

The cover picture of the bulletin is a sunrise from our home on Cherry Island on the Eastern Shore of Maryland. Every morning the sun appears on the horizon with its life-giving rays and warmth. We take it for granted that the sun will come up every morning. Likewise through God's grace we have the light of Christ. By the grace of God the constant life-giving Christ-light is with us as God's free gift to all people. The portion of John's Gospel that we read today speaks to that promise of life. John writes so that the church – and we – can come to believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Messiah – so that we can have the life that God wants us to have through believing in Christ. John 3:16 is probably the most quoted of all the New Testament. But let us put Jesus's saying today in context.

Chapter 3 of the Gospel according to John was a response to a question posed by Nicodemus, a Jewish leader, a Pharisee, and teacher. So as not to be seen by the Jewish authorities, he came to Jesus at night. He knew that Jesus was from God, but he wanted to understand fully. Jesus explained how God loves us. “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.” Say it with me: “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.” Yes, God loves us so much. But in the Greek, the word for “so” also means “in this way”, in this manner. Yes, God's love is infinite; God surely loves us sooooo much. But the point here is not how much God loves us, but the manner in which God loves us – how God loves us! God gave us Jesus, the son of God. Out of God's great love we were made. And out of love God gave us the means for our salvation – Jesus. By God's grace and great love for us – all our trespasses – all our sins – are forgiven. God so loved the world – God loved the world “in this way” that even the enemies of God – those opposed to Christianity – are saved.<sup>1</sup> What a model for us Christians! We were given the gift of God's son and light came into the world.

But if Jesus is the gift from God then all we need do is give thanks for that gift. It is ours already. Nicodemus was already saved – by God's loving gift of his son Jesus. Nicodemus already had the promise of salvation – but he did not understand.<sup>2</sup> But if we take being “born again” as the requirement to being saved, we do so at our own peril for we are excluding others if they do not pass the test of being “born again” Christians when indeed we all are saved already. Consider the context and do not limit God's love, my friends. I think that John 3:16 is an invitation to think like Nicodemus – to look for a deeper meaning to this essential teaching in John. People often have questions about their faith. I know I do. Let me tell you a personal story about grace and faith.

It was the annual visitation of the Bishop at Old Trinity Church on Church Creek where there have been continuous services since 1690. For Jim and me it only took 15 minutes to get there by boat, but most drove. Driving around all the little peninsulas of

land – called necks – that jut out into the water took much longer. And the family with children to be baptized had driven over an hour. The baptismal family arrived in disarray when they all piled out of their van. Four of the children were to be baptized – born anew and from above – and their Mom was trying to get all the shirttails tucked in, bows straightened, and the baby’s Christening gown on. The uncles and aunties and cousins arrived just behind them and were busy tidying up their own clothing.

I was the greeter and the lay reader that Sunday, but I was so distracted by, so drawn to a young man who lingered outside the church. He was a Goth kid. Do you all know that term? Several of our children went through a Goth phase when they dyed their hair black and wore nothing but black clothing. Well, this young man was an extreme example of that fad. He wore a long black coat over black pants and shirt; his hair was dyed jet black, and he wore black eyeliner that was a stark contrast to his pale white skin. The young man was a cousin, but he felt like an outsider, he told me later. But then I am getting ahead of myself...

It was so temperate that I decided to leave the doors open so that the boy could hear what was going on. I kept checking on him. He was leaning on the fence at the edge of the church yard, between the grass around the church and the burial grounds that dated back three hundred years. He was truly “on the fence.” I felt that he was trying to decide whether to join us for the service. I went out to invite him in early on, but he shook his head. I went back to the door after the readings just before the sermon so that he could see me hold the door open for him. The bishop in his great booming voice preached a wonderful homily that was really the history of believers from creation through Christ’s resurrection. The boy took a few steps closer to the door so that he could hear. Later it became clear that he already knew the stories in the Bible that the Bishop was retelling.

I went outside after the sermon to spend the rest of the service with my Goth kid – he had become “mine” by then. We talked for a time about his cousins, he was particularly close to his baby cousin, the youngest to be baptized that day. But he still would not come into the church. It was not because he had not been made welcome, but because of an inner struggle. He was at odds with the community of believers – the church. He told me that he could not believe, that he could not be a Christian. And then he asked me how I could believe in a God who would let his son be killed on the cross, how we could gather to worship when it was us who killed Jesus. How God could choose some of us and not others. And why we had to become believers to be saved. I was thinking so long and hard that he asked me again how I could believe and if I had passed the test of believing.

