

A sermon preached at Zion, North Branford

March 8, 2020

Texts: John 3:1-17

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“For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.” This is a beloved verse for many. It has been called the Gospel in a nutshell. Sadly, like many other verses of Scripture, it has all too often been stripped of its beauty, context, and its truth. Some like to use this verse as a measuring stick, to judge –in their minds- who it is that believes properly and will ‘go to heaven’ versus those who will perish in that ‘other place.’ For these judgmental folks, if you are not a Christian, and a very particular sort of Christian at that, you will be condemned- lost for all eternity. They seem to forget that Jesus himself was not a Christian.

John 3:16, like every other verse in the Bible, is set in the middle a story about God and God’s people. This one, about a frightened man named Nicodemus. Nicodemus was a leader of the people who had questions about Jesus. He had heard about this young rabbi and his radical teachings. He had heard how people were being healed. He had witnessed the enthusiasm of Jesus disciples and the rumors that this was the long awaited Messiah; but still, Nicodemus had his doubts. So he went to visit Jesus at night, so that no one would see where he was going. This was understandable. To be seen with Jesus was risky business and Nicodemus had a reputation to protect. What if Jesus turned out to be a charlatan, yet another fake Messiah, or even worse, a violent revolutionary? To be connected with Jesus might bring shame, dishonor and even death.

And so Nicodemus meets with Jesus after dark, and they have a long conversation, some of which we heard this morning. It contained metaphors which would have been familiar to Nicodemus, the snake in the desert- and others that had Nicodemus scratching his head- like Jesus’ talk about being born again and born of the spirit in order to have eternal life.

This eternal life that Jesus teaches is not focused on a geographical place, and not just about the end of time. It is a state of being, which doesn’t just happen when we die, but begins the moment we are born into God’s love. To be born again is to live in this love. When a person lives in this love, their lives are transformed. There is a different focus and a new purpose in their daily living.

Theologian John Allen said that for Jesus and his followers, "this second birth marked a beginning of a dangerous journey. It entailed leaving behind the safety nets woven and stored up in life and starting fresh, aligned with something new, something that could potentially anger the powers that be. This second birth recalls Jesus’ own emergence from the waters of the Jordan. It recalls Israel’s own emergence from slavery into liberation through the waters of a parted sea. In short, it recalls moments when people have set out on new and treacherous journeys, called by God to re-imagine their communities and their very bodies as God might. To be born again is to enter the world with a new set of guiding principles, a new way of approaching everything, and a radically altered perception."

This radically altered perception is nothing less than to look on the whole world with the eyes and the heart of God's deep love.

In his conversation with Nicodemus, Jesus says that Nicodemus must believe in the Son of Man in order to have eternal life. The Greek word translated here as believe, *πιστεω*) means to have confidence, to trust. Jesus, in effect, tells Nicodemus, "Trust me, God did it all for love. And this love of God for all of creation is eternally life giving." Or as our Presiding Bishop Michael Curry is fond of saying, "If it is not about love, it is not about God."

God so loves the world. Not just Christians, not just Americans, not just the properly pious and upright, but the whole of it- every last created bit of this world. Every person, animal, and plant. Every rock and hill and river. Every thing in this entire world. It is trusting in God's love, that saves us from evil and allows us to live in God's light, always; beginning right now.

Jesus did not come among us to congratulate those with perfect faith. He did not come to condemn and judge those of other faiths. On the contrary, Jesus often used people of other faiths in his stories as examples of what faithfulness looks like- the woman at the well, the healing of Namaan the leper, the good Samaritan. Jesus came to heal the broken hearted, to question those in power, to encourage and embolden the timid, to bring hope to the marginalized; in other words, to save the world through love.

We do not know if Nicodemus and Jesus had further conversations. We do know that after Jesus' crucifixion, two men who had had serious doubts and had visited him secretly, became very open in honoring him. While the majority of Jesus' disciples had fled in fear of being arrested themselves, Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus asked Pilate for Jesus' body and laid it in a tomb. They were able to put love above their fears, Love above what others might think, and align themselves with the teachings of Jesus in a very public way.

What about us? Have we been born into an eternal life of radical love? Each day we are given opportunities to trust in God's love and allow it to transform lives, beginning with our own.

Let us pray. Thank you God, for the signs of new life all around us; for the buds on the trees, for the return of songbirds; for crocuses and snowdrops once more making their appearance. Thank you for pouring your great love over all humanity and all creation. Starting over is difficult, sometimes we are afraid. Sometimes we don't know where to start. Sometimes we find it easier to complain and stay where we are. Help us to trust in your way of love. By your Spirit inspire us each new day with your promises of rebirth. That we might become instruments of your compassion, your peace, and your love. Amen

