

**March 11, 2018**  
**The Fourth Sunday in Lent**  
**The Rev. Keri T. Aubert**  
**St. Thomas's Episcopal Church, New Haven, CT**

**Numbers 21:4-9**  
**Psalms 107:1-3, 17-22**  
**Ephesians 2:1-10**  
**John 3:14-21**

“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.”

John 3:15 is “the most famous Bible verse,” “the ‘Gospel in a nutshell,’” “the fundamental statement of Christian belief.”<sup>1</sup> At least, so says Wikipedia. And so say many others, especially those of a more evangelical tilt. The popularity of John 3:16 with evangelicals only makes believers like me skeptical. Perhaps rightly so, if you keep reading: “Those who believe in him are not condemned; but those who do not believe are condemned already ....”

Last Sunday in the Inquirers Class we had a brief conversation about salvation. It’s an important subject, because so much of what Christians disagree about falls under the “salvation” umbrella. It’s also a complicated subject, one that can lead the unwary down a rabbit hole of contradiction. A bottom line for me is this: I’ve never been comfortable assuming for myself the role of judge and jury. Maybe that’s because I have so often found myself on the wrong side of those who are.

I grew up in Baton Rouge, Louisiana, a city that straddles the imaginary line separating the state’s South from North, French Roman Catholic from English Protestant, Cajun from Redneck. Along the line, the two groups contend, like continents along a fault line. Over the course of my youth in Baton Rouge, what had been a quietly prevailing Roman Catholicism gradually gave way to a much more vocal Evangelicalism.

I was in the Roman Catholic camp, if only noncommittally. When I was in the ninth grade, most of my Roman Catholic friends were born again. My best friend had become a fervent Southern Baptist. For months she pressured me to join her at the church near my house. I’m sure she believed she was doing me a favor, but I was annoyed by her recruiting tactics. For example, on weeknight revival meeting nights, she would stop by my front door and beg me to come along.

Eventually I began entertaining the prospect of trying it out. That lasted until one day when we were chatting in the school cafeteria line. I don’t remember how it came about, but at some point she informed me that everyone who doesn’t believe in Jesus is doomed to hell.

I asked, “What about Jews?”

She confirmed, “They’re all going to hell.”

I didn't agree with her then, and I don't agree with her now. But many Christians do, even today. This is ever more problematic, as our nation becomes increasingly post-Christian and religiously pluralistic. Many of our neighbors are Muslim or Hindu or Buddhist or agnostic or even atheist. Do we condemn them to a fiery eternity? Many members of *this* congregation follow Christ yet stray from traditional orthodoxy in many and varied ways. Do we condemn *them* to a fiery eternity? I expect not.

If we are inclined to resist, the gospels aren't always helpful. The Gospel of John is especially problematic, especially when it comes to Jews, especially because of its version of the Passion. Some argue that John insists that the path to salvation passes *only* through Jesus, *and* that Jews were and remain responsible for Jesus' death.

It's important to remember that each Gospel arose from a particular community of Jesus-followers, and each Gospel portrays a particular Jesus. John's Gospel is significantly different from the other three. One particularity is the division it draws between those who follow Jesus and everyone else. As targeted at the original audience, it defined the young "Christian" community over and apart from the broader Jewish community of which it was both a subset and a competitor.

As long as Christians were a persecuted minority, John's words were harmless. But after Constantine institutionalized Christianity in the fourth century, they became dangerous. From then on, the anti-Semitism implicit in the gospels contributed to anti-Semitism explicit in action.<sup>2</sup>

Here's an example. Martin Luther, father of the Reformation, writing in the sixteenth century, offers this:

Perhaps, one of the merciful Saints among us Christians may think I am behaving too crude and disdainfully against the poor, miserable Jews in that I deal with them so sarcastically and insultingly. But, good God, I am much too mild in insulting such devils; I would like to do it but they are much too superior in sarcasm, and even have a God who is a master at sarcasm and is called the actual devil and evil spirit."<sup>3</sup>

There's more, even worse, but you get the gist. It's hard to hear, but we are not served by ignoring its place in our Christian history. It is a long and sometimes shameful history, a history that we need to be aware of, now as much as ever, because inter-religious conflict remains with us today. Around the world, anti-Semitism is alive, and other types of faith-justified violence continues. As the events in Charlottesville last August readily demonstrate, we're kidding ourselves if we insist that faith-justified violence originates only with Muslim extremists.

The Holy Week readings from the Gospel of John are some of the most problematic in the Gospels, because they blame “the Jews” for the crucifixion of Jesus. In this season of repentance, and especially as we approach Good Friday, we should remember that words can be wielded as weapons, and that words can incite people *to wield* weapons. The passion narratives describe unimaginable violence, and have themselves been used *to incite* unimaginable violence. Christianity has sponsored violence both physical and spiritual, both individual and collective, and sometimes it still does.

