

## “SO LOVED”

Ephesians 5: 1-2, 6-9; John 3:1-17

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It's a little hard to know what to make of Nicodemus. We can appreciate that there's some spiritual searching going on inside him. But we might wonder if he's being willfully obtuse, refusing to understand what Jesus says to him. We might also think he's a bit of a coward, too afraid of his community's disapproval to openly follow or even been seen talking with Jesus.

But that might not be the best way to approach this text. It might be more helpful to see Nicodemus as somebody struggling to understand the meaning of the cross ... just as so many of those who've followed Jesus, or wanted to follow him, have had to do. Now, this story is set *before* Jesus' crucifixion, but the cross is very present, very much at the heart of the story. This is one of those places where it's really helpful to remember that the gospel was actually written later, well after Jesus' crucifixion, at least 30 and possibly as much as 50 years later. The cross is the lens through which John views and tells all of Jesus' story.

By that time, the followers of Jesus – at least those in the community John is part of - were seeing themselves as separate from mainstream Judaism, and were viewed that way also by the religious leaders who were increasingly hostile to what they saw as a radical movement. The tensions of that moment between these two groups are reflected in John's gospel, where the Jerusalem temple authorities and the highly observant Pharisees are portrayed negatively. Unfortunately, over the years, this became fodder for anti-Semitism, even though that's far from the intention of this gospel which was written for a Christian community with its roots in Judaism.

The other thing to keep in mind about the context of those early believers is that they still lived under Roman rule. Crucifixion was not a thing of the past for them. For Christians today, the notion that the cross is an image of salvation is so familiar that we take it for granted. But we're looking at it from a distance of 2000+ years, and with a history of theology, worship, music, and art to support that understanding. But it wouldn't have been so easy for those earliest Christians. They “were still trying to imagine how a leader who was brutally executed by the empire could be their Messiah. The Messiah was not supposed to be crucified but was expected to officiate a peaceful rule.... The idea of salvation through belief in a crucified leader was a scandalous theological innovation.” (Wolfe, p. 24)

In his gospel, John strives to articulate this new and different way of seeing the cross for his community.

The struggle of Nicodemus seems to mirror that struggle of the early church. “We see the thing you do, Jesus. We know you must be from God. We've embraced your teaching. We have experienced your grace. We've found life in you. But how can this have happened through a life

that culminated in a horrific execution on a cross? How do we reconcile these seemingly irreconcilable realities? How do we make sense of it? How do we put it into words? How do we explain to anybody how this can possibly be redemptive?"

That IS hard. We still have a hard time with this.

The 16<sup>th</sup> verse of John, chapter 3, was the linchpin of the faith I was raised with. Maybe the same is true for you, too.

It was understood to mean that Jesus died because God demanded a sacrificial death as punishment for human sin, and that Jesus' death satisfied this requirement of divine justice on our behalf, so that God could forgive and accept us. This idea is more formally known as "substitutionary atonement," and for Christians in our culture it has become the dominant way of understanding Jesus' death; indeed, for a lot of people, it's the only interpretation they have ever heard. For a long time, it was the only one I was aware of. I learned that one had to be "born again" by praying a prayer of acceptance, and this meant forgiveness and salvation, which meant escape from eternal punishment in the fires of hell. John 3 was cited as the authority for this teaching.

I no longer believe this. I came to realize that it just entails too many other problematic beliefs - chiefly a too-small notion of who God is: that God is distant, legalistic, lacking in imagination, needs to be appeased, and has less unconditional love for us than most human parents have for their children. It makes faith about a transaction, rather than transformation. And it reads a whole lot into this third chapter of John that isn't here.

There's nothing here about the fires of hell. Being "born again" is not equated with praying a formulaic prayer. The word sin isn't used. God is not pictured as condemning, but loving. Even that word we translate as "perishing" can mean a variety of other things, including get lost, be destroyed, waste, or come to an end... so it's more than a little odd, what we've made this text out to be.

There is so much in this passage – big, BIG ideas about faith and life and earth and heaven and the kingdom of God. New life. Water. Spirit. Humanity. Nicodemus, and John's early Christian community, and we, are invited to contemplate the mysterious and paradoxical ways of a loving God.

"The Spirit blows where it will," Jesus tells Nicodemus. God is at work, bringing life and redemption in places and by means that may make no sense to us.

Jesus reminds Nicodemus of the story from Numbers about the time the people of Israel, still wandering in the wilderness, had a plague of snakes in their camp. Moses held up an image of a snake and those who looked at it were saved from the toxic snakebites. Somehow, the very thing that was so fearsome becomes the means of healing. Such are the strange, unexpected ways of God.

Somehow, the cross – so fearsome – also mediates healing to those who look to Jesus, lifted up on that cross. It's for us. It offers us something we need.

God doesn't need it. The cross doesn't change God's mind about us. God already loves the world; God already loves us. Just as we are, though we may have – or feel we have – nothing much to offer.

Jan Richardson, who writes many blessing poems, has one for Lent which includes the line "Beloved is where we begin." I just love that line. It feels to me like a riff on John 3:16. God SO LOVED the world. We are – our world is – beloved of God. Wherever we begin our faith journey, we begin it already beloved. We don't *become* God's beloved children after we pray a prayer, or believe some things, or clean up our act, or join a church, or do some good deeds. We begin already beloved.

So what if we consider that Jesus' blood was shed not to satisfy a demand from God that somebody be punished, but as a pouring out of God's love for us? Love greater than all the evil that emerges from our brokenness and alienation from God. Love willing to come into the midst of that and show itself more powerful, more enduring. Love demonstrated in weakness and suffering. Love we perhaps couldn't see in another way.

Look at the cross and see not a victim of God's wrath but the messenger of God's tenderness toward the world.

Look at the cross and see not a God who is eager to punish but a God who loves.

Look at the cross, and see God's solidarity with our suffering and compassion for our weakness. Look at the cross and see there both humanity and divinity, united in one person, united in love.

Look with awe, not with fear.

Look at the cross and forget everything you were told about your own worthlessness.

Look at the cross and see Jesus looking at you with love.

Look and know that you are loved – SO loved, beloved – of God, and that you always have been, and that you will always find a welcome and your true home in God. Know it in your mind and in your heart and in your soul and in your bones. That's knowledge that will change your life.

THIS is what it means to be born into a whole new life in the kingdom of the God who SO loved the world, and me, and you, and all of us.

Resources:

Richard Rohr *The Universal Christ*

Lisa M. Wolf "In the Lectionary: March 5, Second Sunday in Lent" in *The Christian Century*, March 2023