

## Big Brother

A little over ten years ago, while we were living in Iowa, we planned a trip to Omaha with friends to visit a museum where this new creation called the St. John's Illustrated Bible was being displayed.

Our friends were driving, and their car was equipped with something I had never seen or even heard of. It was called Global Positioning System navigation, or GPS for short.

We punched in the address of the museum. As I watched in fascination, a map showed up on a screen that showed the route we were to take. We could watch the position of the car move along this map as we drove. At the appropriate times, a voice came on to guide us through various turns.

Amazingly, this device guided us right to the door of a museum in a city 100 miles away. At the end of the day, two thoughts occurred to me as I pondered what had happened: 1) this is an amazing and very useful device, and 2) "Big Brother is watching."

That was the theme of George Orwell's chilling novel, *1984*. The book imagined a society in which everything was tightly controlled by a tyrannical government. The authorities were able to track everyone at all times and monitor their behavior.

Any deviation from acceptable thought and behavior was dealt with harshly. So before you said or did anything, you had to remind yourself that Big Brother is watching. It claimed to promote an orderly and safe society. But it ended up enslaving everyone.

I remember thinking at the time that GPS technology could make it possible to locate where anyone in the world was at any given moment. It could provide authoritarian leaders with exactly the tool they need to create a Big Brother Society.

The arrival of smart phones just a few years later made this scenario even more plausible, although few people seem to have any worries about it. I mention this not to stoke fear and conspiracy theories but because of how it relates to today's gospel.

As I reflected on chapter three of John, it occurred to me that the concept of Big Brother watching and controlling behavior is nothing new. It's been around since at least the Middle Ages.

In fact, the Christian church during that time taught that we do live in a Big Brother Society, whether we like it or not. The only difference was that instead of the government looking over your shoulder, watching every movement and waiting to crush the least departure from acceptable behavior, it was God.

God is watching your every act, every moment of every day, even when there is no one else around. God sees it all and is taking notes and taking names, and is going to punish you for all the stuff you do.

That was the way Martin Luther experienced the world when he was young. It was the way most people in Europe were raised at the time.

It is a view of reality that persists to this day. It never ceases to amaze me how often people think of God as the Big Eye in the Sky, scanning the globe in a relentless search for bad behavior. Under that view, the church's purpose is to serve as God's minions in this Big Brother attempt to monitor the behavior of people and keep them in line.

For those with the Eye in the Sky view of God, the biggest difference between our society and the Medieval world is that in a largely secular society it's a little easier to forget that God is around with his spyglass. We manage to put it out of our minds that Big Brother is watching, until we walk into a church or find ourselves uncomfortably close to a pastor, one of God's paid enforcers.

I never realized how strong this Big Brother attitude about God was until I made the decision to go into the ministry. On hearing this surprising news, one of my close friends expressed concern over how this career move was going to affect our relationship. "I suppose now I'm going to have to watch what I say, clean up my act around you."

My response was, "Don't pull on Eddie Haskell on me." (Yeah, I know I'm dating myself again with that *Leave it to Beaver* reference.) What I meant was, "If you start acting differently around me because of the profession I'm going into, I will be very disappointed."

That kind of thing happens a lot. People think they need to watch their language when they are around the pastor. They need to be more careful what they say, and what they do. Although this is not so much the case in suds-happy Wisconsin, I've been in places where people think twice before they risk opening a bottle of beer with the pastor around.

A curious thing happens when I visit a member of our congregation in the hospital who has not been regularly attending worship. Sometimes I can barely get out a "Hi, how are you doing" before I start getting apologies and excuses as to why they haven't been in church. As if the reason I showed up was to shame them for their misdeeds.

My favorite example of being considered a member of God's Big Brother patrol took place in Creston, IA, not long after I was called to a congregation there. As a

member of the Kiwanis Club, I participated in a charity bowling tournament that we sponsored.

One of the features of this tournament was that whenever a red headpin came up, you had the option of betting from \$1 to \$5 that you would get a strike with your next ball. That situation came up on one of my turns.

What I did not realize until someone told me later was that a lot of people were hoping that situation would never come up for me. Once it did, they were holding their breath, watching nervously to see what I would do. After all, this was *gambling!* And this is *the new pastor!*

Is he going to throw a fit? Will he lecture us on the evils of gambling?

I had no idea of the angst that was in the room. I bet three dollars, lost it, and was glad to give it. Come on, this was for charity. I understand Pastor Christine is similarly involved in public gambling for charity over at the radio station.

The “Big Brother is Watching” attitude is frustrating for two reasons. First, I was not called into the ministry to be a lunchroom monitor or a playground supervisor, or to be Santa’s helper—checking to see who’s naughty or nice.

There are very few students who attend an ELCA Lutheran seminary so that they can join the Spanish Inquisition, the Morality Police Squad, or the religious version of the Gestapo. We are called to proclaim the Good News of Jesus Christ.

The second, and more important, reason for my frustration is that this attitude does not reflect the truth about God. Today’s Gospel passage reminds us that God is not interested in this “Big Brother is Watching” relationship, and does not operate that way.

