

Lent 4  
St. Paul's/Resurrección, Mount Vernon, WA

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## First Things

WHAT!?! I don't get it. John 3:16 was one of the first Bible verses my evangelical parents had me memorize. It's the whole Gospel in a verse, they said. I can recite in English and Spanish and there was a time when I could get most of it in Tsafiki, the Indigenous language of the people among whom my parents worked.

But the verse, of course, does not stand alone. It's got an image of undeserved redemption before it—the serpent in the wilderness (which is another similar sermon in itself,) and then this pesky verse right afterwards, “Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.”

What in the world? God doesn't condemn us? Even when we do bad things? Doesn't God get angry with us, or at least sad?

And then there's that confusing next section, “Those who believe in him are not condemned; but those who do not believe are condemned already, because they have not believed in the name of the only Son of God.” It confuses me that the verse reads, "are not condemned," and not "are forgiven." Forgiveness makes more sense, right? We do bad things, we believe and ask forgiveness, and God forgives. Isn't that how it is?

Well, it is but it's not the whole story, and the great thinkers of our faith have known it all along. There is something more fundamental to our being than our sin and its forgiveness. There is God's presence, everywhere, all the time, and in all things. It is a presence that creates us, maintains us, and is never absent from us. Until we grasp this, forgiveness just doesn't make any sense.

Here is but a brief sampling of great Christian thinkers and mystics:

Origen, 2nd century theologian, taught that everyone and everything will go through purging for our sins and be saved—even Satan.

The Cappadocian Fathers of the 4th century, Three great bishops, talked about the Trinity as engaged in an eternal dance of perfect love. From that dance, all creation spins—drawing its very ongoing existence from God, and making God present in everyone and in everything at all times, without exception. Being outside the grace of God is just simply impossible.

Eugenius, a Scot, wrote in the 9th century, that God wrote two great books, a small one, and a big one. The small one is the Bible. The big one is all of creation. God's presence

is everywhere—we cannot escape it.

Pope Benedict XVI wrote of Hildegard of Bingen, a German mystic of the 11th century, “For her, the entire creation is a symphony of the Holy Spirit who is in himself joy and jubilation.”

And here are two whose own pen was so eloquent:

Dame Julian of Norwich wrote in the 14th century,

*In my folly, before this time I often wondered why, by the great foreseeing wisdom of God, the onset of sin was not prevented: for then, I thought, all should have been well. This impulse [of thought] was much to be avoided, but nevertheless I mourned and sorrowed because of it, without reason and discretion. But Jesus, who in this vision informed me of all that is needed by me, answered with these words and said: ‘It was necessary that there should be sin; but all shall be well, and all shall be well, and all manner of thing shall be well.’*

And Augustine of Hippo wrote this beautiful poem in the early 6th century,

Late have I loved you, beauty so old and so new:  
 Late have I loved you, and see, you were within and I was in without  
 and sought you there,  
 In my unloveliness I plunged into those lovely created things which  
 you made.  
 You were with me, and I was not with you.  
 The lovely things kept me far from you, though if they did not have  
 their existence in you, they had no existence at all.  
 You called and cried out loud and shattered my deafness.  
 You were radiant and resplendent, you put to flight my blindness.  
 You were fragrant, and I drew in my breath and now pant after you.  
 I tasted you, and I feel but hunger and thirst for you.  
 You touched me, and I am set on fire to attain the peace which is yours.

I think this is about seeing the world through our eyes or through God's loving gaze. God doesn't draw lines between peoples.

- God loves Donald Trump as much as God loves Joe Biden.
- God loves black and brown people as much as God loves white people.
- God loves Russia as much as God loves the United States.
- God loves rich and poor alike, members of dominant white culture and non-members alike.
- There is ONE category: created beings.

- There is ONE source and end of it all: God's own heart.
- This is always first and foremost.

If God is in all, holds all and loves all, then the incredible richness of diversity we see must be God's idea, so much so, that God meets us where we are. Some are moved by a sunset, some by the ocean. Some are transported from high mountain tops, others on the open plain. Some feel closest to their truest selves in the arms of their lovers, while others feel most alive when all alone.

God meets peoples as each people needs. To some, high ceremony, to others very little; to some great emotional expression, to others more moderation; to some, effusive decoration, to others, elegance in simplicity; to some a high value for the group as a whole, to others, individual freedom; to some, a sense of the power of the past, to others the promise of the future. And yet God is with and within each and all together, each one as they need; each people as they need, as God alone knows.

So, if nobody has the corner on the God market, we all need one another.

- We need one another for precisely who each of us is, and not for what we represent or the votes we are likely to cast.
- We need one another for all our differences, languages and cultures, but not so one group can try to keep the others out.
- We need Democrats and Republicans and Independents, but not for legislative gridlock and grandstanding.
- We need conservatives and progressives to balance one another out, not to get lost in an eternal tug-of-war.
- We need Israelis and Palestinians, Russians and Ukrainians, but not so each can try to annihilate the other or to build empires.
- We need the rich to be generous and humble, and to remember how they got that way,
- We need the poor to be noble and strong and have viable opportunities to build a better life, so they can teach us wisdom.
- We need the rainbow of spiritual traditions in the world, so we can look to each for wisdom rather than a source for new members.
- We need lives dedicated to prayer and lives dedicated to action, who are in constant conversation with one another.
- We need one another because the spark of God that lives in each of us is sacred and precious without measure.

Only when we are grounded in this foundation can we talk about forgiveness.

God yearns to have us turn around, wake up, give up our own egocentric and ethnocentric eyes, and love one another as we are loved. Sounds rather Lenten to me, frankly.