This happened before I went to seminary, where I learned all the answers – right? – wrong! What I learned in seminary was to ask more questions. But my answer that day was that I was a cradle Episcopalian, and that I just didn’t know any better. I was a believer who knew some Scripture, but I believed because of my traditions, not my reason, and it was my reason that had to become educated so that I could answer him better. I would have answered differently now. But I did listen and offer what little theology I knew how to express. I told him that it was not Jesus’s followers, those who

believed, who had killed him, but the religious authorities of the time who were threatened by Jesus. I told him that God loves us and gave us his son to teach us how much we are loved. He asked if God loved us so much why did his son have to die for us? Why were there hoops we have to jump through to be saved? He quoted John 3:16.

I wish I could have told him that the purpose of all of the Gospel could be summed up in John 3:16, yes, but that single verse is not meant to exclude people from God's love. The whole – and only – purpose of the Gospel according to John is that we come to believe that through Jesus's life, his teachings, his signs, and at the last his death and resurrection we are saved. The purpose is to turn our hearts so that we would believe that Jesus is the Son of God sent into the world to save us – to return us to God. I believed these things when my Goth child asked, but I couldn't articulate my belief. I wonder, as Christians schooled in the stories of the Bible and traditions of the church, what would we do if someone ask us how we could believe such an outlandish tale of Jesus who came to show us God's love by dying for us? How would we answer? Well, my friends, we are loved that much. And we are called to be able to answer on God's – on Jesus's – behalf.

I forgot to tell you that my Goth child's name was Nicodemus. I know – my mouth fell open too when he told me his name. After service that day at Old Trinity, we gathered in the Parish Hall for fellowship. My Nicodemus came and sat by me, and our conversation continued.

Today's Gospel was addressed to the 1<sup>st</sup> century Nicodemus, someone who knew Torah. He believed that Jesus was the Messiah that had been promised in the Hebrew scriptures, and he sought Jesus out to ask some questions because he was troubled– not unlike my Nicodemus. Nicodemus in the Gospel according to John came in the dark of night. My Nicodemus was shrouded in darkness in broad daylight.

My sisters and brothers, how could God choose some of us and not others. And why must someone pass a certain test to become believers to be saved? Entrance into the kingdom is not something we can accomplish on our own, our faith doesn't save us. Only God can save us.<sup>3</sup> Yes we do have to choose to live in God's light – to let God's grace wash over us, but there is "room in the light for all of God's beloved creation."<sup>4</sup> Like any other gift, the gift of grace can be ours only if we reach out and take it. And maybe being able to reach out and take it is a gift too.<sup>5</sup>

God loved Jesus's Nicodemus – so loved him – loved him in this way – that he was saved for all of eternity. And I believed then – and still believe – that God loves my Nicodemus who is saved whether he knows it or not.

Lord, may it be so.

Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> To John, God and Jesus are one and the same, so the how, the manner in which we are loved is that God gave Godself as a living sacrifice. Somewhere somehow a mistranslation occurred (perhaps in the Latin Vulgate Bible) that read "only begotten son," linking Jesus's ministry to the miraculous virgin birth. But remember that in the Gospel according to John there is no birth narrative at all, because, of course, Jesus

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preexisted with God. And “Everyone who believes [in Jesus], the only son of God” appears to make belief or unbelief a human opportunity to reject or accept.

<sup>2</sup> Jesus told Nicodemus that “noone can see the kingdom of God without being born *anōthen*, to use the Greek. (John 3:3.) In Greek, *anōthen* means both “from above” and “again” or “anew.” Our NRSV translation uses the meaning “born from above” while the NIV uses “born again.” Most modern theologians trust that John intended for the reader to hear both meanings: born “anōthen” meaning both “born from above” and “born anew.”

<sup>3</sup> Bishop Andy Doyle’ blog “Hitchhiking the Word”  
<http://hitchhikingthebible.blogspot.com>.

<sup>4</sup> The Rev. Sharron Riessinger Blezard an ELCA pastor in the Lower Susquehanna Synod, “Living in the Light” March 12, 2015,  
<https://www.stewardshipoflife.org/2015/03/living-in-the-light>.

<sup>5</sup> Frederick Buechner’s thoughts on grace, published in *Wishful Thinking* and reprinted in *Beyond Words*. Buechner believes – and I believe – that: “Grace is something you can never get but only be given. There’s no way to earn it or deserve it or bring it about any more than you can deserve the taste of raspberries and cream or earn good looks or bring about your own birth. A good sleep is grace and so are good dreams. Most tears are grace. The smell of rain is grace. Somebody loving you is grace. Loving somebody is grace.” See

<https://mail.google.com/mail/u/1/#inbox/FMfcgxwLsmkhNDGhtXkXcppnFVdPnLzg>.