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First Presbyterian Church
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John 3:1-17

“For God So Loved the World”

Are you born again? Some of you may remember when the “born again” craze hit the mainline denominations back in the 70s. I remember when it hit my church, because it was an unpleasant time for people on all sides of the born-again issue.

When the craze hit my prim and proper Presbyterian Church people were taken aback. What do you mean I have to be born again, good Presbyterians asked? I’ve been born once and baptized once and by golly if it’s been good enough until now it’ll be good enough till I die! But the born agains, said it wasn’t good enough. That sprinkling of water you got on your head as an infant when you were baptized isn’t good enough. You gotta be born again! And so it went, around and around.

If I remember correctly the pastor left over the whole issue because he did become born-again and I guess he didn’t want to fight the entrenched Presbyterians. The pastor who followed him only lasted 18 months. According to some people “the born-agains got after his wife.” Eventually, I think, most of the born-agains left the church and went to “the Chapel”, which in my house was usually said in a hushed tone, as in “They left to go to *the Chapel*”. Which shouldn’t be confused with the Chapel here, which is doing good ministry in Fort Wayne.

So it is with a healthy dose of skepticism I meet our gospel story for today, because not only am I not born again, I don’t want to be born again. Born again Christians make me a little uneasy because they’re so passionate about their salvation and everyone else’s salvation, too. They always seem to know who is saved and who is not.

John 3:16, “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,” is a staple of highway road signs and bumper stickers and football games. For some, it’s Christianity 101 — a simple formula for faith, a handy evangelism tool, and a

perfect summary of the Good News. Martin Luther called it “the heart of the Bible, the Gospel in miniature.”

And so it is on this second Sunday of Lent, as we consider Jesus’s lengthy, nighttime encounter with Nicodemus, John 3:16 jumps out for its efficiency and pithiness. In just twenty-seven words, the verse describes a loving God, a cherished world, a self-giving Son, a universal invitation, a deliverance from death, and a promise of eternal life. Christianity in a nutshell, right?

For many people, being a Christian means affirming the right things – saying “yes” to accepting Jesus as your Lord and Savior according to a strict definition of what that means. To accept Jesus, to be “born again,” means one agrees with a set of doctrines about who Jesus is and what he accomplished through his death and resurrection. To enter into orthodox faith is to believe that certain theological statements about God, Jesus, the Holy Spirit, the human condition, the Bible, and the Church, are true. To be a mature Christian is to have one’s theological ducks in a row, and John 3:16 becomes that litmus test for faith.

But is that all there is to Christianity . . . or is Christianity more than subscribing to a list of fundamentals? Is the prisoner on death row saved because he declares Jesus his Lord and Savior at the 11th hour? And what does it mean to say “Jesus is my Lord and Savior?” We ask it of everyone who joins the church; and we affirm it when we reaffirm our baptisms or when we ordain and install elders and deacons.

Is being a Christian only about believing the right things; or is it also about following Jesus the right way?

For the last century or so, there has been a subtle but profound shift from having faith in Jesus to having beliefs about Jesus. Way back in 1922, Harry Emerson Fosdick, a well-known preacher and critic of the emerging fundamentalist movement, said: “What can you do with folks like this who, in the face of colossal issues, play with the tiddlywinks and peccadilloes of religion?”. The new fundamentalists Fosdick spoke about claimed that in order to be a Christian one had to subscribe to a list of 5 fundamentals. They were:

- The inerrancy of the Bible
- The authenticity of Christ’s miracles.
- The Virgin Birth of Christ

- The bodily resurrection of Christ
- The substitutionary atonement of Christ on the cross

While the immediate effect of Fosdick's outspokenness caused him to lose his job, eventually the Presbyterian Church declared that such belief in the five fundamentals was not necessary to call oneself a Christian.

But the fundamentalist movement took hold. Mega churches packed people in. Belief was, and still is in many circles, black and white. A person's orthodoxy, that is to say a person's relationship with God, is tested on the nature of what one believes about God or Jesus, rather than how faithful one is in following Jesus. But can Jesus' life and teaching be boiled down to the equivalent of a *Get Out of Hell Free card*?

