

“For God So Loved the World”

John 3:1-21

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This morning we are looking at what is arguably the most famous verse in the entire Bible- certainly one of the first texts we ever learned as children. In just one sentence, the sum and substance of the Christian’s faith is explained in that it reveals to us the depth of God’s love, the greatness of his gift, and the blessings which God freely offers us. It is said that in the weeks before his death, Martin Luther interpreted the text for the last time and said, “What Spartan saying can be compared with this wonderful brevity? It is a Bible in itself!” And in the moments just before his death, he repeated that same verse—John 3:16--three times in Latin.

Dwight L. Moody, considered by many to be the greatest evangelist of the 19th century, told of how he once attended a series of evangelistic meetings led by a Mr. Moorhouse. For six nights in a row, he preached on the very same text- John 3:16. On the seventh night, he advanced into the pulpit and confessed before the eager congregation: “Beloved friends, I have been hunting all day for a new text, but I cannot find anything so good as the old one, so we will go back to John 3:16.” He went on to preach a SEVENTH sermon on those same wonderful words: “God so loved the world.” Then said Moody, “I still remember the end of that sermon: ‘My friends,’ he said, ‘for a whole week I have been trying to tell you how much God loves you, but I cannot do it with this poor stammering tongue. If I could borrow Jacob’s ladder, and climb up into Heaven, and ask Gabriel, who stands in the presence of the Almighty, to tell me how much love the Father has for the world, all he could say would be: God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth on him should not perish, but have eternal life.’”

However, To TRULY understand this text, we first have to look at its context- at those verses which come before it in one of the most famous interviews in all the Bible. John chapter three opens by telling us that there was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus and that he was a ruler of the Jews. He was a powerful member of the Sanhedrin, the Jewish High Council that had final word over decisions regarding the Holy Temple and Jewish daily life. We are told that he came to Jesus by night. Now this is an important detail for it implies MORE than this man of great importance did not want to be seen seeking out someone from the lower class who was also an uneducated and uncredentialed rival at that. In John’s gospel, night is often a symbol of spiritual darkness. When Judas departs from the Upper Room to betray Jesus following their last meal together, the text then says, “So, after receiving the morsel, he immediately went out; *and it was night.*” For WHATEVER reason Nicodemus wants to speak to Jesus, the fact that he approaches him at night indicates how one of Israel’s most important leaders, someone entrusted to be a spiritual light to the Jews, was IN FACT blind and enveloped in darkness HIMSELF.

We know that Nicodemus knew of Jesus’ reputation and quite possibly had even heard him preach for he says to him, “Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher come for God; for no one can do these signs that you do, unless God is with him.” However, Jesus isn’t interested in hearing flattery so right away he challenges him by saying that unless one is BORN AGAIN, he cannot see the kingdom of God. It’s apparent that Nicodemus doesn’t realize that Jesus is speaking in metaphors here, that what he is saying is that where every child enters the world the

same way- through a mother's womb, a child OF GOD comes into the world by quite ANOTHER route. A child of God is born "spiritually" AS WELL AS "naturally"; he experiences a birth "from above" IN ADDITION TO being born "from below." Jesus adds that that which is born of the flesh is the result of fleshly or physical activity while that which is of the SPIRIT can only be born by the SPIRIT, that it is an activity begun and completed by God ALONE. Furthermore, just like the wind, no one can dictate or predict how or when the Spirit will move- it operates solely at the initiative and discretion of God. Well by now, Nicodemus is thoroughly confused and this leads Jesus to exclaim, "How is it that you are a teacher of Israel and yet you cannot comprehend the most elementary concepts of your own faith?"

The Pharisees, of which Nicodemus was a leader, based their faith and practice, not only on the written scriptures, that is, the Torah, the Prophets and Sacred writings, but on Oral Tradition as well. Unlike the SADDUCEES who interpreted the scriptures literally and were rigid in their enforcement of Jewish law, the PHARISEES were willing to make adjustments so as to make it more relevant to the people's daily lives. They also welcomed new ideas which were not specifically spelled out in the Old Testament such as a belief in angels and demons, the resurrection of the dead, the future life, and the hope of a coming Messiah who would redeem Israel- none of which the Sadducees accepted. They represented the great majority of Jews in Israel including the poor. Of ALL the religious groups in Israel, Jesus came closest to the Pharisees as well as St. Paul who once referred to himself as "a Pharisee among Pharisees."