It needn't be that way. In fact, Christianity's marginalization and persecution of people of other faiths should be a topic of repentance. Remember, to repent means to turn. In turning away from sin and toward god, it's sometimes necessary to cultivate an *opposite* way of being. Here at St. Thomas's, we have unique opportunities to do just that.

This has been an important year at St. Thomas's Day School. After more than a decade of slow but steady declining enrollment, we seem to be poised for a turnaround. The key to that turnaround: under Head of School Gina Panza's leadership, the Day School has finally, fully, claimed its identity as an *Episcopal* day school.

If you've been here for a while, you know that the conflict between the Church and the Day School was epic in proportions. Those days are gone, hopefully forever. All that remains is the irony that, after decades of discomfort about being an *Episcopal* school in an increasingly secular society, the turnaround has come from understanding and claiming that very identity.

Being an Episcopal school doesn't mean turning out children who are Episcopalians or even Christians. It *does* mean building a student body that is diverse in all measures, including religion or lack thereof. It means engaging children of all faith traditions or none, and cultivating inter-faith understanding and appreciation. It means graduating youth who are equipped to change the world for the better.

In this, in some ways, the Day School is ahead of the Church. But we're catching up. When I arrived just over two years ago, the Church was what I have described as a silo. It lacked any truly active advocacy or service ministries; it lacked partnerships with other communities of faith.

On one hand, our work together as a congregation is not the only work that's important: this congregation is filled with individuals who do advocacy and service on their own, in their paid work and/or their off time. Needless to say, those contributions don't *have* to go through the Church to be valid or important or even grounded in one's personal faith.

On the other hand, there is power in numbers. When a group of people act together, they gain mutual support and an amplified voice. And when that group is faith-based, there are bonuses; one is that the individuals involved grow in faith and unity, and they bring their congregations with them. That's true if the group is a subset of a congregation or a subset of multiple congregations. That's true, and maybe especially so, if the multiple congregations represent multiple faiths.

To help break down the silo, I have been actively partnering with clergy peers in New Haven and Hamden. For example, a group of us Episcopal clergy launched the Greater New Haven Young Adult Network, which had its first meeting last week. I'm especially excited about my work with a small group of interfaith clergy—Jewish, Unitarian Universalist, United Church of Christ, United Methodist, Presbyterian. We are of different faiths, but we are of like minds.

The group's most visible work has been around immigration, particularly the sanctuary movement. You've probably heard that First and Summerfield United Methodist Church has provided sanctuary to three different individuals threatened with deportation. Nelson Pinos has been in sanctuary—literally, in the sanctuary—for three months. You've probably seen some press about that, but if not, please check it out online. Suffice it to say that Nelson can't go to work while in sanctuary and, after three months, his family's savings has run dry. If they can't pay the mortgage, they will lose their home.

We can't house an immigrant here. But it's time to help our partners at First and Summerfield, who have done so much. And so St. Thomas's has initiated a congregational "challenge" among our partner congregations to pay the Pinos mortgage. To kick off the effort, a congregant, who wishes to remain anonymous, today brought a check for \$250.

This congregation is still in the process of defining its identity and determining its passions. Clearly I have ideas and opinions about that. But, ultimately, it's up to you.

The portion of the Gospel of John that we heard today is a part of a conversation between Jesus and Nicodemus. Nicodemus has made his way to Jesus secretly, in the dark of night, because for him Jesus is dangerous. You see, Nicodemus is a Pharisee, a religious leader, a representative of the system from which Jesus has set himself apart, through words and actions.

I hope that Jesus is at least a little dangerous for us as well. In the dark of night, I hear Jesus calling us not to isolation, but rather to definition. Jesus is *our* path to a God of love and compassion and generosity and self-giving. Sometimes we must *turn*—sometimes we must *risk*—in preparation for the light of a new day.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> "John 3:16," Wikipedia, available online at [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John\\_3:16](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John_3:16) (accessed March 10, 2018).

<sup>2</sup> John Dominic Crossan, *Who Killed Jesus: Exposing the Roots of Anti-Semitism in the Gospel Story of the Death of Jesus* (New York: HarperCollins, 1995), xi–xii.

<sup>3</sup> Martin Luther as translated in Gerard Falk, *The Jew in Christian Theology: Martin Luther's Anti-Jewish Vom Schem Hamphoras, Previously Unpublished in English, and Other Milestones in Church Doctrine Concerning Judaism* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 1992), 174.