In her 2013 book, Christianity after Religion, historian Diana Butler Bass points out that the English word "believe" comes from the German word "belieben" — which is the word for love. In other words, to believe is not to hold an opinion. To believe is to treasure. To hold something beloved. To give my heart over to it without reservation. To believe in something is to invest it with my love. To believe in God, to accept Jesus as one's Lord and Savior, means throwing one's whole hearts, minds, and bodies into God's hands. It means believing even when you can't say for certain who God is or what it means to declare Jesus as one's Savior.

Now, Presbyterians have long struggled with the idea that God cannot be reduced to a simple formula, nor can the way of God revealed in the life of Jesus be reduced to a simple formula. And it's something we struggle with because we're faithful, not because we're unfaithful. And it's something Nicodemus struggled with in his tortured, convoluted dialogue with Jesus.

The Judaism of Nicodemus' tradition scrupulously observed 613 laws and commandments. Everything from having to give cereal offerings for these sins, to the sacrifice of a dove for those, to instructions on what kind of meat you could eat and how many sets of dishes were needed, to who had responsibility for a widow in the family and which brother was required to marry her, and strict laws

on how the Sabbath was to be kept, were laws Nicodemus would have faithfully followed.

But now Nicodemus, a leader of the Pharisees, a well-respected group known for their wisdom, hears about Jesus, a young rabbi on the fringe of society, and comes to him out of curiosity to learn about this new type of Judaism he's preaching, and he can't believe how simple it is. Instead of 613 laws and commandments to subscribe to, Jesus preaches two: love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, and mind, and love your neighbor as yourself. Jesus is preaching a way of life, not a set of rules.

It is so different from what Nicodemus has always believed, that he walks away confused. How can one come out of his mother's womb again, he asks?

Poor Nicodemus, he's a fundamentalist. He doesn't get the subtle nuance of Jesus' speech. He doesn't understand that Jesus is all about letting go of old truths, old definitions, old traditions, and old theological certainties. Nicodemus, like countless people after him, is looking for a spiritual rule book, a kind of "Christianity 101", which contains the logical steps that lead to spiritual completion. Nicodemus, like so many people today, is looking for a simple answer: do this, believe this, subscribe to this and you'll be saved.

The problem is, life is messy, sometimes it throws you a curve ball that makes you question old assumptions, and issues aren't always black and white.

In many ways I wish I could tell you that the life of faith can be boiled down to five fundamentals, because that would be easy. And in many ways I wish I could tell you that the matter of who is saved and who is not and who is going to heaven and who is going to hell is as simple as some people would want to make it, but I can't tell you that, because I'm not that certain.

But I do believe that what matters most to Jesus is not believing the right things about him, but believing and following those two commandments he said were the greatest: and that is to love God with all our heart, soul and mind, and love our neighbor as ourselves.

I believe this is what matters most, because Jesus said this is what matters most.

And so for me the question isn't, are you saved, but if you think you are, what do you do now?

Because I don't believe that God came to us in the form of Jesus Christ simply to show us the path to heaven. I do believe that God came to us in Jesus Christ to share our joy and sorrow. I do believe that Christ proclaimed God's love, healed the sick, and was a friend of sinners. And I do believe that God expects the same from those of us who consider ourselves "saved". Salvation means leading the new life we have received from Christ. In Christ God reconciled the world to himself, but the work of reconciliation-of salvation-is ours to carry out.

The church is the embodied life of Christ whose existence should bear witness to Christ by voice and deed. If we think we're saved, our lives should reflect it. We should be willing to pass the peace, feed those who hunger, clothe the naked, heal the sick, live as a friend among sinners, work for God's justice, and forgive those who trespass against us.

According to John's Gospel, after the crucifixion, when Jesus' body was taken down from the cross, Nicodemus came with his myrrh and aloes, and he and the disciples wrapped Jesus' body in linen cloths as was the Jewish custom. When so many had fled, when the entire world was against Jesus, Nicodemus stuck his neck out on Jesus' behalf. Scholars are divided on whether Nicodemus was a believer. But does it really matter if he was or wasn't? Because when the chips were down, it was Nicodemus who was there.

Are you saved? And if you think you are, what are you going to do now? Because that's what really matters.

Amen.

Sources:

Lectionary Homiletics for March 20, 2011

Journey with Jesus, "Where the Wind Blows", Debie Thomas, March 1, 2020