Yet, despite all that Jesus and the Pharisees shared in common, he was becoming a growing concern among them. As Jesus' radical message of the kingdom of God took root, his teachings and ministry grew increasingly popular with the people. The religious leaders worried that if he were allowed to continue, it would eventually undermine their OWN teachings and threaten their very authority. For example, he and his disciples refused to keep the appointed fasts and uphold Sabbath laws. They failed to observe the appointed ritual washings before eating and disregarded the rules concerning food, including eating with Publicans and sinners. Jesus, on the other hand, condemned their obsession with legalistic details. He said that it was not what went into a person that defiled him but rather what came OUT, and accused them of going so far as to tithe mint and dill and cumin while neglecting the WEIGHTIER matters of the law. He was criticized for healing a man on the Sabbath but he DID so because he believed God was far more concerned about HUMAN LIVES than adhering to some IRRELEVANT LEGAL CODE. After all, man was not made for the LAW but rather the Law was made for MAN. To Christ, so much of what passed for the Jewish religion was in fact TRIVIAL and UNNECESSARY to one's relationship with God. This is why he distilled the Law and the Prophets down to just TWO commandments, that people were to love God with their whole heart and mind and soul, and to love their neighbor as they loved themselves instead of the 613 commandments the Pharisees had created. They strained gnats while swallowing camels, "majoring in the minors while minoring in the majors" as one of my professors like to put it.

To the PHARISEES, however, there was NOTHING trivial about them. These weren't arbitrary rules and regulations meant to be taken lightly but God's COMMANDS and so long as Israel remained obedient to them, her distinction as God's Chosen People--those who have been called out to be separate from the world--would be preserved. Their greatest fear was that the nation would be assimilated by the surrounding cultures. By continuing to IGNORE her laws and causing OTHERS to disregard them, they believed it would open the door to Israel becoming no different than any OTHER culture in the ancient world; it would eventually upend what they

regarded as the very FOUNDATION of their faith and national life. Thus, at the heart of their conflict lay this, that where those Jewish leaders were trying to save Judaism in general and their nation in particular, Jesus was MORE concerned about trying to save INDIVIDUALS. Where THEY were more obsessed with OUTWARD behavior and conformity to a strict moral code, Jesus was more interested in one's INWARD transformation, with spiritual rebirth and the cleansing of one's motives and impulses. Thus, it was not by LEGALISTIC REGULATION but solely by INWARD REGENERATION that one fulfilled the law.

At this point, I want to skip over to John 3:16 for with this verse, John shows how the message and ministry of Christ differed CONSIDERABLY from what Nicodemus and the rest of the Pharisees professed. To begin with, it begins with "God"- "For GOD so loved the world..." Where religion begins with MAN'S search for God, Christianity begins with God's search for MAN. It's a misnomer to think that Christianity always begins with us first hungering and thirsting after God, and only when we have sought for God long and hard enough, only THEN does God finally reveal himself to us. After all, does not Jeremiah say, "You shall seek the Lord and find him when you search for him with all your heart." Well that may have been the theology of the Nicodemus and the Jews but Christ came to show us that Christianity begins, not with US but with GOD AND GOD'S LOVE. And it is not that we first loved and sought HIM but that God first loved and sought US! As John says in his First Epistle, "In this is love, not that we loved GOD but that he loved US and sent his Son to be the expiation for our sins." (1Jn. 4:10) God is always taking the initiative and seeking after US, never the other way around.

Furthermore, God comes to us IN LOVE. God is first and foremost about relationship, about reconciling and restoring broken marriages and fractured friendships. Where the Jews were primarily about rigorous adherence to the Law and the consequences of falling short of its demands, Christ was foremost about showing grace and mercy and forgiveness in the face of our failures and limitations. He understood how trying to live by the Law was self-defeating, how if one was constantly exerting one's will to do so, it would consign people to a lifetime of failure and guilt. Instead, only through the gracious offer of God's love and forgiveness could the human heart ever be transformed and divested of its selfishness and pride.

And such love was not reserved for the Jews ALONE as so many of the Jews believed, but for the entire WORLD. God was using the nation of Israel and the Jewish people to be a light and beacon of God's love for people EVERYWHERE so that the Gentiles would eventually discover and experience that same love for THEMSELVES. In this way, rather than viewing each other with hatred and suspicion, ALL people would come to see each other as BROTHERS AND SISTERS and thus strive to live peacefully together. How God could love such a world as this is hard to fathom- a world in constant rebellion against him in which we are now seeing hundreds being killed every day in the Ukraine, contributing to the creation of over two million refugees, a figure that continues to grow. Furthermore, with her grand, historic cities being bombed into rubble, a disaster of unimaginable proportions is emerging as there is now no food, water or electricity available to their remaining inhabitants. This is not what God had planned for his creation, a crisis we have continued to create for ourselves since the beginning of time- and yet, love us, GOD DOES!

In addition, that love was nothing less than a gift of God- "God so loved the world that he GAVE..." We can't buy it; we can't earn it; we can't steal it. It is a free gift from God for us and all WE can do is receive it in the same spirit in which it is offered- gratefully and joyfully; it

is a gift, pure and simple. And what did it cost God to make such a gift available to us- nothing less than the life of his “only-begotten Son.” It cost God EVERYTHING, but that only goes to show how precious and deep that love is, that were there just ONE person who needed to be redeemed, God would STILL have given up his Son just to save that one person.

