

**LOVE BADE ME WELCOME; JOHN 20:19-31; EASTER II, APRIL 23, 2017;
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The men's book group to which I belong reconvened the other night after a five-year hiatus. We are a religiously diverse group: two Presbyterians, an Eastern Orthodox Christian, a Reform Jew, an Episcopalian and two Roman Catholics.

The book that brought us together was George Orwell's *1984*. Someone said, and I would agree: 'the book is not a great read but a scary experience to read.' We spent more time talking about the current environment of national and world politics than the book itself, which was, we thought, a sign of Orwell's relevance for today.

1984, as you may recall, is about altering the values, beliefs and actions of people. So the conversation veered from politics into religion; at one point the Orthodox Christian, among us, raised his hand and asked the question, "Does a person *have to* believe in redemption and resurrection to be a Christian?"

Today's Scripture lesson is an answer to that question. All of us around the table agreed, for the most part, if we are told, per a totalitarian state or dictator, that we *have to* think or say or do something, we are likely think, say or do the opposite.

What is distinctive about the Christian gospel is that it is designed to spread the faith by persuasion, not fiat or dictate. Of course, there are some religious communities that assume complete authority and dictatorial power over people's lives – fundamentalist churches typically depend upon and enforce everyone believing the same blueprint theology.

Presbyterians, however, have long protected the right of clergy and members to hold "scruples" to the essential tenets of faith. When the conservative wing of the church in the 18th and 20th centuries sought to require clergy to sign a document that pledged adherence to the essential tenets of faith, the legislative body could not even agree what the essential tenets of faith were.

Roman Catholics have more freedom than is typically perceived. One of the Roman Catholics in our group gave us some insight as to how this works for him on the issue of abortion/freedom of choice.

He uses a Jesuit lens to ask himself questions that move from the theoretical realm, where he comes up with one answer, to the practical realm of applying his answer and finds himself contemplating a different and opposed answer. This person works for a prominent Catholic institution and has frequent interaction with the bishop, yet no lock-step position on tough issues.

When John sits down to record his account of Jesus' life he is not a dictator. His gospel is a series of increasingly remarkable signs that reveal Jesus is who he says he is – from turning water to wine, to healing a lame man, to giving sight to a blind man, to raising Lazarus and finally being raised from death himself; John seeks to convince the reader through a series of revelations that inspire deeper trust.

But let's come back to Orwell for a moment. The specter of *1984* hangs over today's world. Last week I stumbled onto live streaming of North Korea's three-day celebration of the founding dictator's birthday.

The assembly of troops and armaments was designed to convey the monolithic power of the state. The messaging from the speakers, including the dictator, was eerily close to that of Big Brother in Orwell's dystopian novel. I got the sense there is zero tolerance for anything but the party line.

Though, admittedly, like *1984*, since the state controls the press and media, it is unlikely that any narrative, message or account other than official party line ever reaches the people.

This hardline control does seem to be a global trend. Perhaps you saw David Brooks' article last week. He writes about the crisis of what the last generation called "Western civ." This was a narrative about the development of civilization as an accumulation of great ideas and innovations from the Egyptians, through Athens, the Magna Carta, the Age of Faith and the Renaissance and the Declaration of the Rights of Man.

The Western civ narrative came with certain values about the importance of reasoned discourse, the importance of property rights, the need for a public square that was religiously informed but not ecclesiastically dominated. It set a standard for what great statesmanship looked like and gave diverse people a sense of shared mission, a common vocabulary and a framework within which political debate and argument could help identify common goals.

But a few decades ago many in the academic community lost faith in the Western civilization narrative. Now if it is encountered at all it is presented as a history of oppression. The consequence of this erosion and rejection, Brooks writes, is the rise of illiberals and authoritarians who not only don't believe in democratic values but don't even *pretend* to believe in them as former dictators did.

We are leaving the age of reasoned, consensus-building leaders and entering the age of the strongman – witness the shift in Russia, Turkey, Egypt, and the doubling down of China and North Korea; plus the wave of nationalist parties and leaders in France and Germany; not to mention the United States.

Last week was the debut of John Kelly, Secretary of Homeland Security, who positioned his department, in his first public speech, for the swift and unrelenting crack down of immigrants and Muslims justifying across the board guilty-until-proven-innocent restrictions – including the separation of mothers and children entering the country which Secretary Kelly proclaimed was already proving effective in deterring would be migrants.

Maybe things are closer to the first century than we realize when people like Caesar Augustus and Nero or Herod and his sons ruled with unlimited, unilateral power; and religious authorities required strict adherence to rules and observances that negated allowing the spirit of the law to take precedence over the letter of the law should a human life or some matter of justice hang in the balance. Unbridled power corrupts whether the first or twenty-first century.

Enter today's lesson from the Gospel of John. It's worth noting that John's chronology of resurrection, ascension, and Pentecost is different than Luke/Acts chronology of those events and is the commonly observed sequence in the church.

In John's account, Jesus is raised on Easter, when he appears to Mary in the garden, he tells her he is *ascending* to his father and her father; then he appears to the disciples and tells them he is *giving them* the Holy Spirit (the moment of Pentecost in Acts); then he commissions them with the authority to forgive or not to forgive – the sins of any they encounter.

Luke/Acts tells us that Jesus was raised on Easter, ascended to the right hand of God in heaven forty days later and ten days after that the Holy Spirit descended on the disciples at Pentecost; which we refer to as the birthday of the church, when the community of faith was empowered by the Holy Spirit to carry out the mission of Jesus.

What John is accomplishing with his condensed chronology is the creation and commissioning of the church on the day of resurrection. Though the word *ekklesia* or "church" does not appear in the Fourth Gospel, from beginning to end the narrative makes clear that the message and mission of the Christian community is Jesus himself. Despite the challenges the church faces as a voluntary organization the church is different from other social groups. Its reason for being is not in its apparent successes or failures, in its growth or influence, but solely in the call and commission of Jesus – it otherwise runs the risk of turning into a personality cult or service club or sports league or whatever activity du jour the church organizes.

I mention this because it expands what John tells us happened in the upper room on the first Easter and then again a week later when Thomas was present. Jesus is appearing to and commissioning his church.

This is important lest we think faith is a privatized experience that matters only to me. Rather it is a communal enterprise in which the community is charged to carry the message to the world and to stand for justice like Jesus.

But what would it take to convince those disciples, to convince Thomas, to enlist in this movement that became the church of Jesus Christ? They lived in a day and age of dictators, rulers and religious authorities with unlimited power. They are used to the leader of the occupation government dictating what they are and aren't allowed to do from paying taxes to the right to assembly to their professed belief in a deity.

Could they comprehend any other system of governance, of leadership; could they even conceive that *they had a place* in the decision-making process?

Jesus understands this. His ministry is gentle; he invites people to come as they are, to listen, to take what they want and leave the rest. To the rich young man searching for eternal life, when pressed, Jesus offers a remedy – sell what you own, give the proceeds to the poor then follow me; the man chooses to decline. Jesus heals people who ask to be healed and tells them it is *their* faith, *their* willingness that makes healing possible. It is not so surprising that the early church developed a communal, shared form of power and decision-making.

What is so radical about the emergence of Christianity in the first century is that Jesus bases his kingdom and rule upon “agape” love; that is love directed outward to the other.

By its very nature such love can only be shared and accepted by invitation and persuasion not decree and mandate.

Jesus tells them as much in the upper room when he washes their feet – he shows them this love in action, how it humbles and lowers itself; how the one who is master becomes servant.

The choir will sing today Ralph Vaughn Williams setting for the poetry of George Herbert – a seventeenth century Anglican priest – who wrote religious verse; Herbert’s perspective is that of ‘the man in the street.’

What motivated him to write poetry was his own falling short of a Christ-like life; he knew he was not alone; and he believed that a robust faith was grounded in a personal relationship with God, yet expressed in active service to others.

Herbert’s model for his love poems is a friend talking with a friend – the religious version of the Socratic method of question and answer to arrive at a truth. Yet, the voice in Herbert’s poetry is no abstract, theoretical Lone Ranger but a full-fledged, card-carrying member of the Anglican church. You could say Herbert’s poetry is theological inquiry to strengthen the people of God and the ministry of outreach.

What is striking about Mystical Song III – “Love Bade Me Welcome” is the unrelenting, pursuit of love to win the one guilty of dust and sin. Love meets us, Christ meets us, as he meets Thomas today in the upper room, at every turn with humility and generosity; this Christ/love gives us the benefit of the doubt; is ready to sacrifice until we taste the whole and abundant life he offers.

What finally happens is that love conquers the fortress of the human heart – not by force, like a dictator, but by relentless, honest, humble invitation to those who live in darkness or have returned to a dark place.

Do we have to believe in redemption and resurrection to be a Christian? The question is not so much ‘do we have to’ as ‘do we want to’; love gives us reason, over and over, to trust that we are indeed unconditionally accepted by a great and gracious God regardless of our past; and, therefore, we are redeemed, *liberated* from the mistakes and shame and fools we’ve made of ourselves that still hold power over us but have lost their grip and fallen away.

The burden of guilt lifted, *we are raised* from the tombs of despair and regret and resentment that bound us.

No dictator, no power of state, or force of arms can accomplish that.

‘Love bids us welcome,’ the church, *this church* is a message and mission desperately needed for these times. Amen.