

3 Advent December 11, 2016

Controversial Kingdom

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Did you hear about the controversy that erupted over a book about love? The book is called *Love Wins*; it was published in 2011 and although its title might suggest it is about marriage equality, it is really about the final judgment of God and through a process of questions it explores the notion of God's judgment being God's mercy and that the salvation of Christ is really for all people, whether they are Christian or not. Now this is not a new concept for Christianity, in the book the author referred to early church fathers who believed that the salvation of Christ is for all people. And 20th Century Christian apologist C.S. Lewis also explored this idea. However, this idea is and to some extent always has been controversial, perhaps because it part of human nature to be elitist, judgmental, and exclusive.

The author of the book, a popular pastor named Rob Bell experienced some unexpected criticism and fallout after the book was published. Bell is not connected officially to any mainline Christian denomination, although he is a graduate of Fuller Seminary. Originally from Michigan, he and his family moved from California, where he had been studying, to Grandville Michigan where he started the Mars Hill Bible Church in 1999 (not to be confused with the Mars Hill Church in Seattle). At its peak, during Bell's pastorate, average Sunday attendance at his church was said to be estimated at somewhere between 8,000 and 10,000 people. In addition to preaching, Rob Bell published several books and had a video teaching series called NOOMA, which many Episcopal Churches used and some still do use. In April 2011 Rob Bell made the list of Time Magazine's 100 most influential people in the world. And then, *Love Wins* was published.

The book made the New York Times bestseller list. And the criticism began. Some people were so offended by Bell's book they labeled him a heretic. Others were confused. I think a great number of people were simply disappointed by the book because it did not name who would and who would not go to heaven when they died. It is believed an estimated 1000 people left Mars Hill Bible Church after *Love Wins* was published because they were bothered by what Rob Bell said in

the book. By September of the same year the book was published, Rob Bell had announced he was leaving the church he had started. He denies the reason for his leaving had anything to do with the reaction from his book. I wonder if after growing to the level of spiritual maturity of Rob Bell I saw when I read the book, he believed he could not minister the same way he had and knew God was calling him to something else.

Still, there is no denying after writing *Love Wins*, Rob Bell went from being called a pastor to being labeled a “controversial” pastor and teacher, and to this day if you google his name you will see the word *controversy* attached to some of the search results. All because he wrote a book where he questioned the notion that God would exclude some people who are made in God’s Image, who God loves, from salvation.

I was reminded of the controversy Rob Bell’s little book on God’s love caused when I read today’s Gospel where we encounter John the Baptist once again. Last week we found John the Baptist knee deep in the Jordan River baptizing people and talking some pretty mean talk to the religious leaders who were coming to check him out. That confidence from last Sunday seems to be gone now, deeper in Matthew’s Gospel where we find John locked in a jail cell. Perhaps he didn’t expect to be arrested and locked up for what he was doing and saying, because maybe he was thinking the Messiah wouldn’t let a thing like that happen. Being in jail with no sign of Jesus coming to rescue him seemed to make John re-think his situation and maybe even his beliefs, and he started asking questions like Rob Bell. Only John didn’t ask the same questions as Bell, he asked a question that sounds like it could be dripping with doubt and disappointment and perhaps even a broken heart. He sent his disciples to ask Jesus: “Are you the Messiah, or are we to wait for another?”

Jesus, being Jesus, didn’t answer John’s question clearly or simply or plainly. Instead he sent John’s disciples to witness to what Jesus had been up to, the stuff of the prophet Isaiah’s peaceable kingdom we heard more about in our first reading today where those who could not see are given sight, those who could not hear are healed, and the lame now leap for joy.

Like many of Jesus’ answers to other questions, at first glance this might not be a very satisfactory answer. But it is an answer that invites John sitting in prison and all of us sitting in church today to reflect on what Jesus said and why he might have chosen to answer the question the way he did.

