

The Olin T. Binkley Memorial Baptist Church

*"Heavy Lifting"*

IV Lent (B)

John 3:14-21

by

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March 11, 2018

There's a legal battle between two churches in Dallas, my hometown, over the name of the church. Seems that there's a dispute, squabble between the two pastors over who has the rightful legal trademark to the name. The Dallas Morning News Story:

The conflict is testing each side's faith in the law.

For Shante' Buckley, that means upholding the trademark she won church she founded nearly two years ago in West Dallas.

For Grant Diamond, poised to launch his church later this month, it means defending the brand he's been building for more than a year.

On Tuesday, Diamond won the first round when a state district judge in Collin County denied Buckley's request for a temporary restraining order to force Diamond to stop using the name. A permanent injunction hearing is set next week.

Buckley, 46, was disappointed the TRO wasn't granted. "I thought it was pretty clear. I invested the time and money in getting one and this church came in at the 11th hour," she said.

Diamond, 28, said he's willing to mediate the dispute rather than duke it out in court, but he expressed no desire to drop the name.

"We've invested tens of thousands of dollars at this point in establishing a brand in our city... ."he said. "Excellence matters, so if you're going to start a church or business, you need to arrive with excellence. Part of excellence is establishing a compelling brand."

Buckley, a St. Louis native, began planting the seed for her ministry in 2015, in part because she wanted to shepherd her own flock as a senior pastor. She held regular "Bible and Biscuits" services before launching last Easter.

She picked the current location first because she saw a lot of families being displaced by the gentrification underway in West Dallas and a lot of new families with no roots in the area. Her multicultural flock includes "Toyota executives to a woman who sleeps in her car," she said.

"I felt like we were doing good work here and really making a difference," she said.

Now she's worried that her legal battle will overshadow that.

"I really want the story to be about what's happening in the city and making a difference and changing the Christian narrative," she said.

What's intriguing is how much both Buckley and Diamond want to reinvent worship service to attract new members who've grown disillusioned.

A married father of a 19-month-old son, Diamond is trying to pull millennials into the fold.

"I grew up like many people, especially in this part of the world, in a religious home," he said. "I knew church, but I didn't know God. That's what made me want to start a new church. I feel like my generation especially has said 'no' to church but haven't necessarily said 'no' to God."

Buckley's hoping to send a message that everyone — black, Asian, white or Latino and regardless of gender or sexual orientation — is welcome in her ministry.

"We're not just saying, 'come to church.' ... We're trying to woo people who want to live the message."

Buckley lives in Cedar Hill with a 10-year-old niece she's raising. She's married to her work. She planned to go to law school before she felt called to ministry.

Oh, the name they're arguing over is LIFT CHURCH. Their fight may have caused some to say LEFT church. A church name meant to draw our eyes upward has, well, left us with eyes averted.

Lift. Are we a Lift Church?

In today's appointed gospel lection, some will be lifted up, some let down— Jesus and Nicodemus have a night-time theological seminar.

And the words of Jesus from John are some of the first we ever learned and memorized.

“For God so loved the world that God gave his only son so that all who believe in him may not perish but have eternal life.”

“For God did not send his son into the world to condemn it, but that the world might be saved through him.

Martin Luther said John 3:16 is “the gospel in miniature.” In a nutshell there you have it.

I love John 3:16, I'm lifted up, but then the other shoe is dropped:

“Those who don't believe are condemned already because they have not believed.”

I'm sorta let down.

Is everyone who does not believe in Jesus condemned?

What is the scope of God's salvation project?

How do we reconcile it? Two seemingly contradictory sets of statements—and not just in John 3 but in several places in scripture—love and judgment.

You have this grand opening statement of God's intent to save the world;

FOR GOD LOVES THE WORLD IN THIS WAY

and its crushing follow-up that those who don't believe are condemned already. Lifted up, then let down.

Scholars rightly point out that the Gospel of John represents the views of a community strongly inclined to sectarianism. Now stay with me here, this is the heavy lifting of any sermon; that John's community is aware of the opposition between "us" (the insiders) and "them" (the outsiders). And the enemies—for John and his community—include "the Jews." My teacher and friend Ron Allen wrote *Preaching the Gospels without Blaming the Jews*, a commentary on every gospel lectionary text. Here's what he says of today's John 3 passage:

"A community such as John's feels itself alone, alienated, and persecuted. What we find in John represents one side of a conflict with various outsiders and, possibly, some insiders who have deviated and defected from the community. We find statements to the effect that only those within their community who understand Jesus as we do, are saved."

Ron Allen thinks the passage should be taken not necessarily as anti-semitic but as a statement of reassurance to a beleaguered church—God loves only you; you, indeed are the apple of God's eyes. Would you use language to uplift a discouraged people that drew lines, even lines of heaven and hell? And what do we do with hell, anyway?

Origen—early church father—has nobody in hell.

Augustine appears to have just about everybody there.

Karl Barth—renowned theologian—wrote extensively on Christian theology—but didn't say much on external damnation or reward. He refused to lock God into either an "all are saved" or "not all are saved" position. He once said "I don't preach universalism, but I don't not preach universalism." The double negative, come on man, don't hedge a bet!

Jurgen Moltmann—another German theologian—says he's not a universalist—but...

At a WFU Div address he was asked: "Are you a universalist?" "No! There are some people I hope not to see in heaven. But I believe that God is a Universalist. God made them and wants to see them all."

Well, now.

Is your vision of hell sparsely populated? Do you have a firm conviction instead of the triumph of divine grace? I do.

Universalism is mocked as spiritual sentimentalism (these mockers are those who my grandmother said loves Jesus but seemed mad about it). The scoffers of Universalism say our view/my view is of a Jesus who is an all-affirming, indulgent, non-judgmental, inclusive therapist who appears on Oprah.

