

Sunday, March 14, 2021
Sermon: There is No Condemnation With God
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Friends, after I read our scripture passage today (John 3:14-21), Emily wrote, “Oh I can't wait to hear you break this one down.” Thank you, Emily. These passages such as For God so Loved the World are so familiar to us but when we read it all through we can find some passages that are troubling for many of us. It's a way that we have been trained to interpret or to automatically think of God, or religion, as somehow exclusionary. It's a way that we have been trained to read For God so Loved the World, except for certain people, right? It's this way that we've been trained to view God's radical love for, as Ellery said earlier, the whole universe, this is cosmic in scope. And then we're always trained to think, “Yeah, but not so much, it's not that big, it's not that cosmic, it's not that universal.” I want to try to help us with this. Maybe a lot of you are in the deconstruction process and maybe try to deconstruct this a little bit, but at the same time reconstruct something so that we're not using God/religion to be over and against others.

I want to start off with this which will hopefully be helpful for you. There is (I bet you didn't see this coming) an evolutionary biologist from Purdue University named William Muir. William Muir (I bet you didn't see this coming either) studies chickens. He wanted to know how chickens could be more productive and so he did a bunch of research on chickens. One of the things that he did was to put just your normal, average egg-producing chicken in one group and then he put the super chickens, the chickens that were the strongest, the most productive, in another group and he let them stay for six generations with one another. What he found was that the chickens who were just the normal chickens were healthy, they were plump, they were producing more eggs than ever and more chickens than ever, as well. After six generations, they were in good shape.

The super chickens, the ones who were the strongest, you might call them the alpha chickens, after six generations there were only three left. They had all pecked one another to death in a competition. That's what the super chickens did to one another. If you want more information on this you can Google Margaret Heffernan who did a Ted talk on what this means with chickens. And as I'm telling the story, I know you're making connections. Margaret Heffernan makes connections to this in the business world. She goes around trying to inspire and teach businesses how to run their businesses more effectively, more efficiently. She tells the story of the chickens and how, when you get superstar chickens they tend to peck one another in the pecking order.

And when she tells this to businesses, or when she gives speeches at places and tells this story, people will come up to her and they will say, “Oh my gosh, that's my business,” because we're always looking for the superstar, but the superstar often takes up all of the space and often dominates like the superstar chickens. They'll say, “That's my business,” or they'll say, “That's my family,” or they will say, “That's my nation.” As Bill prayed earlier, sometimes our nation in the United States acts as a super chicken trying to peck at others as we go to war and destroy others. But Margaret Heffernan says that maybe our model should be the normal chicken group, where everybody has a voice, where no one is excluded, where we don't use our power over and against others but we use a certain kind of power that is with others. She says that one of the MIT, I think it was, did an experiment about this and had different groups come together. What MIT found that the

group that didn't have the highest IQ, that didn't have the group with the smartest people in it, performed much better than the groups that had the highest IQs. Why? Because the other groups, she says, had higher empathy and interestingly they also had more women in that group. She says there may be connections there where we have more empathy in these groups for one another we make sure that everybody has equal time at the table and everybody's voice is heard. And that's how you move ahead. The group with the highest IQ was the one that was most aggressive with one another, the group that tended to self-implode. And as I'm watching this Ted Talk, Margaret Heffernan talks about how businesses self-implode in this way. I couldn't help but think how religions self-implode this way, how churches self-implode this way, as well.

How is it that humans get stuck in a pattern of acting like the aggressive alpha chickens with one another? How is it that we use religion in that way? Jesus, in our passage today, starts off with this weird passage from the Book of Numbers where Moses lifted up the snake. The Israelites are leaving Egypt to go out into the wilderness and they came into some conflicts with one another. And God sends in some serpents to attack the Israelites and God tells Moses to lift up a bronze serpent in the air and anyone who looks on it will be cured of their snake bite. Now you may have a ton of questions about this story as I do, but here's how I want to frame it. Early Christians said that the worst way, or the least effective way, to interpret such Bible passages is on a literal level. An emphasis or an obsession with biblical literalism - treating these stories literally - came much later in Christianity around the year 1600.

