

Heather Schoenewolf, March 22, 2009

*Limits, Lessons and Love*

John 3:14-21

Anyone who has spent time on a school playground as a kid is aware of limits. Limits must be established – by teachers and by team captains – to determine the rules of the game, to clarify the boundaries, and to set things up so that everyone knows how to play the game. Lines are drawn – often with chalk on the pavement – so that all who play may know if they are on a base or off base; if the ball was kicked in bounds or out-of-bounds; if a player has made it home and is finally safe. Limits are often necessary – they create expectations, they provide structure, they promote safety. But sometimes there can be a problem with limits when the lines that are drawn become exclusive and polarizing: when you're in the club or out of the club, a winner or a loser.

Today's text contains one of the most famous verses in our church today. John 3:16 is posted on billboards along interstate highways, on signs in end-zones, on Christian t-shirts and bumper stickers...and for good reason – it is a beautiful verse. The Gospel writer talks of a love so strong between God and creation that God went to great lengths in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus to redeem this beloved creation. And one promise of this redemptive love is that all who respond to God's grace with transformed hearts and lives will inherit eternal reward.

But this verse is one of those passages in the NT that is often used to draw lines. It is a text that has often been at the center of the theological debate about who has inherited Christ's salvation and who has not. This verse becomes a line

in the sand, a litmus test for who will make it into heaven and who will find themselves just outside of the pearly gates. When used in this manner, this passage of hope in God's grace becomes a proof text around the condemnation of others. It becomes the basis for conversations in which a discussion of personal faith and testimony of God's grace in one's life is reduced to one question: "Are you saved?"

We who read this text have to fight the popular culture's impulse to pull this verse out of context, to isolate it and elevate it as a mini-gospel unto itself. For the fullness of its meaning is best seen in the light of the full text in John. The teachings of Jesus that we read today come as the closing remarks in Jesus' reply to Nicodemus – the Pharisee who comes to Jesus in the dark of night with questions about who Jesus is and what he is doing. Nicodemus is a man aware of limits. He is aware of the judgment he will face if he is caught by his peers -- the other religious leaders of the day -- turning to Jesus for advice and instruction. He's afraid of what "they'll" say – and probably about what they'll do if he is suspected of following Jesus' teachings. He is a man confined by the standards of the day, by the expectations of the crowd with whom he associates, and by the fears on his own heart.

And yet Jesus' compelling witness to God's love draws Nicodemus into Jesus' presence in spite of those things which hold him back and those things which bring him down. Sure, he travels in the darkness but he enters into Christ's light. And if we read on in John's gospel, we find that Nicodemus was indeed transformed by this encounter with Jesus that night and that he was one who joined Joseph of Arimathea in providing for Jesus' burial.

We are a lot like Nicodemus. We often let things like labels and limits and lines define us – to create a fear within us that dictates our actions. After all, we live in a culture in which we are taught to identify ourselves along polarizing lines, as if we are marking up a standardized test. We are man or woman, fat or thin, gay or straight, married or single, black or white, rich or poor, democrat or republican, young or old...the list goes on. We allow our definition of ourselves to be limited to labels rather than expressions of the fullness of the unique giftedness we have received by God. And we are often drawn to these lines, for they give us a sense of clarity, even belonging. We know with whom we stand, whose side we're on.

This week I, and many of you, visited an exhibit at the Heinz History center called "Free at Last" which explored the history of slavery and abolition in Western Pennsylvania. Our Presbytery sponsored an event in which folks could learn together. Weaving through the walls of the exhibit, I was struck by all of the limiting language – terms used to characterize human beings by the color of their skin, the texture of their hair, the country of their ancestry, the status of their standing as slave, servant or free. At the end of the exhibit stood a sign – a reminder that indeed we have come a long way, but there is still a ways to go until the lines of race are no longer lines which divide us and lead to racist oppression.

On the heels of a divisive Presbytery vote around full inclusion and ordination standards, I was encouraged by an effort to work toward racial justice within our Presbytery – indeed a sign of hope. I was *convicted* by stories of heroic

measures taken by men and women trapped in slavery who refused to be defined by limits: Of Ellen and William Craft who disguised themselves as a white man and his slave man traveling from Macon GA to Philadelphia on the train or of Henry "Box" Brown who shipped himself in a crate from VA to Pennsylvania – a 27 hour journey to freedom.<sup>1</sup>

We are a lot like Nicodemus. We hunger for something else – something beyond the limits of our day. We search for something transcendent – something which will take us out of the boxes in which we reside and enable us to experience a fullness of life in which we can embrace the complexity of who we are and the magnificent divinity of who God is. We do not want to be confined by labels. We want to know God and in knowing God have a clearer understanding of who we are and who we are called to be. We even work and fight and push to get beyond these limits – especially when their confinement oppresses us and leads to injustice.

In the context of our passage, Jesus challenges the limits of the world with an unlimited love that invites us into the very presence of the living God. Jesus embodies the most radical love available: one offered to the world, one that brings life, and indeed salvation. *"For God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world but that the world through him might be saved."* The crux of who Jesus is and what Jesus is about is to serve as the instrument of God's welcome, as the fullness of God's grace, and of the power of redemption that God is offering to God's ailing creation.

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<sup>1</sup> Free at Last? Slavery in Pittsburgh in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> Centuries An exhibition by the University of Pittsburgh at the Senator John Heinz History Center. Tour Booklet.

We limit the meaning of this text when we see it as a mere line in the sand, when we use it to label people as saved and unsaved, and confine condemnation to damnation. As we respond to Christ's invitation to believe, to turn to follow Jesus as did Nicodemus, we must remember that the invitation isn't to serve on a jury regarding who is saved and who is not. It is an invitation to share love, mercy and grace – not to limit God's power and possibility as God strives to redeem the whole world. For darkness is *only* known in the fullness of Christ's light, and belief is authentic when we act according to God's grace and love. Judgment exists and persists when one looks at the world through the narrowness of squinting eyes struggling to see in the dark rather than by casting a vision in the fullness of the light of God's love and grace. Jesus invites Nicodemus and invites us **to live in the light**: to face the reality of our own sin and the sin of our own limits; to see the world through the lens of the truth of God's grace; to act in a manner that reflects God's love and mercy rather than harming or oppressing.

This week's symbols behind the Communion table are the ladder, the spear and the sponge. And these are the symbols of Jesus' last hours which try to establish a distance between humanity and Jesus – symbols of torture and injustice. And these are symbols used by the soldiers after Jesus' died to prove that Jesus had died – by piercing his side; by those who lifted his lifeless body off of the cross to lay him in the tomb. They are polarizing instruments – not just torture devices but also symbols which represent death over life; captivity over freedom; humiliation over exaltation.

But Jesus is the great liberator. And this Lenten season we remember that Jesus can – and DID use even the

instruments of limitation, of torture, and even of death to overcome the bondage of brokenness, of sin and death once and for all!

Brothers and sisters, we have been set free through the grace, the mercy and the love of a God who just will not let us go. Let us answer Christ's invitation to live as children of the light by embracing the unlimited love that God offers to us and striving to share that love with others across limit, across boundary, across divides.