This reading is universally regarded as absolutely central to the message of the Bible. It contains one of the most quoted and memorized passages of all: John 3:16. *For God so loved the world that he gave his only son, so that everyone who believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.*”

I believe that the words immediately following that key passage are just as important. *“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.”*

The passage makes it clear that God is not interested in sniffing out and documenting questionable behavior wherever it occurs. God is not searching for flaws, taking inventory of our failings, or monitoring us for violations that will disqualify us from entry into the kingdom of heaven.

God's purpose in sending Jesus into the world was the opposite: to override the record of our failings and violations. That is basic to Christian theology and especially to Lutheran theology.

Yet we just can't seem to erase the Medieval Big Brother notion of God. A recently published poll by George Barna found that only 1 in 4 Lutherans have a problem with this statement:

"If a person is generally good, or does enough good things for others, they will earn a place in heaven."

Apparently, despite what Martin Luther taught, the vast majority of Lutherans think that's about right. That fact may help explain why hard-line fundamentalist religions and denominations have such appeal throughout the world. Because that is exactly what they teach.

That on judgment day, the record of everything you have done in your life will be entered as evidence in a great tribunal. There, the good things you have done in your life will be weighed against the bad things you have done. If the good outweighs the bad, heaven is yours. If the bad outweighs the good, you are condemned.

There is a lot about that which appeals to our sense of justice and fairness, but that is not what Christianity teaches. Not even close. "*God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world but in order that the world might be saved through him.*" Jesus is all about saving.

A crucial point is that God's standards are much higher than a simple, "Did you do a few more good things than bad in your life? Congratulations, you just squeaked in under the wire."

God's standard is: do you love the lord your God with all your heart and all your soul and all your mind, and your neighbor as yourself? Do you really? Always? That is not a standard that people can meet, because even if we make a concerted effort to do that most of the time, it is our nature to slip into thinking of ourselves first.

Yet Jesus' standards were even higher than that. In Matthew 5, Jesus said, "If you are angry with a brother or a sister, you will be liable to judgment; and if you insult a brother or sister, you will be liable to the council; and if you say, "You fool," you will be liable to the hell of fire."

In Luke 18, the rich young man asked, “What must I do to inherit eternal life?” Jesus included this requirement, “Sell all that you own and distribute the money to the poor.”

Taken together, what these two passages demonstrate is that earning your way to heaven is an impossible quest.

But as any parent knows, there is a big difference between consequences and punishment. The consequences of violating the command to love to the extent that God expects doom us to a miserable dog-eat-dog existence.

Violating the command to love God and our neighbor dooms us to living outside of proper relationship with God, and that carries its own punishment. You don't have to pile on any extra penalties for various offenses.

According to John 3, why was Jesus sent into the world? **(Slide #12)** To enforce the law? To determine who should be marked for punishment? No, he came because we need help. Without him, we're stuck in the consequences of sin. We're trapped in a dysfunctional world of our own making. We are stumbling around in the dark without a clue of where we are going.

Jesus came to offer a light to show us the way out.

Jesus did not come into the world to hold our feet to the fire but to take the fire upon himself. He came not to take inventory of our failings, but to forgive and to erase the record of our failings. He came not to make us pay dearly for every one of our lapses, but to pay dearly himself for the sins of others.

Jesus came to offer a light to show us the way out of the hopeless messes we get ourselves into.

Go toward the light, walk in the light, and you will find yourself drawing near the new reign of God: a world where the lion lies down with the lamb, where justice flows like waters and righteousness like an everlasting stream, where we can be the kind of people we are supposed to be in the kind of world we are supposed to live in.

The next verses in John go on to tell us why, despite this clear message that salvation is a gift from God, people still have the feeling that they are always being accused and judged by the ever-present Big Brother in heaven.

It is because when the light of God shines, showing us the way out of the darkness, it exposes what we are and what we have done. The light does not condemn, but it does expose. It exposes both the good and bad.

We don't always like what we see when the light is turned on in our lives. The light that guides us out of the darkness and into relationship with God also has the effect of showing some things about ourselves that need to change.

If people change their behavior and clean up their language whenever they are around the pastor, I feel like Big Brother's hired goon, and I wish they'd just knock it off. I don't need to be parenting adults. I'm called to proclaim the Gospel, the Good News. To hold up the light that saves.

But I've come to the conclusion that the office of the pastor reflects a certain amount of that light that we proclaim. If the office of the pastor reflects enough light so that people don't like what they see of themselves in that light, and that causes some real change, well, I guess that is what light does, and it's not a bad thing. But only if it's true change and not a show to fool the inspectors.

John says in this passage that you have to believe to be saved. Even that is not so much a standard of behavior as it is plain common sense. Being saved is being with God. We cannot be with God if we do not believe in God. We can't go toward the light of Christ that pulls us out of the consequence of sin if we do not see or trust that light.

This free gift of saving light is not a license to do whatever we want and pretend we have no responsibility for our actions. Because doing so moves us away from the light. And condemns us to live in darkness.

But as John says, it isn't God who condemns us in that case. We condemn ourselves.

There is a light shining out there. But it is not the spotlight of the Great Enforcer. It is the saving light showing the way to the Kingdom of God.