

“Words to Live By: Love”

John 3:1-17

Second Sunday in Lent

March 17, 2019

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“For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son that whosoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.”

- John 3:16

Prayer of Preparation

O Lord, hear our prayers: open our hearts to your love, the love of your only Son, Jesus Christ, in whose name we pray: Amen.

Sermon Message

We are sharing about the importance of words. We expressed last week how words matter. We were communicating how simple words like follow and serve and reconcile point to understanding who Jesus is.

We want to continue with that line of thinking, and we do so by focusing on the word “love,” as well as on a scripture verse that the Protestant Reformer Martin Luther called the Gospel in a nutshell – John 3:16: “For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son that whosoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.”

Here, we learn what kind of love we are talking about: not “God loves us this much,” but *God loves us in a particular way*: in this way, by *sending*, by *giving*, his Son, to save us and grant us eternal life!

Now, there is a cost to this kind of love, to the kind of love that became flesh (John 1:14), that entered the world not to condemn it but to rescue it and restore it to what God intended (John 3:17). *That’s* the kind of love we are communicating, the kind of love we are sharing!

Nic at Night

With all the various definitions of love on order these days, it is important to understand this particular kind of love, the kind of love that is *lifted up* on a cross, that takes up residence among us, the kind of love which Jesus communicates to Nicodemus (John 3:15). For it is important to see how the conversation between Jesus and Nicodemus sets the stage for God's mission statement in John 3:16. It is important to see how words like "born from above," "eternal life," "Spirit," "wind," "born of the Spirit" lay the foundation for comprehending God's love.

For what we have in this wonderful story is a dialogue between two teachers who speak past each other about what such words could possibly mean: one, Nicodemus, speaks on a biological level; the other, Jesus, on a theological level.

Nicodemus, of course, is a scholar and a Pharisee, a teacher of the law. Jesus is a Rabbi and preacher. Jesus, however, tells Nicodemus, in so many words, that he will never see God's kingdom unless he is born again (John 3:3). Nicodemus does not understand. Nicodemus is thinking birth canal and water breaking, not God's kingdom (John 3:4-4); Nicodemus is thinking about being born biologically, with birth being one of the most stressful experiences any one of us has in our lives. We may be cozy in the womb for nine months, but getting out ain't easy! I know because I still have the marks behind my ears! It is small wonder that most of us come out screaming our heads off and wanting our money back.

Perhaps this is why Nicodemus is gut-struck: his mind is captured by images of confined space, pain, darkness, uncertainty. That's what Nicodemus sees as he hears Jesus say that we've got to do it all over again. And so, if you are Nicodemus, you might be thinking: "If that is the good news, then what is the bad news?"

Nicodemus, however, is not a person in touch with his feelings. Remember that he is thinking about physics: "How does this work? Grownups are too big to fit back in. And I don't know of any gynecologist who can pull this off."

And Jesus is saying, "No, no, no. That's not what we are talking about. This is about wholesale new creation and transformation – mind, body, spirit. This is going to make the first-birth look like a picnic."¹

¹ Thanks to Reverend Dr. Sam Wells of Duke Divinity School for these insights: "Born Again," a sermon preached at Duke Chapel on February 17, 2008.

Mystery and Wonder

I think it would have been interesting to be a fly on the wall during this exchange. I mean, when I read this passage I am struck by way Jesus and Nicodemus talk and with the mystery of what Jesus is saying. I also realize that Nicodemus is just flabbergasted.

And yet, it is important to remember that Nicodemus is the one who seeks out Jesus.² As a leader of the Jews, Nicodemus *is* intrigued with who Jesus is (John 3:1). He is not simply one who will cast dispersion on what Jesus is doing.

That's a very important point because, as we read in other parts of the Gospels, we do not see the Pharisees in a good light. Most of the time Jesus rails against the Pharisees, and often for good reason. For the Pharisees could be very moralistic, so sold on the law that they became enslaved to their own passions, held in bondage to pride and jealousy and hate, void of compassion and mercy.³

Indeed, I believe it was the great Church of Scotland preacher, Edward Irving, who once characterized Pharisees as those who refused to be involved with sinners for fear of contamination. Irving contrasted this attitude with God's action in becoming human in Jesus: God did not so love the world as to set a good example, but to actually become one of us, assuming our fallenness. In doing so, God took on our very humanity, even at great cost to himself.⁴ God did not remain at a distance.

