

Say No to Condemnation

John 3:14-21
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First Presbyterian Church
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How many people here know who Max Lucado is? Several of you do; some don't. Max Lucado is a church pastor who has written nearly 100 books with more than 150 million copies in print, many of which are studied in our Saints Alive Sunday school class. Lucado was named "America's Pastor" by Christianity Today magazine, and in 2005, Reader's Digest selected him as "The Best Preacher in America."

Now that we all know something about Max Lucado, how many people here would guess that Lucado has a dark past. That right; he was a drunk. He says so himself, adding that his life was out of control. "I really was a train headed off a cliff," says Lucado.

The point is we don't know the full story when it comes to someone else's life. And yet, how often do we make judgments about others, tagging them with hateful labels like loser, jerk, clueless, mean, rude, arrogant, pushy, and all the other negative things we say and think about other people, some of whom we've never met. And what's worse some of these people we live with, work with, go to church with, hang around with.

In today's New Testament lesson, Jesus is speaking with a member of the Pharisees, a group of religious leaders who have made a judgment about him. They think he's a loser and pushy and arrogant and all kinds of other terrible things, including dangerous. So they condemn him because of what they think about him.

Jesus, on the other hand, has a more open mind, a more open heart. Even though Nicodemus and the other Pharisees are seeking to put Jesus on trial and destroy him, Jesus agrees to meet with Nicodemus, to hear him out, and try to help him.

Rather than condemning Nicodemus in return, Jesus opens up about himself and shows Nicodemus a better way, saying, "Everyone who believes in the Son of Man, in Jesus will not perish, but (will) have eternal life."

The world is full of people condemning one another over their beliefs and practices. It's epidemic. And it's insidious, creeping into our lives and into our hearts.

I mean, think about it. If you're honest with yourself, there are people in this world whom you condemn, people you think are just plain wrong, maybe even evil. Heck, there's probably people in your family who you condemn in your heart – maybe not for being evil, but for being wrong; family members or friends or coworkers who you judge as wrong, and they always will be wrong, because they just don't see things like you do; never will.

It's hard to look past this, isn't it? – when you're constantly seeing it on Facebook, or hearing it around the dinner table or overhearing it at work comments from people who are on the wrong side of things, who are making terrible decisions, who are part of the problem, and certainly not part of the solution. It's maddening, isn't it?

It's maddening because it just keeps going, with no end in sight. The snarky jabs, the thoughtless comments, the totally-not-funny jokes, the completely misguided opinions, their lack of concern for others, their cruel decisions and actions. How can we put up with it? What can we do about it?

And most importantly, how can we be part of the solution, and not part of the problem?

Well, the first step is to realize that we are all part of the problem. We are all susceptible to wrong opinions, misguided decisions, spiteful actions, and small-minded choices. Sadly, that's just the way of the world, if left to our own devices.

Thankfully, we are not left to our own devices. God, in his merciful and righteous judgment, intervened on our behalf, sending his only Son to save us from our fate as hapless humans.

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

God does not condemn us and neither should we condemn one another, no matter how far lost someone may seem. Why? Because condemning others as hopeless leaves no way for them – or you – to come out OK. Everybody suffers, stuck in the quicksand of judgments about others, with all of us sinking down and down and down, together.

The question is how do we keep from condemning those who are so clearly wrong? Well, if we want even the smallest chance of turning things around, turning things for the better, we start by realizing we don't know the whole story. We don't know what had that person or group do what they did.

Take for instance, the two boys who were fishing at their special pond. All of a sudden, the Game Warden jumps out of the bushes. Immediately, one of the boys throws his fishing pole down and starts running through the woods, with the Game Warden hot on his heels.

After about a half-mile, the boy stops to catch his breath and the Game Warden finally catches him. “Let's see your fishing license, little man!” With that, the boy pulls out his wallet and gives the game warden a valid fishing license.

“Well, son,” says the Game Warden, “you must be about as dumb as a box of rocks! You don’t have to run from me if you have a valid license!” “Yes, sir,” replies the boy, “but my friend way back there, well, he doesn’t have one.” The boy ran to save his friend.

It’s easy to pass judgment on others without knowing the full story. The hard part is acknowledging that everyone has their reasons for doing what they do, and only God is in a position to judge, even and especially those who have turned their backs on all-that-is-godly-and-decent in this world.

“... Those who do not believe (in the salvation of God),” says Jesus, “are condemned already, because they have not believed....” In other words, they condemn themselves before God by refusing to repent and believe. And that’s between them and God; not us. We only make matters worse and the situation hopeless when we jump on the condemnation bandwagon and fail to seek a better way.

And Jesus gives us the better way right here! When Jesus says, “... This is the judgement, that the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil,” Jesus is giving us a better way of approaching such situations. The key is when he says “their deeds were evil.” Their deeds were evil – not them, but their deeds.

This begs the question, what causes someone to act in evil, misguided ways? Well, it’s all the standard things – temptation, fear, greed, feeling hurt or betrayed, getting sucked into a cycle of Fake News, drowning in a whirlwind of information-overload, getting spun in all directions, and finding themselves confused or threatened by the whole thing.

All of us are vulnerable to such things, which is why all of us, to some extent, are part of the problem. Unless we end the cycle of condemning those who think and act differently from us, then we and they and the whole world are lost.

No, we have to come to some common ground and seek a way forward together, as difficult and impossible as that seems.

Thankfully, with God, nothing is impossible – even overcoming the darkness in the hearts of those gripped by evil and misguided ways, those whose “deeds (are) evil,” as Jesus says.

Christ’s light shines for all to see, and it is God’s desire that all people turn to the light of salvation, setting aside their evil ways. “... Those who do what is true come to the light,” says Jesus, “so that it may be clearly seen that their deeds have been done in God.”

So, we need not expend our time and energy condemning those who sit in darkness and do evil, because their deeds have condemned them already before God.

Rather, ours is to stand strong in the light of Jesus Christ, reflecting that light to others – even and especially those who sit in darkness – knowing and believing that it is only in the light of Christ that the world will be saved through him.

Amen.

PASTORAL PRAYER

Holy and redeeming God, as Moses lifted high the serpent in the wilderness, so Jesus was lifted up for the salvation of the world. We thank you for this season of Lent during which we remember anew your loving and redeeming acts toward us.

We thank you for your ongoing creative energy in the world; for bestowing upon us gifts through which we may participate in your life and work; for enabling us through the power of the Holy Spirit to carry on the message and ministry of your Son, Jesus Christ.

We ask that in these moments of worship, you will speak to us and impart again the word which we most need to hear, so that we may respond to you with love and faithfulness.

We ask also, your spirit of comfort, healing and strength for those struggling this hour and in the days ahead. We pray all this in faith, as we raise our eyes to heaven and our voices in song, praying the prayer that you taught us, singing:

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name.

Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.

Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors; and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.

For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen.