



## “ReLent: Judgment”

John 3:14-21

March 14, 2021

A few years ago, a pastor in Charlotte published a book titled, *The Rise of the Nones*. The term refers not to Roman Catholic sisters (n-u-n-s) but to the religiously unaffiliated (n-o-n-e-s). Those who check the box marked “none” on religious affiliation surveys have, for some time now, been the fastest-growing segment of the American population, and the author wanted to understand the reasons behind this dramatic increase. Again and again, he heard first-hand accounts and read statistics that told the story. The rise of the *nones* had everything to do with a pervasive perception of the church. He writes, “When people who had given up on church and faith thought of Christians, all that came to mind was a bunch of people who were judgmental. Prideful, acting morally superior, and from that, finding fault with everybody else.”<sup>i</sup>

This perception, combined with a general distrust of institutions and other contributing factors, has fueled the rise of the religiously unaffiliated for well over a decade now. These numbers, and the testimonies of the *nones*, tell one part of an important story. Another part of that story is powerfully described in an essay that one of you sent me last week, a piece with the intriguing title, “The Empty Religions of Instagram,” which chronicles the spiritual seeking of a self-identified *none* who has found the available alternatives profoundly lacking. The author, Leigh Stein, points to the popularity of Instagram influencers (whom she calls Instavangelists) whose messages are infused with spiritual language and personal stories without specific reference to religious dogma. There is a yearning for these deeper wells of meaning, but ultimately Stein is left frustrated by these Instavangelists, writing, “(those) we’ve chosen as our moral leaders aren’t challenging us to ask the

fundamental questions that leaders of faith have been wrestling with for thousands of years: Why are we here? Why do we suffer? What should we believe in beyond the limits of our puny selfhood?” She quotes her mother, a psychotherapist and lay minister in her church, who suggests that these Instavangelists, “might inspire you to live your best life but not make the best use of your life.” Stein concludes, “We’re looking for guidance in the wrong places. Instead of helping us to engage with our most important questions, our screens might be distracting us from them. Maybe we actually need to go to something like church?”

When describing what she is missing in her spiritual life, Stein uses words that resonate with my own sense of the faith we proclaim and the call we follow. Reverence. Humility. Awe. Mercy.

In the age of rising *nones* and empty Instagram religions, what is the role of the Church? How might we be faithful to the extensive gifts of our faith tradition and responsive to the unmet spiritual yearning of this moment when so much has been cracked open and laid bare?

“For God so loved the world...” This seminal verse appears in the middle of a dramatic encounter between Jesus and a spiritual seeker, a man named Nicodemus. As beautifully descriptive and profoundly true as these words are, I do worry a bit about the weight they have been asked to carry for our faith. I also worry about the way that this verse has been lifted from the story that gives it meaning. I worry that these words, intended in context as an expression of the depth of God’s love, have been shaped instead into a weapon of judgment or a test of doctrinal declaration.

With that picture in mind, you can understand why some stay away or seek meaning and purpose elsewhere. The truth is that the human tendency to judgmentalism and hypocrisy is not confined to the Christian church, *but* for those who are called to embody the love of Jesus Christ the call to struggle against these tendencies is particularly significant. In this season of relenting, I wonder, what it might look like for us to let go of our inclination to judge?

Reclaiming the radical message of Jesus in this encounter recorded in the Gospel of John might offer a way to do that. Here are some thoughts for consideration.

1. For God so loved *the world*. The Greek word here (stay with me, it will just be a moment) is *cosmos*. That God's love covers the entire universe might be the most startling aspect of this verse; there is no exclusive claim on the love of God, which covers the cosmos, wraps around the world. This truth ought to invoke a little humility on the part of the church. As the hymn puts it, "the love of God is broader than the measure of our minds."

2. We would also do well to include John 3:17 whenever we recite the preceding verse. God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him. The life of Jesus Christ, and the ministry of the church, is not about condemnation. It is an invitation to abundant life, to salvation.

3. Finally, Jesus describes the basis for judgment—the light has come into the world, and the people loved darkness rather than the light. What Jesus offers is a different picture of judgment than the one we most commonly lift up. When we think of judgment, we think of consequences that follow our actions, punishment that fits the crime. Judgment is handed down for what has gone wrong. As a kid, a group of us would often rush into the fellowship hall immediately after worship and begin a game of dodgeball. Things would sometimes get a little intense, with a number of kids playing and dodge balls

being thrown all over the large room. One time, a ball was thrown (okay, thrown by me) and hit a church window with enough velocity to break the glass. At precisely that moment, an elder of the church opened the door of the fellowship hall. Judgment ensued.