Love Divine

For only *that kind* of love can save us: a love which bears our burdens in Christ's own body and which heals our wounds by his own wounds (2 Cor 5:21).

It is why persons who are *born of such love* will serve in the world in all its sinfulness and failure, as God does (John 3:16), not obsessed with purity or superiority but involved in it by washing feet and touching the untouchable (John 13:1-17).⁵

Such a love is what, I think, John Wesley, the founder of Methodism, meant when he talked about being a new creation: to be born of the Spirit is simply the beginning of a *new way of life in love*, an inward change brought about by God's

² See Fred B. Craddock, *John* (Atlanta, GA: John Knox Press, 1982), 30.

³ See Andrew Walker, "The Pharisee and the Christian," in *Leading Light* (1989).

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

grace, that does not turn its backs on “sinners” but loves “sinners” and welcomes them.⁶ It is a love that is both social and personal and rubs shoulders with everyone. At least, that’s how Wesley viewed it: the joy of heaven to earth come down, fixing in us his love!⁷

Perhaps this is one of the reasons a scholar like Nicodemus has difficulty getting his mind around all of this: Born again, born from above, born of the Spirit. Leading to new life, eternal life, love of God. Nicodemus is still stuck in the birth canal!

It reminds of a cute story about a little girl who was asked to write an essay on “birth.” She went home and asked her mother how she had been born. Her mother, who was busy at the time, said “the stork brought you and left you on the doorstep.”

Continuing her research, she asked her dad how she had been born. Being in the middle of something, her father also deflected the question by saying: “You were found at the bottom of a garden. The leprechauns brought you.”

Then the little girl went and asked her grandmother how she had arrived: “You were picked from a gooseberry tree,” grandma said.

With this information the little girl wrote her essay. When the teacher asked her to read it in front of the class, she stood up and began: “*There has not been a natural birth in our family for three generations...*”⁸

Born Again: To What?

We may laugh, but it is sad, I feel, to see how the mystery and wonder of the being born again has been collapsed into slogans, if not new forms of hierarchy, even among Christians. In some circles, for example, it is not considered “good enough” to believe in Christ, or to be actively involved in mission, or to be seeking God and asking questions about faith. Rather, one must have a certain kind of experience to be counted as worthy or first class.⁹

⁶ See John Wesley, *Explanatory Notes on the New Testament* (John 3:5).

⁷ See Pastor Andy’s sermon “Words to Live By: To Follow” from March 10, 2019 at www.franklingrace.org.

⁸ Thanks to Brett Blair for this opening commentary on John 3:1-17 at www.esersmons.com.

⁹ Thanks again to insights from Reverend Dr. Sam Wells’ sermon “Born Again.”

The problem with this kind of thinking is not that God does not want us to be born anew, but that such accounts can work to displace everything else that is important to the Christian faith; what begins to matter has more to do with *my* experience, or *my* certainty, or *my* passport to heaven, and not Jesus or the kingdom, or how we are to relate to others.¹⁰

In other words, Christianity stops being about the Gospel: it stops being about *God* so loving the world that he gave to the world his only begotten Son that whosoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life (John 3:16). It stops being about mystery and wonder. It stops being about the Spirit blowing where it wills (John 3:7).

Reminding us all that, when this begins to happen, the Spirit can become subject to our own personal agendas. We begin to live in a world smaller than God has given us, putting God in a box.¹¹ Indeed, we remain in the dark, much like Nicodemus, incapable of seeing God's light, fearful of what the Spirit may actually be doing (John 3:2).

Closing

Such, I feel, is the case for most of us. We get so stuck on a few words in this passage that we cannot see how they connect with Jesus being lifted up on a cross, with the particular way God loves the world (John 3:11-14).

We fail to see that what the Christian life is about is *being lifted up for others and lifting up others*. And we forget that we all have one more birth awaiting us. There is always more to this life, always more to the umbilical cord connecting "born again" on the one hand to holy love on the other.¹²

Sadly, somewhere along the line, this cord has been cut: the love that connects new birth and new life has been severed. And when that happens we can lose sight of the mystery of it all, of the God in whom we live and move and have our being (Acts 17:8). We can miss that what connects us all is *love*, the love that God gave to us in Jesus Christ, the love that God sent into the world, not to condemn it but to save it and rescue it. The love that leads from birth to life, that leads to a whole new creation. Amen.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid.