

A number of years ago, I had an interesting conversation with a young child who was distressed. After asking what was going on, this little one said that she had done some things that weren't right that day. And then she said, pointing at the floor, "You know." "Know what," I inquired. "Well how do I know?" She asked. "Know what?" "You know, that I won't go down there." "Oh," I said. Her fear had become clear. Would she end up in some fiery furnace as punishment for the things she did wrong. At just 7 or 8 years old, somehow she had picked up from the culture around her that she had better behave or there would be hell to pay.

Today's Gospel reading sounds so condemnatory because it's used that way so often. You've seen it on placards at football games, on billboards, on bumper stickers – John 3:16; John 3:16; John 3:16. It's so simple, just do this, and then that will happen: believe and you'll be saved. The threat is that if you don't, though, you'll have hell to pay. Litmus tests of the right thing to say to prove that you really believe are all too familiar: say this to stay out of hell. What should be life giving, a source of joy, becomes a source of division and fear. Who's in, who's out, do I have enough of the right kind of belief? Have I done everything I need to do to be on God's right side? Will Jesus stand up for me? What will happen to me when I die? When we go down this road, we miss the point.

The Jesus portrayed throughout the Gospel of John is fully human: God's Word made flesh. Jesus talks to real people in real places – Nicodemus, the crippled man, the blind man, Mary and Martha and his disciples; he gets irritated; he performs a miracle for the pure pleasure of it; he has friends, and even a favorite; he weeps when his friend Lazarus dies. Jesus is thoroughly human. But he is also the one who makes God known to us, not only through his conversations, but through his very being. Jesus interprets God for us because he is God. Jesus shows us the God Who is always turned toward the world, extending an invitation to the world to be partnered with God in a marvelous love affair.

This love affair is lived out in community with one another, in the sharing of Eucharist, and has the promise of eternal life beginning today, in the here and now and has no end point. It's not some future-only event. The challenge in that love affair is to live without fear, trusting that God is in love with us and offers us life, not death. "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." John 3:17.

When I was a very young child, I had a recurring dream for a short time. There was a witch in the dream and she was making a witch's brew in a hot boiling cauldron. The dream was terrifying, not as much because I was afraid of the cauldron and the witch putting me in it, as the fact that she was trying to convince my mother to work with her. In that moment in the dream, I didn't know if she would prevent the witch from cooking me. Of course, when I woke up, I knew with a knowledge deeper than something I could prove that I had nothing to fear. My mother loved me and would fight the witch to her

death to keep me safe.

I mentioned earlier that this young child had a deep fear, like the one that emerged in my dream. Am I worth saving? Does someone love me enough? The answer I gave the child is that God made her and that God wouldn't throw her away. Her response was – “Well maybe, but you don't really, really know.” “It's true, I can't prove it to you,” I said, “but I know it's true, I believe it.” And it's a belief we come to over time, in relationship with God, and we learn that God is trustworthy, because the root of the word belief really means trust, not right doctrine.

The Gospel of John is one that is written for the benefit of his community. It's written, not with a proselytizing purpose for football placards, but with encouragement to John's community to keep on, to continue to believe and trust, to remain in relationship with God because God hasn't abandoned them. They had been kicked out of the worshipping community they belonged to and lost the ability to worship God in the building that housed their sacred scripture. John is saying that Jesus opened everything up so that a building is no longer needed as they had believed for so long. God has been made accessible through Jesus, not religious structures, or sacred buildings.

What's really at issue in today's Gospel is a matter of quality of life individually and corporately. We can live in fear, or we can live with the gift of freedom to live without fear. Jesus said “I came that you might have life, and have it abundantly.” Living with this gift can transform us. We can live in the light, and our transformation can transform the world. Domination and fear will be more than we can take and we will want to change things.

While my mother would never have let the witch get me, the manner in which God loves the world, loves us, is that God allowed the witch to get Jesus. Not as payment for some crime we committed, but because when God became human and dwelt among us, it was so that we would get the message that God's love transcends the darkness and everything else the world can throw at God. Jesus could live no other way but in the light. Jesus's life, death and resurrection meet head on a system of domination and fear that characterizes the way we've set up the world. It was a sacrifice because it's the only way it could have turned out. That much light in darkness, that much love amongst us, is bound to end in violence because it upsets everything.

We're half way through Lent I don't know if you selected a Lenten discipline this year or not – reading Scripture more often, praying faithfully, getting rid of bad habits – all good things. Harder still, though, is to give up our fears, and trust in God, who has reconstructed reality through the life of Jesus. Domination and fear have no place in God's world. Perhaps the best way to prepare for Easter with joy is to know that although we prefer the darkness, we have been invited into the light. The manner in which God loves us is that God became human and dwelt among us; that God did not come to condemn us, but God touched all of reality, even death, and turned it upside down; that God invites us to live without fear and to enter the light today so that we might have abundant life beginning here and now, without end.

On Easter morning we are going to burst open the doors of the church and worship together. The real invitation of the Gospel today is to live in light. The invitation tells us that we do not have to let the fear of the unknown guide our lives with anxiety. We can get up on Easter morning with joy, knowing that we are desired by God, as a lover desires her beloved, and that nothing, not even ourselves, can ultimately separate us from the love of God through Christ Jesus. Amen.