That is the way we think of judgment, but Jesus' words offer us a different picture. Judgment as Jesus describes it is not about getting caught or being punished, it is about telling the truth. His words are not punitive, they are descriptive. Their goal is not condemnation but redemption. Light has come into the world; we have chosen to follow the ways of darkness instead. But the light has not gone away; God sent the Son not to condemn the world but to save the world. All of it.

And this, it seems to me, is an even harder truth for us to accept. Judgment as punishment we understand. We even seem to delight in it. It satisfies our need for clarity and fairness to see someone get his or her just desserts. We are comfortable with such a response. But grace, redemption, unconditional love, well that is much more difficult for us. This is why there is nothing more scandalous or troubling than the cross—it discloses the unconditional love of Jesus Christ, who came not to condemn but to save.

For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son. God did not check with us beforehand about the most rational or prudential way to accomplish salvation. God's answer to the brokenness of the world was not measured or judicious or even particularly fair. God loved the world so much that God gave what mattered most. And the gift was offered not to the righteous or the intelligent or the morally pure. The gift belongs to the entire world.

God's unconditional love and unmerited grace ought to hold in check all our tendencies to judge and condemn others. Relenting our judgmentalism could have a profoundly transformative impact on how we live the faith we profess. Imagine how much freedom we could find in giving up the need to play the role of judge. Imagine how changed our

community could be if we simply offered the grace of God with absolutely no strings attached. God *so loved* the world, and so should we.

We encounter more than enough harsh judgment in our lives. We are judged on everything from our appearance to our work performance to our family system. Words of hatred and anger come far too easily to our own minds and hearts. I don't know about you, but it is not hard for me to spiral into a torrent of judgment. It doesn't feel particularly good, but once I start it's hard to stop. I can look at other drivers on the road or news stories on television or other kids on the playground and get in this judgmental frame of mind. I don't know for sure, but I've heard it can even happen in church—judging the worship behavior, life choices, or convictions of another member of the community. It doesn't feel particularly good, but it can be hard to stop the spiral of judgment even as it takes us away from a centered spirit of worship. Can you believe he wore that? How could they let their children do that? Did you hear what she said? I would never make *that* decision. Judgment, judgment, judgment. All rooted in an underlying self-judgment that says we are not good enough, not wise enough, not faithful enough. It's exhausting, all this judging and being judged.

The invitation offered by Jesus' words this morning is simple and life-changing. Let it go. Release your need to evaluate and assess and adjudicate the actions and words of everyone else. Perhaps most radically, relent your ceaseless self-judgment. Instead, believe this truth—that God loves the world enough to offer redemption at great cost, to free us from the prison of judgment. The more we grow in faith, the less we feel the need to judge others and the more we live into the love of God.

Kathleen Norris tells the story of a Benedictine sister who was visiting her mother as she lay dying in a hospital bed. In an effort to reassure her, the

sister said, "Remember Mom, in heaven everyone you love will be there." Her mother paused and replied, "Honey, that's not true. In heaven I will love everyone who's there."<sup>ii</sup>

The truth of the Gospel is this: we are loved and accepted not because of how good we are but because of how gracious God is. We can relent judgment because the only one who judges us is the one who loves us unconditionally. We can extend grace and kindness and mercy to everyone else because we have experienced divine love. We can be a community of acceptance and invitation because we have been accepted and invited.

On a winding road in the mountains of North Carolina, in white paint on a large boulder just off the side of the road, are these words: "Prepare to meet thy God! John 3:16." I'm not sure who painted the words, but given the precarious location, I've always assumed they were intended as a warning. Certainly, anyone who attempts to look up the verse on that road is likely to meet God sooner rather than later. And yet, here in the home stretch of the season of Lent, we too are preparing to meet our God. We are on our way to the cross. Perhaps we approach with fear and trembling. Perhaps we walk in uncertainty and doubt. Maybe we're wondering what this judgment will be.

What if it is love? What if the one seated on the throne speaks these words, "I sent my Son into the world, not to condemn, but that the world might be saved through him."

Then, could we relent judgment and welcome grace? I think so. Yes, I think so.

<sup>i</sup> James Emery White, *The Rise of the Nones: Understanding and Reaching the Religiously Unaffiliated*. Appendix A.

<sup>ii</sup> Kathleen Norris, *Amazing Grace: A Vocabulary of Faith*. Riverhead Books, 1999.