

What Great Love

John 3:1-17

When I first read the scripture for this Sunday and named the sermon I thought I knew what this sermon was all about – after all – we all learned in Sunday School that the greatest verse for evangelism is John 3:16 and was the second verse we memorized after “Jesus wept.” So you can imagine my surprise when I discovered there was so much more to this passage than to tell you all the ways that God expresses God’s love for the world God created.

John began this story somewhat abruptly. We know only that Jesus is in Jerusalem during the Passover feast according to 2:23. We are told that Nicodemus is a Pharisee, a ruler, and a member of the Sanhedrin. Both in [3:1-21](#) and in [19:39](#) Nicodemus is identified as the one who first came to Jesus by night and therefore is the original night stalker.

Two major images in John's Gospel are light and darkness. Nicodemus emerged out of the night's darkness, seeking light from the teacher he believed was from God. Just as suddenly as he appeared, Nicodemus disappeared back into the night from whence he came. Before he did so, Jesus told him one must be born anew in order to see the kingdom of God, and the last we heard from Nicodemus was, "How can this be?" ([v. 9](#)). Jesus' last words are, in verses beyond our text, "Those who do what is true come to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that their deeds have been done in God" ([v. 21](#)). It would take Nicodemus a long time—almost the end of

John's Gospel (19:38-42)—to come once and for all out of the night and into the light.

Nicodemus hovered on the margins and in the shadows of John's story. He was neither the first in the church nor the last to follow Jesus from afar. It may have been difficult, perhaps even dangerous, for Nicodemus to follow Jesus publicly, during the bright light of the day. He was, after all, someone who was part of the Jewish establishment. For his group Jesus seemed to be at first only a nuisance but later a political problem and threat. Nicodemus had to be cautious and to exercise discretion. He was like so many of Jesus' disciples who had to be careful about when and where they practiced their discipleship.

Nicodemus admitted that Jesus could not have performed his signs (2:23) unless God were with him. Jesus responded by answering a question Nicodemus did not ask. Not only was and is Jesus the presence of God, but those who are born from above—recreated in the water of baptism by the power of the Spirit—will see in these things Jesus had done the presence of the kingdom of God. Nicodemus did not understand what it meant to be "born from above." Jesus told him that to be born from above was to be born of the Spirit, and to be born of the Spirit was to believe in Jesus and in believing in him to have eternal life. To be born from above by water and the Spirit, to believe in Jesus, is to leave the darkness and to come into the light (v. 19). Those who live in the darkness and hate the light do so because their evil deeds will be exposed (v. 20). To come into the light—to be born from above—is to do "what is true" (v. 21), to follow the one who is himself "the way, and the truth, and the life" (14:6).

For many of us, the gospel is summarized by the words in John 3:16. Everyone who believes in Jesus will not perish but will have eternal life.

Some of us, however, understand faith or "believing in Jesus" to be simply what we do with our minds. According to John's Gospel, being born from above and believing in Jesus are clearly not so much about what we do with our minds as about what we do with our hearts and our lives. "Those who do what is true come to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that their deeds have been done in God" (v. 21). For John's Gospel believing and doing are inseparable. Nicodemus lived in the darkness and the shadows of this story until its conclusion, when he emerges publicly with Joseph of Arimathea, who is also a "secret disciple," to bury Jesus. **George W. Stroup**

So how does this scripture relate to you and me? If any character from the Bible can be regarded as representative of twenty-first-century church members, it might be Nicodemus. A successful and self-confident man, he played a leadership role in his community. He was spiritually open and curious, yet also rational. He approached Jesus directly and tried to figure out Jesus' actions and social networks. He was committed and curious enough that he made an appointment to talk with Jesus face to face. However, Nicodemus was not ready to go public with his interest in Jesus, so he made the appointment in the middle of the night, when he could keep his faith secret, separated from the rest of his life. His imagination was caught by Jesus, but he wanted to compartmentalize whatever faith he had. Nicodemus was not yet ready to declare his faith in the light of day, not prepared to let it change his life.

Like it or not, many of us are Nicodemuses in our wider life. We have faith, sometimes deep faith, and we are spiritually curious, but we keep faith in its own sphere. Being a Nicodemus-like Christian is understandable in the twenty-first century. We have mixed marriages or multicultural work settings, privilege tolerance and mutual respect over witnessing. Cultural

norms push religion into the private sphere, positioning faith as appropriate for family and personal morality, but inappropriate for public issues. Our brand of religion promotes self-restraint, tolerance, and personal morality, and all are worthy virtues. We support public morality and an engagement in social issues. If we are like Nicodemus, it is not necessarily because we have somehow failed as Christians.

Our faith is genuine, heartfelt, personal, and often deep, but it is too small. In this text Jesus suggested that Nicodemus's kind of faith was incomplete, even immature. He likened his midnight encounter with Nicodemus to a child still safe in its mother's womb. You are still gestating, Jesus implied. You must be born again, and declare this faith in the light of day.

Jesus seemed impatient as he talked with Nicodemus. He seemed annoyed when Nicodemus did not immediately understand the metaphor of rebirth. He even mocked the Pharisee for not understanding spiritual concepts. Jesus' impatience led some people to read this text as a command: you must be born again. Many interpret rebirth as work that gestating Christians need to do. For these interpreters, the urgency of people making a decision to accept Christ as their Lord and Savior is paramount. However, reading this text as a command is not the only option. In fact, it may be as legitimate—to read it as an invitation. When Jesus told Nicodemus that he needed to be born again by water and Spirit, he was asking Nicodemus to let God work in his life.

In a wonderful sermon on this text, Debbie Blue observes that the metaphor of birth in this text is surprising and provocative. It is surprising because it is so irrational, so beyond what will ever really happen to us

physically, and Nicodemus gave voice to that. This invitation to rebirth is nonsensical; nobody can literally be born again.

The invitation is provocative too, because it invites us to open our imaginations and reconsider our relationship with God, which is the central focus of this text and John's Gospel. Jesus invited Nicodemus, as he invites each of us, to come into the light of day and become mature Christian, full participants in the abundant life he offers. Jesus knew that neither Nicodemus nor we can do this on our own. It is God who will give birth in water and Spirit. Rebirth is God's gift to give, God's work to accomplish, and it is God who labors to bring us new life.

God works hard for us and our faith. God conceives us as Christians and nurtures us in the wombs of our faith, safe and warm and secret. At some point, like any pregnant woman who is close to full term; God wants to push that baby through the birth canal into greater maturity, into fullness of life, into a faith lived wholly in the world. That is what Jesus talked about in this text. Jesus thought it was time Nicodemus came through that spiritual birth canal. Perhaps he thinks it is time for many of us to be reborn too. God is ready to give us birth by water and Spirit.

Who among us has room to grow in our faith? The good news of this text is that God is prepared—even eager—to do the hard, messy, sweating labor that will bring us to maturity and new life. **Deborah J. Kapp**

So how do we understand the end of this scripture – especially verses 16 and 17? It is as if Jesus stopped talking to Nicodemus and turned to those who would hear these words in the future and said these familiar words:

"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. 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."

We walk in the open light of our salvation through our baptism and letting the Holy Spirit mold us into the mature Christian life that God wants for us. John put it another way in one of his short letters: If we walk in the light as he is in the light we have fellowship one with another and the blood of Jesus Christ God's Son cleans us from all sin. Maybe the sermon title was correct...let us walk in the light of God's great love!

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