It can be tempting to see Jesus' answer as being only about miracles of healing: restoring individuals to good physical health. But that is not only what those healing miracles of Jesus were about. Jesus wasn't just restoring people to physical health when he healed them, he was restoring them to their families, communities, and to God. You see, there was (and sometimes you can find someone who still believes this) a belief that any illness or handicap was punishment from God and it meant God was angry with or didn't love that person. Thus, when a person found themselves to be suffering from any illness, they were labeled "unclean" or "unworthy" and were not allowed to fully participate in community or religious life. No one would hire them for work, no one would marry them, they could not serve in a religious capacity. These people found themselves excluded or cast out of society and believed God did not care for them.

So, when Jesus healed a person he was doing something radical, he was showing that all people, even people society considered outcasts are a welcome part of God's Kingdom; because God does love all people, God sees all people, and God wants not only wellness of body, but of heart and soul and mind for all people. By healing those society had labeled outcast, Jesus was restoring them to life, and showing that God does not throw anyone away because in God's love there is room for everyone. This is the start of that Kingdom of Heaven also called the Kingdom of God that John the Baptist himself had said was near in last Sunday's Gospel. And that is part of the Good News of great joy those angels are going to sing about on Christmas.

But that doesn't mean John the Baptist's question is wrong or bad. It is a question that is certainly appropriate for the season of Advent because it helps us remember what it is we are waiting for and praying for every time we pray the Lord's Prayer, which we do as a community every Sunday and perhaps as individuals when we pray at home during the week. The part of the Lord's Prayer I am referring to is the part where we pray for God's Kingdom come, and God's will be done on earth as it is in heaven. We say the words so frequently that we can sometimes say them without paying any attention to them. That is why it is good to have questions like John the Baptist's to help wake us up when we've gotten complacent.

The Lord's Prayer reminds us that we pray for and long for God's Kingdom, not ours to come. Sometimes we can confuse the two, and I wonder if that might be what happened with John the Baptist, who dreamed of God's Kingdom, as so many people did in his day, as God restoring God's People to power over their oppressors. They longed to see their oppressors suffer for the terrible things they were doing to them, charging high taxes, taking the best of the resources, and bringing in pagan religion. And while Jesus did lots of wonderful and amazing things, he didn't punish Rome. Jesus didn't really punish anyone. He did more restorative things. Jesus didn't force anyone to do anything; people could respond to Jesus by following him, ignoring him, or rejecting him, just like today.

What Jesus did do was show us what God's Kingdom is and what it looks like. And when we pay attention to the Kingdom Jesus showed us, like Rob Bell did when he looked at the Bible with his questions, we might discover God's Kingdom isn't as cut and dry as we might want or expect it to be. God's Kingdom might even look more forgiving and more inclusive than we find comfortable. And if we are uncomfortable with that, it is okay, that is what we have seasons like Advent for. To ask questions, to reflect, to grow beyond wanting those who hurt us or wronged us to suffer punishment and instead receive the same love and forgiveness and life from God as all of God's children.

Perhaps it is even more important in these days when we hear talk of division and distrust and anger to be more reflective of the radical notion of God's Kingdom and ways we might recognize God's Kingdom in the midst of our busy lives. To pay attention and notice where we see healing and restoration, hope and new life, cooperation and joy. On Friday I had the joy of opening our building to the Ohio University Police Dept. and the State Patrol who needed a community building to train a few dogs on their K-9 unit. I had the opportunity to meet and talk with the officers and I got to meet their dogs. One of which, a big black lab mix named Alex, is a rescue dog, his officer handler told me how much Alex loves to work, loves to go to work, and believes it is because Alex knows he has a second chance. And I believe him.

In the few hours the officers and their dogs were in our building I felt a growing connection between our two lines of work, in fact we talked about things we all have in common. When we said goodbye, the officers thanked us for letting them use our space, and I had offered to help any way we can in the future. One officer looked me in the eye and asked if he could direct students he comes across looking for someone to talk to me, and of course I said yes. Now I feel like I know

these neighbors of ours better, and they know me, and they are more familiar with all of us at Church of the Good Shepherd, and we grew closer as a community, one where they value Church of the Good Shepherd not just as a building, but as a church, a community of people following Christ as best we can and trying to help make the Kingdom of God a little more visible and accessible. As one officer said, "You are doing it." And I want you all to hear that today.

And we can keep doing it, even if and when someone might think it controversial to share God's love, which God freely gives to us, so that as we continue to live into that love together, the Kingdom will come.