

14 April 2024, Easter 3B
St. John's Parish of Newtonville

Acts 3:12-19
1 John 3:1-7
Luke 24:36b-48
Psalm 4

Meeting Us Where We Are

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Let us pray.

Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts beating as one be acceptable in your sight, O God, our Rock and our Redeemer, and set our hearts on fire with your love. **Amen.**

My friend Mason teaches a class at UNH-Manchester that explores the evolution of LGBTQ+ perspectives and images across a variety of subjects, including history, aging, religion, media, and the law. For the last few years, Mason has invited me as a guest speaker on religion. This year was the first time I got to speak with the class in person and as a clergy person. So, last Thursday, after completing work at my legal job, I drove to Manchester, put on my clergy shirt and collar, and shared with these students a perspective on religion they hadn't much encountered before: that of a gay, brown, priest. At the beginning of class, I asked them to tell me about their experiences with religion and their understandings of religious views on LGBTQ+ issues.

There was wide variation in how much religion was a factor in each of their upbringings and the religious denominations in which they were raised. There were, however, two commonalities.

First, they did the thing that most people do when they find out I'm a priest. In fact, even before I was a priest, people did this when they found out I was in the ordination process. They gave their church attendance record, sheepishly confessing that they hadn't been to church in a while and/or did not attend regularly. Some also, again as a sort of sheepish confession, expressed reservations about church doctrines.

This is always interesting to me. It feels like the response people expect is a finger wagging admonition: "You really should go to the church more." Or, "You really should believe XYZ teaching of the church." The tone of these confessions seems to anticipate condemnation.

I joked with them, as I often joke with others in response to these attendance and doctrine confessions, that I don't keep attendance and I'm not the belief police. I checked the ordination liturgy, and it says I am called to be pastor, priest, and teacher, not condemner, chastiser, and shamer.

The other commonality among these students was that they had universally received the message that LGBTQ+ identity is incompatible with religion.

Beyond LGBTQ+ identity, it became clear that these students had learned that religion, particularly Christianity, is about condemnation and shame, the finger wagging I described earlier. This is often the reason people eschew religion and church.

These views of religion, specifically Christianity, are rooted in a fundamental belief that our relationship with the divine comes down to lists of Dos and Don'ts. If you do the Dos, and avoid the Don'ts, you're all set. But if you do any of the Don'ts, God or whatever one's conception of the divine will strike you down with a lightning bolt or smite you in some other spectacular way. Religions often perpetuate the view that the Divine is sitting around waiting for us to slip up so there is an excuse to punish us, like a divine finger hovering over a big red "SMITE" button.

We had a great conversation that, I hope, offered a different way to think about our relationship to the Divine. They asked me about my experiences growing up in faith communities and, particularly, whether I had any challenges reconciling my faith with my identity as a gay man. The short answer is, God and I were always cool, but I had to work through those general messages that LGBTQ+ identity was incompatible with faith.

They asked me about how I deal with Scripture, particularly, the so-called “clobber passages.” They asked me my thoughts on theological questions like whether there is a hell and whether God punishes us for sinning. Rather than reducing sin to doing the Dos and not doing the Don’ts, we talked about sin as rupturing relationships, causing harm to others. That carries its own punishment and pain. God doesn’t need a smite button.

They asked me how I felt about the future of the inclusion of LGBTQ+ people in the Church. My response: “Hopeful.” I acknowledged that the Church has inflicted a lot of harm on a lot of people, and that we have a ton of reconciliation work to do. And yet, I am hopeful because I see and hear the messages of love through the din of messages of condemnation, and I know that love is stronger because God is stronger and God is love.

As I reflected on my experience at UNH-Manchester and the condemnatory approach to religion that is all too prevalent, the Gospel lessons over the last weeks seemed to speak more loudly against the view that God spends God’s days waiting to punish us.

In the stories of Jesus’ appearances after the Resurrection, Jesus fully acknowledges that he asks his followers to believe things so far outside the human experience that it seems insane. Maybe they had learned to accept

the miracles Jesus performed, but Jesus was brutally murdered. Didn't this miraculous power die with him?

Now, he shows up after they saw him brutally murdered and he's walking through walls and locked doors with the equivalent of a "Hey. What's up?" Of course they think he's a ghost! When people die, they don't come back. Also, flesh and bone can't walk through doors or walls. I'd hazard a guess that pretty much all of us here would think we are seeing things.

Of course they were terrified, confused, doubting, disbelieving, and wondering. Even when they touch Jesus, even when they see and touch his wounds, they are still uncertain. When they are able to entertain the thought that this is a physical, risen Jesus in a very real body, Jesus explains to them that the Resurrection fulfills all his teachings and all of Scripture.

You know what Jesus doesn't do? He doesn't condemn them or chastise them or smite them. He tells them not to be afraid. He invites them to see and touch him. He offers them proof to assuage their fears and doubts. When that isn't enough, he doesn't respond, "Folks, come on. How much more evidence do you need?!" He gives them further evidence by eating in front of them. Jesus doesn't then say, "Dummies. Did you not listen to a word I

said to you? Have you never read Scripture a day in your life?" He explains to them; he opens their minds.

Even with my buddy Thomas, Jesus doesn't condemn or berate. As Brian preached last Sunday, Jesus offers Thomas intimacy: "Stick your fingers in the mark of the nails. Shove your hand into the wound on my side. Come on, Thomas. Get in there. Do not doubt but believe." Often, we read what Jesus says to Thomas afterward – "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe." – as condemnatory. But Jesus doesn't curse Thomas or yell at him, just like Jesus doesn't do that in today's Gospel Lesson. Nope. He simply acknowledges that many will have to believe based solely on the witness of others.

The lesson from these stories, my beloved friends, is that God is not waiting around looking to smite us for doing the wrong thing or not doing the right thing or not believing. If that were the case, God wouldn't have bothered to send prophets or to come to us in the Word made Flesh or to die and rise again. If God were looking for excuses to punish us, God would have destroyed the humans in the garden long ago.

The Easter message, though, is that part of the grace God extends us is to meet us where we are. God is in our corner, rooting for us. God wants to help us do the right thing, avoid those things that harm ourselves and others, and believe in the power of God's love. Our Creator is not condemnatory. Our Creator is loving. So, when we cannot get to God's level, God comes to our level.

We are to do likewise. We are meant to love, not condemn. We are meant to be witnesses to ourselves and to one another of God's abiding, profound, unshakable love. Easter is not about condemnation. Easter is about a God who loves us more than we can imagine and our calling to reflect that love in the world around us.

We are witnesses of these things.

Amen.