

John 3:1-15

Nicodemus Visits Jesus

3 Now there was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews. ² He came to Jesus^[a] by night and said to him, “Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God; for no one can do these signs that you do apart from the presence of God.” ³ Jesus answered him, “Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above.”^[b] ⁴ Nicodemus said to him, “How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother’s womb and be born?” ⁵ Jesus answered, “Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit. ⁶ What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit.^[c] ⁷ Do not be astonished that I said to you, ‘You^[d] must be born from above.’^[e] ⁸ The wind^[f] blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit.” ⁹ Nicodemus said to him, “How can these things be?” ¹⁰ Jesus answered him, “Are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things?

¹¹ “Very truly, I tell you, we speak of what we know and testify to what we have seen; yet you^[g] do not receive our testimony. ¹² If I have told you about earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you about heavenly things? ¹³ No one has ascended into heaven except the one who descended from heaven, the Son of Man.^[h] ¹⁴ And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, ¹⁵ that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.^[i]

John 3:16-17

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.

¹⁷ “Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.

March 12, 2017

“God So Loved”

John 3:1-17

Kerra Becker English

Have you ever heard of someone’s last wish being, “I wish I made more money, or I wish I had worked harder?” I seriously doubt it. And yet, often, when a person receives that dreaded diagnosis that tells them their time left in this known world is limited – their thoughts often turn to, “I wish I let my friends and family know how much I loved them, or I wish I had loved more.”

Love is not a commodity of diminishing returns, like money or work. Studies have shown that there is indeed a threshold for how much happiness is truly tied to money. When you don’t have enough, yes, more brings greater security and even the opportunity to buy more things that bring us happiness, things like chocolate or movie tickets. But when you start to accumulate significantly over that amount, money becomes more of a chore, something that costs time and effort to manage. Perhaps some of us would be interested in trying that problem out sometime – but my hunch is that the studies on that are right. Wealth just brings on a different set of problems than poverty. The same kind of diminishing returns can be found in work. We need enough work to feel useful, productive, and economically self-sufficient. But those folks who either choose to or feel forced to take on longer and longer hours at work often get to retirement and don’t quite know how to relax and enjoy life. Those missed vacations and dance recital moments aren’t coming back, and our friends and family will move on without us when we don’t make time for them.

God did not send Jesus into the world so we could make more money or spend all our time working. Those things seem to be peculiar, first world, mainstream distractions. God sent Jesus into the world to show us love, and so that love might multiply throughout the world. Jesus’ intent was

to help us believe fully in the kind of love that lasts forever. We know what the perishables look like. My checking account never registers what I personally would call “full” but for a day or two – then the money bleeds out quickly to pay for those things that seem rather important – a roof over my head, food, warmth, health care and the like. As practical as it may be, believing in material things, even the ones that we would call necessities, never quite completes us.

Instead, we are instructed, like Nicodemus, to believe in love. I’m not sure Nicodemus was completely tracking this whole conversation with Jesus. But in his defense, it is a strange one. Jesus talks about being born from above. He talks about being led by the Spirit. He talks about entering the kingdom of God and ascending to heaven. And I think we are just as perplexed about these things today. So let’s start a little easier with getting a grasp on the earthly things before we try to grasp the heavenly things, shall we?

Love. That’s the reason for God becoming “earthly” in the first place. God was loving humankind long before Jesus came on the scene, and God was loving the universe long before humankind showed up, and yet somehow we are still baffled when we tried to understand the love of God. Maybe God realized we needed to see what love looked like in human form and with human limitations. We needed a model that looked like us. Perhaps that’s remedial love, or at least love 101. Show us, God, what love looks like if you want us to pay attention. Give us your best example. Teach us how to love, and who to love, and what to love – so that we will love rightly, not wrongly.

Therefore... Jesus. Jesus was given out of love. Jesus was given, not to condemn. Jesus was given, to show us the way to salvation – which simply put – means that Jesus was given to help us understand the mysteries of life that would make us feel whole and warm our hearts with love.

But before we unpack the love of Jesus – which can be a bit complicated - let's start with even more earthiness than that. How do WE know what love is? What does it look like? How does it feel? Is it the same for everyone, or do different people love differently?

Perhaps you can help me out today as we think through this.

