

## Boxes

Last Saturday a few thousand folks showed up at the State Capitol to stand against the recent practice of our government to arrest and separate parents and children who cross the border — which some call border security and others call state sanctioned kidnapping.

And there in the midst of this gathering of thousands is a fellow holding a large sign that says in large letters: “Believe in Jesus or burn in hell!”

And at first glance I have to say that I summed up this fellow as a right wing fundamentalist extremist who’s views of Christianity couldn’t be further removed from my own...

But as the week wore on, and I continued to have images of that sign, as I read and reread today’s gospel, I began to wonder if maybe this guy isn’t right after all.

Now, before you start racing for the exits, let me say that I’m not suggesting that “Believe in Jesus or burn in Hell” means one must make a confession of faith or that one must accept Jesus as personal Lord and Savior (something that is found nowhere in Scripture despite the insistence of so-called Bible Christians that that’s the only ticket to salvation).

No, what I began to think about is: what does it really mean to believe in Jesus?

What is the reality of Hell?

And my meanderings got me thinking that belief in Jesus has little to do with a “yes I believe” uttered from my mouth, or a signature on a membership card or even submitting to baptism.

To believe in Jesus, as we hear in today's gospel lesson, as the disciples are sent out, means simply to hope for, and to extend, common human decency to anyone and to everyone in need.

Jesus tells us that today.

Go out.

Bring nothing but some slippers, a pair of shorts and a walking stick.

No iphone, no AAA card, no wallet – just go, and trust in the kindness of strangers.

Where such kindness is displayed, there is a disciple of Jesus, even if the one doing the kindness calls herself a Buddhist, a Hindu, an atheist, even a Roman Catholic!

Where such kindness is denied, even if he is Archbishop of Canterbury, even if he is a monk of great reputation, even if she is a born again jet setting evangelical, they are not followers of Jesus.

Don't take my word for it.

This is the very definition of judgment day as Jesus tells it through Matthew's gospel.

I was naked and you clothed me, hungry, and you fed me, lonely, and you stopped by for a visit.

Kindness to the needy is the very definition of the kingdom of heaven.

Refusing kindness to the needy is your ticket to hell.

Which brings me back to the "burn in hell" part of that fellow's sign.

Who on earth can imagine the savior of the universe sending someone to never ending agony because he or she didn't sign up for the right secret decoder ring?

And if that's what the man with the sign had in mind, well, I pray that his eyes will one day be opened.

But his words aren't without truth.

Meaning, when we turn away from one another, when we withhold common human compassion from especially the vulnerable, when we retreat into our own little boxes of tribe or race or creed; we are cut off from life as it's meant to be — and isn't that the very definition of hell?

Bringing this closer to home, that openness of spirit — trusting in the goodness of others, a willingness to be good to others, why, this is often hardest to do with those we know the best.

Those we know best are so easily summed up, defined, known through and through, and yes, too often dismissed.

As Mark Twain once commented, "familiarity breeds contempt, ..., and children."

Jesus gets a dose of that today when he arrives back home.

Remember, just a few weeks ago, his immediate family tried to get him tossed into the State Hospital.

Imagine the stories they told the neighbors when they returned:

"Not only has he lost his marbles, but he's disowned us, yammering some nonsense about his real family being those miscreants and loose women who are dragging around after him!"

No wonder when he shows up today, all he gets is the hairy eyeball, or to use Biblical language, "they were scandalized by him."

They have him in a box: a box of preconceived notions, a box that defines him by station in life, stereotype in life.

And Jesus rejects all of it.

The Incarnate God, who comes to us not as Pope or King, but as an ordinary man, in a backwater country, says a lot about who you and I might really be too, doesn't it?

Do you define, meaning, do you limit yourself, because of where you're from or what you do for a living?

Do we limit those around us, especially our nearest and dearest, because somehow we've forgotten that we come from God, and shall return to God too?

Jesus invites us out of that trap; with the reminder that we are each of us beloved daughters and sons of God — that our destiny is to become co-creators with God, as God continues to give birth to all of creation.

And the best way to open our mind to our true nature, to our true destiny, is to start by letting go of being afraid.

The disciples are sent out with nothing, so that they may come to see that they already possess everything!

How many of us worry about what may invade our lives: whether it is our current national panic attack over immigrants or Trump or our collective fear of death or disease or loss of control?

Opening ourselves, crawling out of our tiny boxes that for too long limit and define limited and tiny lives, well, it opens up whole new worlds.

As the philosopher once observed:

Don't fear the bad stuff in life; the disappointments, the failures, the loss, because in everything that comes our way is the hand of God, shaping us into who and what we are destined to become.

Recognize that.....

"This being human is like being a guest house,  
Every morning a new arrival.

A joy, a depression, a meanness,  
some momentary awareness comes  
as an unexpected visitor.

Welcome and entertain them all!

Even if they're a crowd of sorrows,  
who violently sweep your house empty of its furniture,  
still, treat each guest honorably,  
He may be clearing you out for some new delight!

This dark thought, the shame, the malice,  
meet them at the door laughing, and invite them in.

Be grateful for whoever comes,  
because each has been sent as a guide from beyond."  
-Rumi (modified).

It's what Paul is getting at this morning when he boasts not about his money or success or his holiness but about his abject weakness, the thorn in his side.

It is, he seems to be saying, not through our coolness, but through our cracks that God's light can shine through us into the world.

He seems to be saying, don't regret your cracks: your loss, your weakness, your sin, even your shame, it is through these cracks that God's light shines into the world.

We are living in challenging times.

For many of us, the current political winds are blowing dangerously dry, threatening cherished freedoms, and long held expectations of who and what we believe ourselves to be.

Growing angry or cynical is an inviting response.

But we are called to another place.

We are called to take the time to look carefully, even at our worst enemies, even at that which seems thoroughly corrupt, and wonder, if even there, we might catch a glimpse of God's Spirit.

When life has dumped a pile of manure at your doorstep, maybe Jesus says today:

Without the manure, there'll be no roses!

+amen

