

I almost didn't use this reading today...

Why?

Because this reading has often been used with fear to impel people.

not invite people, to follow Jesus...

Because this reading has often been used by fundamentalists to 'prove' their point that everyone must be Christian to go to heaven...

This reading is often used by some Christians to frighten non believers into believing:

'Those who believe in him are not condemned;

but those who do not believe are condemned already,

because they have not believed in the name of the only Son of God. '

Of course, no one wants to be condemned...

So fear of going to hell...being condemned...

has been used, by some, as a tool for conversion.

Really?? Is that how Jesus taught?

Did he really want people walk with him,

to follow him because they were afraid not to??

Would he have thought that he could teach people how to forgive,

how to be generous and merciful, that he could teach people to love

magnificently simply because they were afraid of the consequences

for themselves if they didn't???

That is not the theology nor the philosophy of Jesus what so ever.

So why in the world have these verses been so often used in this way?

I'd like to share with you a little bit of what the world was like when the evangelist wrote

his gospel...I think it will help us to understand a little better.

All of the Gospels are a collection of stories and teachings that were handed down through a particular community of people.

The Evangelist is the one person who chose to select certain stories, yes he chose, and he deliberately chose to add or remove some words or phrases as he wrote down his selected stories...

He did this to help his community carry on in their faith...

to bear the trials of their faith and to give them hope...

This is true for all the Gospels...

They are not non-biased literal recording of events and conversations.

The Evangelist had an intent and a purpose each unique for their own community.

John's Gospel was written around the year 100 and they were extraordinarily violent times.

Scholars believe that John's community was formed in the early 50's and at that time the people were still very interested in sharing the Good News of Jesus with their families and friends, their neighbors and fellow Jews...

They were passionate and idealistic and most of all hopeful that those who heard the stories would be convinced of the Messiahship of Jesus...

But, as time went on, their message wasn't accepted... they were no longer seen as 'real' Jews, and because they believed in Jesus, kicked out of Temple: no longer welcomed at worship.

At the very same time, the Romans were blaming these followers of Jesus for the disintegration of the great Roman Empire.

So those who were a part of John's community were being attacked from both sides...

By the late 80's this particular community had evolved and changed from being a community open and involved with society...

to a community under siege.

They developed an ‘us against them’ mentality.

It was the new Christians against the Jews.

It was the new Christians against Rome and its persecutions....

**More than in any other gospel, you hear of ‘the world’—all those outside their community-
spoken about in a negative sense...79 times to be exact in the Gospel of John.**

**Whereas in the Gospel of Matthew, negatively speaking about ‘the world’
is only mentioned 9 times and the world is only referred to negatively 3 times
in Luke and Mark.**

John’s gospel is well known for it’s light verses dark imagery...

it’s dualist viewpoints...it’s oppositional statements..

Other Christian communities did not necessarily feel like John’s community...

**the other 3 Gospel communities do not take such a confrontational stance
against ‘the world’**

Luke is still reaching out to the Gentiles,

Mathew is engaging the Jews not yet convinced that Jesus is the one...

Paul is all over the place talking to Greeks and Romans and Jews and Gentiles...

**But John...John is using fear to support his community and to convince others to convert
to Jesus...it is not just a modern phenomena...**

but just because that is John’s method, that doesn’t make right...

and a quick note: not all of the Gospel of John is fear based.

but a some of it is and we must be willing to acknowledge it

and, I would suggest to you, either transform it or let it in the past...

So, with that being said, When we take these verses literally:

That only Christians are saved and the rest of humanity is condemned,

**it continues to promote an antagonistic, an 'us against them' mentality...
it promotes a fear based theology...and it promotes an arrogant Christianity..**

**None of those attitudes are helpful in learning to how to be more forgiving,
more compassionate, more generous or more loving...**

**When we hold an 'us against them' mentality, especially in our religious
understandings, it builds walls and boundaries between people...
Jesus was all about breaking down the walls and the boundaries
between people.**

**Arrogance, divisiveness and fear were never part of teachings or life of Jesus.
Arrogance, divisiveness and fear has never helped anyone
to be truly compassionate, kind or forgiving.**

**Love is the only motivating force that can melt arrogance,
heal divisiveness
and dispel fear.**

**Love is the only reason to follow Jesus....
love is the only reason to share with the hungry and stand with the oppressed...**

**If you follow Jesus so that you will not be condemned...
If you follow Jesus to stay out of hell...
you create your own hell on earth because you are living in fear....
and your worse fear is now realized...**

**If you follow Jesus because you Love...
because you Love yourself, your God, your neighbor**

**because you Love life and this beautiful planet,
because forgiveness and kindness and compassion
are the most true and beautiful and humble ways to let
your Love shine...
then you are already in heaven...your greatest hope is now realized...
So the question before us this day are:
Are we compelled by fear
or drawn by Love to follow Jesus?
amen.**