Love, and do what you will

How did we get to a place where so many who claim Christianity believe that unless you are "born again" as they themselves define it, you are going to hell?

How do we get to a place where Christianity can be dressed up in Christian nationalism, storming the Capitol while screaming "Jesus loves Trump"?

How do we get to a place where so many denominations believe that unless you follow their particular route, you are doomed?

How did we get to a place where Christianity and Jesus himself is used to justify wars and the oppression of indigenous people and slavery and economic exploitation of the most vulnerable?

The answer is easier than it seems.

People pick and choose pieces of scripture to justify their actions, pointing to the holy book to say this is allowed because "God says so."

Scripture is over 60 books, written over a period of at least a thousand years.

The Bible is more accurately described as a library rather than a book.

It's written in many different cultures, facing situations that are completely alien to our own, involving people whose understanding of the world and their place in it is also very different than ours.

But playing Bible Bingo to justify human desires, while as old as scripture itself, is also extraordinarily dangerous and quite frankly heretical.

And the reason that we know that Bible Bingo is dangerous, and even heretical, is because of what Jesus tells us today.

When that snarky lawyer demands of him the definition of the most important command of God, he knows he's being snarky because, for the Jewish people, every command of God is equally important.

Each has equal authority.

To pick one law over another is to upend God's purpose.

How does Jesus respond?

Well, Jesus does what Jesus does.

Instead of getting caught up in the minutia, he takes us up to the heights, where we can see the whole picture.

And from that big picture place, what we see is that love is the defining lens through which we must view not only all of scripture, but all of life and all of our relationships with one another.

Love of God is the left lens and love of neighbor and self is the right lens.

Looking through both of these lenses finally allows us to see clearly what it is that God has in mind for us.

When we don the glasses of love and then look at various aspects of scripture that seemed to give permission for war or slavery or

bigotry based upon people's race, creed, sexual orientation, gender or otherwise, suddenly, the right to behave in that way and to think that way — goes up in smoke!

Love is the talisman.

Love is the touchstone.

Love is the interpretive key not just for scripture, but for all of life.

When we look at each other and the world through the lens of love, there is no space for "hating the sin and loving the sinner."

There is only space for loving the sinner

When we look at each other and the world through the lens of love, there is no space for economic disparity, or hating the migrant, or setting up human laws that pretend to supersede the laws of God, which is: the law of love.

We can no longer use our faith to justify excluding people because they are different from us.

The whole point of Jesus's ministry is to point out that God's kingdom is already spread throughout the whole world.

That was the point of the parable of the sower who threw his seeds everywhere.

Before we were, God is.

God's bounty and love and welcome of all people existed before there even were people.

That our job is not to impose our arbitrary, narrow view of who we think God is on others, but rather, we are to search for the already present God in the lives of other people.

It's a presence that might look quite different to us because our own views are so molded by our own culture and class and race and personal experience in life.

But God cannot be put into a box.

And so we take this most important lesson from Jesus, and understand that in all things — there is only love.

So, we cannot kill each other.

We cannot abuse each other.

We cannot simply dismiss each other.

The barriers that we continually put up against those who are different — Jesus is constantly tearing down.

Border walls and borders themselves are not only anti-love, they are fundamentally anti-God.

God is the owner of this world — and we are its stewards.

This good creation is here for all of us to enjoy and reap the benefits of and protect and care for.

Borders and border walls are human constructs and if we are to be faithful followers of Jesus — they are constructs that we ought to reject.

All of this is summed up in the inside baseball that completes today's gospel reading.

The debate Jesus is having with the religious authorities is whether the Messiah will be the son of David, in other words, a warrior King.

Just as David defeated Goliath and the Philistine army, the Jewish people at the time expected a warrior king Messiah who would route the Romans and restore Israel to its former military, religious and political glory.

Jesus comes as the true Messiah in an entirely unexpected, indeed, in an unwanted, way.

Rather than a warrior king, he is the servant king.

Rather than kill others, he washes their feet.

Rather than reject, he embraces all as beloved siblings of God.

That's why he touches the untouchables, heals the unclean, and gives himself over to horrific death, death on a cross, when our human nature just can't tolerate the overflowing love that he offers.

That's why he died.

We could not tolerate the overwhelming love, acceptance, joy, that he offers.

So we kill him.

I wonder how much has changed in these past 2000 years?

Don't we continue to crucify the messengers of Jesus and the message of Jesus on a daily basis?

Whether it's a woman being beaten by several men at a Trump rally because she wore an offending T-shirt, or the carpet bombing of Dresden during World War II, or the napalm of Vietnam, or the economic strangulation of so many of our siblings throughout the developing world, every day we put to the cross God's beckoning and urgent call of love, and nothing but love.

So this is the clarion call today.

Today's gospel lesson might just be the cornerstone of all of Scripture.

Because it tells us how to interpret not only scripture, but our lives and our faith.

And it tells us quite clearly everything that we believe to be true and holy and wonderful can only be seen and understood through the lens of love.

When we look through any other set of glasses, the glasses of self-protection, or nationalism, or patriotism, or economic security, we get it wrong, every time.

The only time we get it right is when we look at each other and our world and the way in which we are living our lives, moment by moment, through the lens of love.

And while it may often appear to be foolish and put us in positions of being vulnerable and even hurt, this is precisely the road that Jesus says will carry us to that place where joy and peace prevail.

Expect pushback.

Expect danger.

Expect even pain or quite possibly, death.

After all that's the path that Jesus himself walks — and it is the very path that he invites us to take too.

And yet, it's the sure path that leads, once and forever, to the life — that really is life.

It was St Augustine who said it perfectly — with just one phrase.

"Love, and do what you will."

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