple things. The world was created by God and God loves the divinely created world. Do we

really think God wants God's own beloved creation to perish? So God gave God's only Son. In John's Gospel, this refers to the incarnation--remember how John begins: "In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God." [4] God loves the world so much that God is with us in the world God created and loves and would not want to perish!

But there's the tricky part about everyone having to believe in Jesus. We think of the word "believe" in modern terms, about believing theological claims made about Jesus. But in antiquity it meant, as Borg states, "Beloving Jesus, giving one's heart, loyalty, fidelity, and commitment to Jesus." [5] And the final phrase about eternal life--in John's Gospel this is a present experience, because to know God and Jesus now is to already participate in eternal life to come. Borg ends by saying that John 3:16 is really about "Beloving Jesus and beloving God as known in Jesus, in the incarnation, and entering into 'the life of the age to come' now. It's not about people going to hell because they don't believe. It's about the path into life with God now." [6] So anyone who uses John 3:16 to exclude others who aren't Christian should get their Bibles back out and start reading all of John's Gospel! Historical and scriptural context matters.

Moving on, let's figure out this whole born-again deal. For born-again Christians, the story of Nicodemus in John Chapter 3 is important. Jesus and Nicodemus have a good conversation and Jesus emphasizes being "born of the Spirit" three times in the passage as well as being "born from above." John is the most metaphorical of our four Gospels--so John is reflecting on the metaphor of rebirth. If we are born of the Spirit, it's about the radical transformation of our lives. Being born-again is about leaving an old life behind to enter into a new life with God. Paul often talks about dying and rising with Christ, being a new creation, or being crucified with Christ. In Mark, Matthew, and Luke, this concept is often explained by bearing one's cross and following Jesus. [7]

Being born-again is a central concept for all Christians--it's not about having to interpret the Bible literally or excluding other religions. As Borg says, being born-again "describes our transformation, and ultimately, the transformation of the world, for those who are born of the Spirit of God as known in Jesus share God's passion for a more just and peaceful world." [8] Being born-again is a divisive concept within Christianity. Some born-again Christians discount the religious expressions of other believers. Some Christians who would say they are born okay the first time (which I happen to love) may discount those with different religious expressions we deem strange. But the reality of new life in God, transforming ourselves, and the possibility of then transforming the world is central to all of Christianity. Leaving our old lives behind, new life with God, being new creations--this makes us not just better Christians, but better people.

Now we recall that Jesus and his earliest followers were all Jewish, Jesus was in line with the prophetic tradition, and died a Roman death. We know that John 3:16 is not about people going to hell if they don't believe in Jesus as their Savior. John 3:16 is about beloving Jesus and entering into the new life that is to come now. Being born-again shouldn't be about excluding those who aren't, whether within the Christian tradition or outside it. Being born-again is about radical transformation, leaving old lives behind, and becoming new creations which makes us compassionate as our God is compassionate. This compassion should make us celebrate diversity in all forms and be especially loving toward anyone who faces persecution or discrimination.

Let's end with how we can be Christians and inclusive. When I preached on World Religions in the fall, I outlined the four responses Christians can have to other world religions: Exclusivist, Inclusivist, Pluralist, or Postliberal. I figured we may need a refresher! The Exclusivist Position understands Christianity as true and all other religions as false. Exclusivists would say that we need to share the Good News of salvation through Jesus Christ with the hope that this sharing

will bring people to God. The Inclusivist Position understands that there is truth and sacred content in other religions, but Inclusivists believe that Jesus is God's saving love fully revealed.

The Pluralist Position emphasizes being open to the fullness of other religions, that all religious paths lead to Ultimate Reality. When Pluralists witness to the Good News, they might say that Jesus is truly the Savior of the world, but not the only Savior of the world. Finally, the Postliberal Position urges full descriptions of religions while acknowledging the complexity of our modern world and holds onto one religion even though all are valued. The Postliberals argue that the religions of the world are so different that you can't really measure one from the perspective of another.[9]

Here's the deal, three of the four ways Christians can respond to other faiths are in varying degrees inclusive. But it seems that the Exclusivists are the Christians we hear from most because they tend to be the loudest and most opinionated. Exclusivists hold John 3:16 signs at football games maintaining that God so loved the world and gave us Jesus and if you don't believe in him, then you will not have everlasting life. That's not the point of the verse anyway-- it's about the path into new life with God now. For Christians that path includes Jesus, but it doesn't mean people are damned to hell if their path doesn't.

Our silence as Christians who likely hold one of the three inclusive positions toward other religions (Inclusivist, Pluralist, or Postliberal) has consequences in our communities. That's why I give Superintendent Jon Sills so much credit for not staying silent and covering up intolerance in a local school system. If we aren't speaking about God loving humanity and all of creation so much, that God wants us to work beside God and one another for justice and compassion because that's what Jesus taught and how he lived his life and what he died for, then we need to start speaking up. So that a Christian child will always turn to a Jewish child and say I'm giving you this cracker or let's eat this cracker together because God loves us both, Amen.

[1] Jon Sills, "Diversity: An Open Letter from Bedford Schools Superintendent Jon Sills," in The Bedford Citizen, March 10, 2014, <http://www.thebedfordcitizen.org/2014/03/10/diversity-an-open-letter-from-bedford-schools-superintendent-jon-sills/>

[2] Amy-Jill Levine, *The Misunderstood Jew: The Church and the Scandal of the Jewish Jesus*, 51.

[3] Amy-Jill Levine, *The Misunderstood Jew: The Church and the Scandal of the Jewish Jesus*, 20.

[4] John 1:1, NRSV.

[5] Marcus Borg, *Speaking Christian: Why Christian Words have Lost their Meaning and Power--And How They Can Be Restored*, 163.

[6] Marcus Borg, *Speaking Christian*, 163.

[7] Marcus Borg, *Speaking Christian*, 169.

[8] Marcus Borg, *Speaking Christian*, 169.

[9] Dr. Benjamin Valentine, *Systematic Theology II*, Andover Newton Theological School, Spring 2008.