



making God's love visible in downtown Memphis

Hard words  
Lent 4, Year B  
March 14, 2021  
The Rev. Amber Carswell

Let's start with a pleasant image to make up for where we're about to go, okay? Let's start with cake. Black forest chocolate cake with loads of icing and cherries on top. You take a bit of the cake and pronounce it delicious. "This cake," you declare, "is particularly moist."

And you notice that suddenly half the room is flinching at your declaration. "Gross," someone says. "You don't like the cake?" you ask, stunned. "No, I don't like that word."

Have you run into this? People hating to hear the word moist? I don't know where it came from, it might just be a self-involved millennial thing, but it is a thing. There are words that people hate to hear, and English speakers have a pretty widespread agreement on what those words are. I'll say it for the last time — moist always tops these sort of lists of most hated words; along with that word, mainstays include clogged, rural, ointment, goiter, and slacks.

Now that I've thoroughly disgusted a good many of you, I'd like to spend a little time with you today on two of the Christian words that have that effect on me and nearly every person I find myself in a room with: "eternal life" and "condemnation."

You'll notice we've shifted from words that are unpleasant to hear, like the unmentionable ones I already mentioned, to words whose meanings are bothersome. To me, it's more like hearing the words "impactful" or "synergy" or "wellness seminar." Not a terrible aural experience, but they've got baggage. "Eternal life" and "condemnation" fit in this category for me and they're both in our most well-known Scripture, which we read today. John 3:16: "For God so loved the world..." Everyone knows it, you memorized it in Sunday school, and if you were like me, you were told as a third-grader in a church basement that if you believed in Jesus it meant you would go to heaven when you died. Maybe it's a lot for a third-grader, but I didn't anything against Jesus at the time, and eternal life? Sure, sign me up.

It was not until many, many years later that I would learn that this verse is just absolutely not about our souls zooming off to some spaceless, timeless, disembodied afterlife. To understand what Jesus meant, we have to understand how many ancient Jews thought about time. There were two ages (or eons) and the first one was all around -- a world broken by corruption, oppression, decay. The Hebrew scriptures point to the day of the Lord, the coming of the Messiah, who would usher in a new eon -- the age to come, where God's healing and justice and peace and presence would cover the world as the waters cover the sea. You can hear this all the way up to Paul -- we're studying Galatians on Tuesday, and he talks about Jesus as coming to save us from "the present evil age" -- saving them from the actual structures in the world that divide them hierarchically into insiders and outsiders, the Jew and the Gentile, the male and the female. No longer do they live in subjugation to the old powers, because Jesus ushered in the new eon.

It's not that everything has been set right. If it's helpful to follow that belief of the ages, there's a Venn diagram and we're in the overlap. The new life is both around us and unrealized, it is guiding us to what is yet to come.

In John 3:16, the phrase that gets translated as "eternal life" does not include the Greek word for eternity; they have a word for eternity, and this isn't it. What we have is the Greek is ζῶην αἰώνιον, "the life of the new eon." You are not being rescued from this world. You are now an agent of that coming time, you are the one to work against the corruption, to undo the yokes of oppression, you are the one who now can say that death and your fear of it no longer rules how you live.

Which leads us right into the next verse and me to my second point: condemnation. John 3:17 is the less popular companion to 3:16 which says, "God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but that through him, the world might be saved."

This is my 4th Lent with you all, and in all this time, I have never parsed a word of biblical Greek to you, but today is the day. κρίνη is the word translated as "to condemn," and again, there's a word in Greek that means condemn and it's not this word. κρίνη is to judge, judgment. It's used as a word for making decisions, judging one way better than other. This doesn't have to be a courtroom scene, the world trembling in the docket as Jesus and Satan argue to God the judge about whether to send the world into eternal punishment. "God did not send his Son to judge the world." That feels very different than being let off the hook from condemnation.

How did we get to condemnation in our most beloved Bible passage? I suspect it's partly because we've read this passage for so long with this weirdly capitalist understanding of salvation. The way it was first explained to me, God had a giant God ledger where the sins of humankind tallied up in the debit column and he couldn't just write off such a monumental debt, so he had to kill his own son in order to balance the ledger.

Maybe we could work with a different metaphor. Let's just be clear that Scripture condemns usury, the accrual of assets through the charging of interest, it declares the tallying of unpayable and exploitative debts as immoral. But also, can you imagine keeping a ledger for the people you love? Have you known those people who are constantly measuring up others for how much power or prestige they can gain from the relationship? The folks who tally every wrong thing done to them, nursing their grudges through the night hours? I've known them, and they're pretty far from the character of God revealed in Christ.

When we imagine this picture of judgment, we forget the way that God told it. That it was humanity who put Jesus in the docket, it was us who judged him guilty, *we* condemned *him* to death. We were the ones exposed as bloodthirsty and sacrificial, not God. No wonder we translated a clear word about judgment into condemnation. It's like it's a part of us. The light came, and we loved darkness. We continue to operate, in so many ways, by the rules of the old age.

So maybe it would do us some good to take a hard look and unflinching listen to the words we wince to hear. We might stop making Scripture into our own image, for one thing, or buying into the image that others have imposed upon it. And that kind of deep engagement can lead us to hear it with new ears: "For God so loved the world," this world, our world, the one right around you. You could see with new eyes the way the old age is passing away, you could see where creation groans and calls your name, beckoning you into the light.