Here we are, in this church community that we presume, hopefully correctly, is built on love. I've caught glimpses of it. I hear about your love for one another when you tell me about visits that you have made to see each other – in the hospital, in the nursing home, or with communion. You take the time to do that. Love. I also see it in the encouragement you give to our seminary interns. That internship year is rough. Mistakes are going to be made – just because you're new. You love them – and look beyond those rookie mistakes to see the genuine gifts for ministry they have inside. Love. You fill the food pantry, take meals to the free clinic, do the dishes after a church supper. I'm one who sees those things, those mundane domestic things, as love.

How else do you see love at work in your church family? Prayer? Music? Card ministries?

The elders who make wise decisions?

Most of us who have come here and stayed a while stay because we have felt love here. Maybe not perfectly so. Churches are not perfect like Jesus. They really aren't. We can do unloving things as well. We won't list those. You can imagine what they are. We can hurt each other deeply with words and with actions. It is true. And sometimes we even do so without really knowing it.

That's when we return to those earthly basics, like the Golden Rule, right? Do unto others as you would have them do unto you. My daughter, of course, noticed the loophole in this rule right away. But what if you and I don't like the same things? What if I do something I like for you, but you hate what it is. I don't know, something she might do like playing a LOT of teen pop music. She might want me to play that kind of music all day long for her – but if she did the same for me - it

might make me lose my mind. The same logic even ruins the intent of Jesus' greatest commandment: love your neighbor as you love yourself. What if you aren't feeling much love for yourself these days? Can you treat your neighbor as meanly as you treat yourself? Just when we thought it would be simple.... We find out it's not.

Marriage and family counselors see this break down happen all the time between people who really, sometimes desperately want to love each other, and keep on failing at it. Love seems particularly difficult, even unattainable perhaps, so a wise counselor might ask the question, "Does he know what love looks like for you?" "Have you told her how to show you love?" Um, well, with those familiar partners, relatives, even close friends, sometimes we lose sight of love or even basic appreciation in the day to day living of life. Those distractions, which the Bible would call idols, take all our time and energy away from loving. We quit talking about love or assume that our families or our friends or our church-mates already know how to love us. And maybe that person we want to love us the most hasn't got an earthly idea of how to help us know that we are loved, by them or by God either. Or maybe they can't love us like we want to be loved, or because they feel unlovable themselves. Or in some dire circumstances, the person we wanted most to love us could only express him or herself in toxic ways that were demeaning and hurtful. Love is not meant to be painful, difficult yes, but hurtful, no. Oh it is so incredibly complicated. Love one another. Yeah, right. It may be the only rule we "have" to follow, but it's the one that seems most impossible to follow.

Jesus, can you show us? Can you help us out here? You came with love for the whole wide world in your heart. You came to earth without condemnation for anyone. You loved criminals and sinners. You loved fundamentalists bible thumpers and educated liberal elites. You loved kind people and mean people. You loved both men and women in ways they could understand. You

loved neighbors, and friends, and even enemies. This goes beyond the kindness of church people. This goes deeper than a few fixes from family therapy. This was love, exposed and vulnerable, a sacrifice that we are bold to even try to imagine, let alone comprehend.

It's no wonder Nicodemus is confused. He came to Jesus at night, and it looks as though he leaves Jesus even more in the dark. This kind of love takes our breath away. It's meant to. Jesus isn't fooling around here. He looks into our eyes with love, every... single... time. We catch glimpses of us of it when we follow the Golden Rule, when we attempt to live by the greatest commandment. We know it when forgiveness happens under the most unlikely circumstances. We feel it in those brief moments when it seems completely real and the truth beyond all truth that God loves us, each of us, in our own individual uniqueness. We know it in joy. We recognize it in grief. For God so loved – the world – the whole wide, complicated, world filled with all its human idiosyncrasies. God loved people, made in the image of god, not quite complete in that image – so again – we get Jesus to show us the way. Maybe God could have sent a guide dog. The unconditional love of a dog is pretty amazing. Maybe God could have sent a cat to keep us guessing about divine affection, occasionally curling up on our lap and purring away. But no, God sent a complex, amazing, but just like us human being to open our eyes and touch our hearts. For God so loved the world that he gave us a son – a relationship – to help us understand that God wants us all in relationship with each other and with the divine presence. Amen.