Douglas Jones Hall—Canadian theologian—suggests that what threatens us most is the gnawing suspicion that we may be superfluous—an accidental species with no real purpose on earth. He says when we are deprived of meaningful work, relationships, goals—when we cannot find a purpose big enough for our capabilities, the we frequently become destructive.

The threat of meaninglessness is a kind of hell, isn't it? Barbara Brown Taylor says she believes that each age has its own peculiar hell. The things that frighten us now are not the things that frightened our forebearers, and the fears of Korean Christians are different from the Christians living in Kenya. The gospel may remain the same wherever it is proclaimed, but the people who hear it are not the same. We aren't motivated by the same spiritual fears other Christians here in the US nor even the same fears our ancestors were.

Death does not scare us as much as it did 1000 years ago. Nor does the threat of damnation work as well as it did even 100 years ago.

We preach the gospel, the cross, and we—Binkley, as all churches—to help save people from meaninglessness, by reminding them who they are and what they are for. The church exists so God has a place to point people toward a purpose as big as their capabilities.

Barbara Brown Taylor: “The church exists so that people have a community in which they may confess their sin (turning away from life) as well as a community that will support them to turn back again. The church exists so that people have a place where they may repent of their fear, their hardness of heart, their isolation and loss of vision, and where—having turned—they may be restored to fullness of life.

Some people need a heavy dose of sin, shame, guilt, fear in their religion. “Make me feel bad, preacher, then I’ll know the worm I am and how God loves me anyway.” Well, OK. But what if judgment and the fear of judgment were replaced with blessing, grace, and love? Can we scare up a crowd to hear that? Depictions of an angry, vindictive, hateful God seem to crush a living, kind, merciful one all the time for some folks. As well as an EXCLUSIVE one. INCLUSIVE God, where we all win and get a participation ribbon just doesn’t seem...

Simple categories of IN or OUT. SAVED or LOST. Make me feel bad so I can feel secure in my salvation.

I was once a guest preacher at a church and a guy—I’d never met him—was turned off by my sermon (strange, I know). “The problem with you ‘liberals’,” (sorry, he said, ‘progressives’) “is that you have a sloppy agapé agenda. It’s cheap grace for you. No accountability. No judgment.” What he wanted from me was some sense that in order to be saved I had to change in ways he imagined proper, that changed opened the door to heaven/love. I said I thought he had flipped them, in reality it is Love first that prompts change, a re-ordering priorities.

The basis and foundation of salvation is love, not fear. I don't change in order get God's love, my embrace of that love is what brings the new creation and a changed life.

I think the real heavy lifting in Christian faith is convincing folks—maybe you—that God really does loves the world and all in the world.

Rob Bell was once the darling of the Evangelicals...until he had his own epiphany or crisis and wrote a book called LOVE WINS. In it, Bell says:

“It's been clearly communicated to many that this belief (in hell as conscious, eternal torment) is a central truth of the Christian faith and to reject it is, in essence, to reject Jesus. This is misguided and toxic and ultimately subverts the contagious spread of Jesus' message of love, peace, forgiveness, and joy that our world desperately needs to hear.”

Bell has expressed frustration with the current state of conservative evangelicalism, calling it “a very narrow, politically intertwined, culturally ghettoized Evangelical subculture.”

In response, the Southern Baptist Convention passed a resolution to affirm the reality of hell as a place of eternal physical torment. It isn't enough to just say hell is separation from God or eternal death, but you need to make sure we know it is a place where unrepentant sinners will experience torture forever.

Yesterday I attended at Playmaker's Theatre in town a panel discussion with Bart Ehrman, professor of religious studies at Carolina, and Robert Franklin from Emory University in Atlanta. The panel discussion was prompted by the theatre's production of “Tartuffe,” Moliere's play centered around religious hypocrisy and a fraudulent scoundrel, and their production of the contemporary play, “The Christians.” I know many of you one or both productions. I enjoyed them both very much. The play, “The Christians,” delves into deep, heavy material—what happens when an Evangelical pastor no longer believes in hell, he preaches this conveniently after the church pays off its mortgage.

Anyway, in the panel discussion, Ehrman (a former Evangelical) spoke to the two views of God, God as one who inflicts eternal punishment or God as one of everlasting love—one depicts the Holy One as a vicious tormentor and the other full of grace and mercy in this life and life to come. Ehrman, now an agnostic, told us that if he did believe in God it would be because of Jesus saying, “the God of Jesus is one of love.” For God loved the world and all in it. He went on and gave us his definition of fundamentalism:

“Not enough FUN

too much DAMN

not enough MENTAL”

The love which Jesus incarnated, by which we are saved, is to become the love which fills us beyond capacity and flows out to heal the world. This is the MEANING-FULL ministry that God calls us to pursue.

God does indeed, love all those who believe in Jesus. You know why? That is because God is the God who loves all. And we who are loved by the one who loves all should, in turn, love all in loving the one who loves all. Saying “yes” to God’s love is important—no doubt—but it isn’t a conditional that must be met if God is to love us and everyone else.

On my drive into town every day from the Templeton’s, near the South Carolina border, on Smith Level Road, I pass two signs. One is located just as you exit from Damascus Church Rd, it’s on the easement professionally done sign for UPLIFT OUTREACH MINISTRIES. Then, less than 2/10 of a mile I pass a homemade sign that’s in someone’s front yard. It’s very colorful, creative. It says:

DON’T GIVE UP

U R NOT ALONE

LOVE WILL WIN

Every time I see it, I'm uplifted. I'd like to pull in one day and knock on their door and ask, "what gives you hope that your message is true?" But then I realize the only one I really need to ask if that message is true is...

and I look up at him and I see Love.

Thanks be to God.