

Light Hearted

a sermon
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John 3:14-21

Many of you are very familiar with a verse that's in the passage I just read. It may even be your favorite Bible verse. John 3:16:

*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.*

And you may likewise know well the verse that follows, as it flows right along from it:

*... God did not send the Son
into the world
to condemn the world,
but in order that the world
might be saved through him.*

And there the passage stops!

Well, actually, it doesn't. It just *seems* to stop there. Many think it stops there. So they stop reading.

But it continues on, not just because there are many other chapters to come in the Gospel of John, but it continues in the sense that there is more to say in this scene, more to say that fills out the meaning of the familiar verses.

Now, it's not really wrong to stop with those two familiar verses, not always. But it can be good, every so often, to keep going, to push past the familiar, to look and see what light the other verses can shed

on the gospel,
on our living and dying,
on our thinking and doing,
on our speaking and acting,
on us,
on Jesus,
on God.

And as we do forge ahead into those next verses, it's not so easy for us. Because we quickly find ourselves in a thicket of contrasts and a tangle of extremes:

darkness and light,
evil and good,
love and hate,
condemnation and acceptance,
rejection and belief.

In other words, we find ourselves deep in the Gospel of John.

*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.*

John tends to describe things in sharp contrasts. It's a black and white world in John, a land of either-or.

*For all who do evil hate the light
and do not come to the light,
so that their deeds may not be exposed.*

That's the land John inhabits. Yet our own familiar land, the one we live and work and play in, the one where we go to bed and wake up, is one of subtleties and shades of gray. The light we're used to is on a spectrum. The people we know are a mix of good and bad, of belief and unbelief. And "evil" is a term we almost never use to describe any of them, including those who do not have or seem to have faith in Jesus.

So John is tough for us, because we expect shading, but he doesn't draw in shades. His portrait of Jesus is drawn in those extreme contrasts that are unfamiliar to us, that are uncomfortable for us. He won't give us what we expect, and he won't speak as we are used to speaking.

*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.*

Actually, some Christians *do* like either-or language. They are absolute in their viewpoints, uncompromising in their attitudes. They draw red lines, and they build solid, angular mental boxes. So they think that they are being true to the Gospel of John when they speak in their own either-or, darkness-and-light way. They cast themselves as the children of light and their opponents as the children of darkness. They take secret or not-so-secret pleasure imagining the eventual destruction of their enemies, who they too-quickly assume are also *Christ's* enemies.

Yes, they think they are being true to the Gospel of John. But really, all they're doing is conscripting the Gospel of John into work John likely did not intend,

to support their prejudices
and give credence to their hatreds
and rationalize their fears
and justify their line-drawing
and bless their box-building.

They never even ask *why* John presents Jesus and his message the way he does. And so they cannot even begin to see that it is neither as sour nor as gloomy as *they* often sound.

That's right. John speaks so starkly.

He does it to change our hearts.

He does it to shock:

into repentance,
into reordering one's life.

He does it to highlight the claim of Christ upon us and the path of death on which apart from him we walk.

He does it to help us see more clearly

our need and Christ's grace,
our wounds and Christ's healing,
our hate and Christ's love,
our rage and Christ's compassion,
our despair and Christ's joy.

And that's why I think there is a joyful meaning that lies beneath and supports and fills out and completes the either-or tone of these verses before us.

These verses are about belief in Jesus. But it's important to say that the believing here is not an intellectual assent to doctrines. It's not agreeing in your mind that certain things about Jesus and God and the world are true. That's not what belief and believing are really about in this passage.

Belief here is not a brain thing. It's a heart thing.

It's not propositional. Instead it's relational.

The believing named here is a commitment of the heart to Jesus. It's a leaning in toward him. It's a placing of your trust in him.

Believing in Jesus here is a desiring and a deciding. Yes, a desiring and a deciding, a yearning and a choosing, a being drawn and a stepping forward

to see him,
to honor him,
to follow him,
to embrace his light,
to see all of reality in his radiance.

Believing in Jesus is being so connected to Jesus that your life now is transformed, so that

even now you have eternal life;
even now all you do and say moves in eternity's light;
even now your living and your dying,
your succeeding and your failing,
your triumphing and your suffering,
are lifted up into heaven;
even now you are with Christ in paradise;
even now your heart is filled with his undying light.

This is what is meant in the Gospel of John by “eternal life.”

Now, for many of us, “eternal” is a word that has to do with *duration*. Something eternal is something that doesn’t end. But in the Bible, “eternal” is not only about duration but also about *quality*. It’s not only about *length* of days but the *connection* of those days with God.

Life in Jesus is eternal not only because it is unending.

It is eternal because, by the power of Jesus, it is joined to God.

It is eternal because, by the love of Jesus, it is embraced by God.

It is eternal because, by the mercy of Jesus, it is fulfilled in God.

This kind of life, *eternal* life, impacts not only your existence beyond physical death. It truly impacts your present. It makes a difference today.

When you have eternal life, you have it *now*, not just later. It is the echo of Christ’s resurrection in your current moments. It is his return felt in your todays.

When you have eternal life, Christ makes himself entirely present to you: his birth, his ministry, his death, his resurrection, his ascension, his return in glory. All distinctions between his past, present, and future collapse under his power to take the most ordinary of your living and give it eternal life, just as he takes ordinary bread and wine, and makes them truly his body and blood.

Eternal life, in this sense, is what comes from faith in Jesus. And so I like to say that believing in Jesus, as understood in these verses, is supposed to be ... light hearted.

Yes, light *hearted*.

Not because you’re jolly.

Not because you’re never sad.

Not because you never struggle.

No, you are light hearted because you have had your heart lit up by Christ.

You are light hearted because you love the light more than you love the darkness.

You are light hearted because you now know that your identity, your truest self, is found not in the darkness but in the radiant glory cast by the Lord Jesus.

Believing in Jesus as a kind of light heartedness is expressed well, I think, in a poem by Denise Levertov, “The Avowal”:

*As swimmers dare
to lie face to the sky
and water bears them,
as hawks rest upon air
and air sustains them,
so would I learn to attain
freedfall, and float
into Creator Spirit’s deep embrace,
knowing no effort earns
that all-surrounding grace.¹*

My friends, may Jesus make you light hearted. May Christ’s light shine in your heart,

¹<https://www.poemhunter.com/best-poems/denise-levertov/the-avowal/>. I am grateful to my colleague the Rev. Joanne Stewart for sharing this poem with me.

lifting your spirit,
lighting your path,
blessing your days,
empowering your work,
gracing your rest,

so that you may feel eternity in the present and serve Jesus Christ with deepening truth and expanding joy.