And the way we receive that gift is not by works or a super-human exertion of the will but only by ACCEPTING it; nothing more is demanded of us than to believe that God DOES love us and the sacrifice of his Son is PROOF of that. By the death and resurrection of Jesus, we have found forgiveness for our past sins and grace to face the future with new hope and thanksgiving in our hearts. We now enjoy a Father-Son relationship with our God who now promises us that nothing will ever separate us from his presence or his love- EVER!

But the purpose of God gifting us with his Son is so that none may perish but have everlasting life. "Eternal life" means more than just living forever and ever but enjoying life in all its fullness and abundance, life in the presence of Christ and the rest of God's people. Despite all the talk of love in this passage, it ALSO speaks of judgment or “separation” in it. However, if you look closely, you’ll notice that it is in the PASSIVE TENSE, that judgment is not prosecuted by God but the result of OUR REACTION to the light of Christ. When we RECEIVE God’s grace, we enter into new life, but when we REJECT it, we EXCLUDE OURSELVES from that life. God and Jesus are not the judges here; God’s offer of love and grace in Jesus sets up the moment of judgment, and we judge OURSELVES by our RESPONSE to God’s love. We can either come to the light to have our deeds exposed and forgiven so that we may be embraced by God’s love, or we can flee the light in our fear and brokenness- the choice is always OURS.

Curiously, we’re never told the reason for Nicodemus’ visit in the FIRST PLACE. I suspect that Nicodemus feels that in spite of all his many years of training and education, regardless of all his rewards and accomplishments, there’s STILL something missing in his life which his faith is unable to provide. Some essential ingredient is missing and he’s just not sure what it is. It is my belief that Nicodemus was hungry for a much deeper encounter with God than his own system of laws and sacrifices and elaborate rituals could offer, a deficit I found best described by one of modern Judaism’s greatest proponents, Abraham Joshua Heschel:

It is customary to blame secular science and anti-religious philosophy for the eclipse of religion in modern society. It would be more honest to blame religion for its own defeats. Religion declined not because it was refuted, but because it became irrelevant, dull, oppressive, insipid. When faith is completely replaced by creed, worship by discipline, love by habit; when the crisis of today is ignored because of the splendor of the past; when faith becomes an heirloom rather than a living fountain; when religion speaks only in the name of authority rather than with the voice of compassion—its message becomes meaningless.

Nicodemus was beginning to realize that mere religion wasn’t ENOUGH, that he needed something MORE than he was already experiencing. The Law could condemn but it could not SAVE. And so when Jesus spoke about a NEW birth, one that begins within and gradually works its way outward; when he talked about the nourishing, life-giving presence of the Spirit in one’s soul, that it proceeds from God and, like the wind, no one can predict or control it; when he hears how TRUE worship is rooted in love and not judgment, in humble faith and not in proud obedience to a lot of religious rules and rituals, this touched something deep within him. Sensing that his very best at fulfilling the Law was falling far short of what God TRULY desired, what he saw and heard from Jesus about God’s love being free and unconditional had struck a chord.

Instead of some great policeman waiting to beat him over the head with his stick at the slightest infraction of the rules, Jesus presented God as a LOVING PARENT who knew and wanted what was best for his children, a Heavenly Father who regardless of how far or how often he'd fall, God's would STILL be there waiting to catch him in his outstretched arms. In other words, what he required more than ANYTHING ELSE was a PERSONAL RELATIONSHIP with God. In the end, Nicodemus had heard and seen enough that he eventually became a follower and disciple of Christ. Never again would he have to engage Jesus under the cover of night. If he felt timid or embarrassed or ashamed during that first visit with him, from then on he would forever come joyfully and courageously into his presence for he was now out from the darkness for good and into Christ's marvelous light.

I hope by now you're all able to see how the account of Nicodemus is no less OUR story TOO. Perhaps when we first heard the name of Jesus, whether at home or in Sunday School, we were intrigued enough to want to learn more about him- who he was and what he stood for. And so we read the Bible and studied his teachings and observed how he lived- how he welcomed the poor, the sick, and the outcast into his family and gave them all a new home, how he healed broken bodies and bound up broken hearts and, as a result, over time we grew convinced that no man had ever lived or taught as this man had. And then when we discovered that he went to his death, not with curses but with pardon on his lips and that his HIS cross had actually been meant for US, that he took OUR place on it for all the sin and selfishness and pride that dominate OUR lives, then, LIKE NICODEMUS, how could WE not fall down before him and declare even as Thomas did, "My Lord and my God!" Amen and amen.