

4th Sunday of Lent – A God of Love or a God of Judgment?

John 3:14-21

Introduction

The boundless love of God is on full display in today's readings. The Chosen People had "added infidelity to infidelity," repeatedly turning away from God. But God still loved them (2 Chronicles 36). Paul reminds us that our salvation is the result of God's great love for us (Eph. 2:4-10). And the message of God's love is reinforced in the Gospel, as we hear John attest that Jesus was sent to save the world because "God so loved the world" (John 3:16).

"God so loved the world"

However, the Gospel passage also talks about God's verdict. So is God a God of love, or a God of judgment? In this question we must confront a truth... Our God is a God of love, and he is also a God who judges. Both love and judgment are essential and intrinsic to God's character. This is a hard notion for us to reconcile. It is hard for us to accept that a God who loves us unconditionally, would also find us unworthy of His heavenly kingdom. This is due in large part to the confusion surrounding our understanding of love and our experience with judgment

Love

Let's consider our experience of love first... The word "love" as we use it today describes a wide range of sentiments, feelings and actions. These sentiments, feelings, and actions rarely capture the essence, breadth, depth and the purity of what true love is. The word love as we know it, is used as an expression of affection towards someone (I love you) but it also expresses pleasure (I love chocolate). To make things more complicated, the word "love" also expresses a human virtue based on compassion, affection and kindness.

In contrast to our view the ancient Greek culture used 7 different words to capture the different states of love: *Storge*: or natural affection, this is the love you share with your family; *Philia*: is the love that you have for friends; *Eros*: is a sexual/erotic desire kind of love (this can be positive or negative) and we often equate this with romance; *Agape*: this

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is unconditional love, or divine love; *Ludus*: this is playful love, like childish love or flirting. *Pragma*: long standing love. The love of a married couple that is seasoned; and finally *Philautia*: which is the love of the self (which can also be negative or positive)

With the exception of Agape each of these words describes various states of human relationship... Agape or divine love... is the unconditional love of God. When we define love in a particular way those definitions impact the whole of our life — that is to say that they impact every way that we use and apply them as it regards our understanding of love. These definitions effect the way we approach our sexuality, romantic life, friendships, family relationships, and the accepted demonstrations and applications of love therein.

If our definition of love impacts our practice of love and our experience of love, then we must make sure that we begin with a truly accurate definition of love. That definition of love then must be anchored in the highest form of love... a love that is perfect. And only one who is perfect and who lives perfectly can establish that standard for love. This standard renders any human definition or description of love inadequate, as we are imperfect beings. But it does point to God, our creator, who is perfect and to his son who is human, divine and perfect. And this ultimately leads us to the cross... the perfect demonstration and application of love. A love that wills the good of another as other... A love that empties itself out of love for others... And this kind of love is a choice... it is something we do.

Judgment

Now lets look at judgment. Judgment too, is a choice. As human beings we make judgments/choices all of the time. However our judgments struggle under the same burden as our human love... they are imperfect. For us judgment is not simple and it is never pure because it is affected by our sensations and emotions. It is also affected by our limited view of reality, and our imagination.

God's judgment however is anchored in justice... justice that flows from His perfection. His justice is based on a complete view of the reality of his creation. This justice is anchored in ultimate truth, goodness, and beauty. None of which we can know completely for now. This is the judgment due us at the end of our life

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(particular judgment), and God's judgment on creation at the end of time (universal/general judgment). It is a judgment that must occur from a perfect God who demands perfect love and justice. It is a judgment on the choices we have made. It is a judgment on our choice to live in the light of His Son Jesus Christ.

The Rejection of God in Christ

In today's readings John is not referring to God's judgment at the end of time. The judgment mentioned here is the result of the choices the human family is making here and now. It is rooted in the human heart that rejects God in the person of Jesus Christ. To use the gospel's imagery, "the light has come into the world and people loved darkness rather than light."

That offers us something else to think about as it relates to our choices and actions. Instead of fearing a just and righteous God at the end of our time here on earth, we first need to fear our own desires and choices... it is those dark and hidden corners of our lives and the dark and hidden corners of our world.

The Choice

The choice is ours... We can look to the light. To Christ, glorified on the cross, a symbol and sacrament of God's perfect love. Or we can turn away, retreating to the darkness, being fearful of the light shining in the darkness of the world, and the darkness of our own lives.

The Journey

As we continue our journey toward Holy Week let us gaze upon the cross. Let the love of the cross enlighten and elevate our choices. Let the light of the cross free us from the darkness and the fear of God's justice. And may the light of God's love shine in our hearts filling us with God's perfect love and the fullness of a new life in his son.