Early in Christianity, ancient theologians would come up with all kinds of allegorical or metaphorical interpretations of these ancient stories. Here's how an allegorical interpretation of the story might go. What are the snakes? The snakes are those things that are inside each of us that attack one another. It's not the literal snakes, but sometimes we people act as alpha chickens, or maybe as alpha snakes, against one another biting one another. You may have noticed this in your family, or at your business, or tragically within churches, or amongst religions, kind of a snake-like attitude towards one another. Well, Moses takes this snake and lifts it up so that anyone who looks on it will be cured of acting like a snake towards one another. They will be distracted because instead of looking at one another, they're looking at something different. They're looking up at the snake that's above them instead of treating one another as if they are the snakes. That kind of interpretation I think can speak to us.

Jesus says he will be lifted up as well, so instead of getting caught in a trap, a pattern of life, with one another where we're biting one another like venomous snakes against one another, Jesus says he's going to be the one who is high and lifted up so that we might change our view. So that we're not obsessed with taking down another like an alpha chicken, or an alpha snake. But we're looking up at Jesus who calls us to change that pattern into a pattern of love, into a pattern that is so unlike the alpha chicken, or the alpha snake, that we refuse to harm one another. Instead like Jesus, we might work for a more just and loving world and as we do that, the world that is so committed to being an alpha chicken, or an alpha snake, might turn against us, might put Jesus on the cross. And that's where the passage comes in because God so loved the world that God sent God's only son to change our pattern of behavior away from being violent with one another, away from the military-industrial complex where we get power over and against others, into a way where we, like God, offered Jesus to the world.

We might offer something radically different to the world as well, not being alpha humans, not being alpha chickens or alpha snakes, but living in a world of empathy, of love, of cooperation with one another, which does have risks. And this is why the passage says that those who believe in the name of the Son of God,

those who believe in this way of life have eternal life. Even though it's risky, what it means to have eternal life is not forever and ever into the future. What it means to have eternal life is significant life now. God-given life now. It's living with God right now in the present. That's what eternal life is all about.

In the 1st century Jewish mind, eternal does not mean forever and ever and ever and ever into the future. What eternal means is right now. A significant, holy, God-given life now. Jesus says the Kingdom of Heaven is among you now. Live into it. That's what salvation means. It's how we live now with one another. The passage says that those who don't believe in the Son of God are condemned already. Who does the condemning? It doesn't say. It's not God. God doesn't condemn us. For God so loved the world that he sent his son to show us this new way of life. God didn't come just to condemn the world. God didn't come to condemn you, or me, or anyone else. God came to save the world through the Son, through showing us how to live a different life than the pecking order. A life where you love one another. If you believe in that, whether you call it him, whether you call it God, Jesus, or Allah, or nothing, it doesn't matter. What matters is living in to this way of life stops the pecking order and lives into God's realm here on earth.

There are Christians who don't believe this. There are Christians who want to use God as our alpha-alpha chicken. They want to use God as our big weapon that's going to peck all other religions in the end. God is gonna get you. That entirely misses the point. That shows that we do not trust in the name of the Son of God because that's not what it's about. The name of the Son of God is about transforming our patterns inside of me that are like snakes. You may have snakes inside of you, too, I don't know. I'm not here to judge you. I'm here to judge myself. I know that I have snakes. I'll judge my nation a little bit - our nation has snakes.

How do we transform that? Not by being against the snakes but by showing a better way of life. By living into the realm of God that Jesus gives us. By believing in the Son of God who shows us that everybody is in. And if we just stop pecking one another like alpha chickens we can have the Kingdom of God here on earth, the realm of God is already among us. You are loved, for God so loved the world, the cosmos, the universe, that God came to show us a different way. That God risked God's very life to show us the extent of God's love. That we can be alpha chickens and we can even kill God in the flesh of Jesus and God comes back to us as Jesus and says that I've got a better idea. God comes back and says then let's try again, we can do this again.

Live into the realm of God's radical love for all people including those we call our enemies. God is not our alpha chicken that we can use to accuse other people but God is love may we live into that love today and forevermore. Amen