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“Salvation in a Soundbite”

John 3:1-17

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Mark 6:30-34, 53-56

¹Now there was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews. ²He came to Jesus 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.” ³Jesus answered him, “Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above.” ⁴Nicodemus 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?” ⁵Jesus answered, “Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit. ⁶What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit. ⁷Do not be astonished that I said to you, ‘You must be born from above.’ ⁸The wind 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.” ⁹Nicodemus said to him, “How can these things be?” ¹⁰Jesus 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 do not receive our testimony. ¹²If I have told you about earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you about heavenly things? ¹³No one has ascended into heaven except the one who descended from heaven, the Son of Man. ¹⁴And



just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, ¹⁵that whoever believes in him may have eternal life. 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.

Sermon:

At 13, I attended a basketball camp called “Shooting for Heaven” one summer at the First Baptist Church in my hometown. At the mid-morning break, we circled up around center court. On that first day, I wasn’t ready. The coach called us out one by one to recite our favorite Bible verses. Off the bat, it was clear I was out of my depth. The ball was chest-passed to me. I had to say something. And somewhere from deep down in my toes, I pulled out *“For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son, so that whosoever believeth in Him should not perish but have eternal life!” John 3:16! Whew.* To my utter shock, I had a Bible verse on file – and I’d hit the memory verse jackpot. (The thanks really goes to my Baptist Grandma Howell for the car ride Bible verse recitations and the John 3:16 knickknacks around her home.) Our kindly coach waxed on for minutes about how we have to believe to keep our souls from heading straight to “you know where.” “Got it, girls? Great. Let’s shoot some more hoops!”

Martin Luther called John 3:16 “the heart of the Bible, the Gospel in miniature.” You’ve likely seen it on billboards, t-shirts, coffee mugs, even tattoos. The verse describes a loving God, the created world God cherishes, and the self-giving Son. It’s a powerful message.

It is also the rallying cry for “born again” Christians. How often have we heard it reduced to a pithy line or palatable soundbite? Well-meaning Christians make it sound so easy to understand, like an equation. “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.” We forget that Jesus originally spoke these words to Nicodemus, a erudite man, who found his words utterly incomprehensible. The metaphorical language of birth, flesh, water, and spirit baffled him. “How can these things be?” he asks.

I have a soft spot for Nicodemus. To be honest, though, it’s hard to know what to make of him. On the one hand, this seemingly sincere, learned Jewish leader seeks out Jesus and greets him with words of generous recognition: “Rabbi, we know that you are teacher . . . from God” (v2). On the other hand, we sense that Nicodemus’ perception is limited, for Jesus is far more than a rabbi, a teacher.ⁱ



Nicodemus is drawn to Jesus because of the signs he was doing. And although Nicodemus is a public figure, he doesn't approach Jesus publicly, but (perhaps) clandestinely, "by night" under the cover of darkness (v1).

With a closer look, we too are left, like Nicodemus, with a lot of questions.

Writer Debie Thomas wonders, "If Jesus's conversation with Nicodemus is representative of God's preferred 'evangelism style,' [then] ... what does my more formulaic approach to Christianity leave out? Am I so invested in keeping the faith cozy and comfortable that I minimize its weirdness? Its otherness? Its offensiveness?"ⁱⁱ Jesus had no problem leaving Nicodemus confused and wondering. The Spirit "blows where it chooses," Jesus said. We cannot predict, control, or contain its comings and goings. We may even find it inconvenient to open the window and let the breeze in, particularly if we feel that things are tidied up, labelled, and sorted.ⁱⁱⁱ The Spirit can't be contained. The journey of faith and the workings of salvation can't be caged or contained, either. When we speak of God's kingdom, we are in a realm of deep mystery.

What Jesus is offering Nicodemus here is not a tune-up, but a brand new life. A shake-your-foundations kind of change. After all, what newborn enters the world without birth pangs, shock, disorientation, or pain? "Downright bewilderment isn't the exception in a birth story; it's the rule."^{iv}

Nicodemus, by all accounts a smart leader in the synagogue, sits baffled. We're forced to ask ourselves whether we, too, have understood this passage flatly. Does American Christian culture lean too hard on the importance of individual belief? How easy it is to forget the truth that God longs for *all* of creation – quite apart from our belief or unbelief. What does it mean to say I believe, anyway?

Growing up, my brother Jeff was the only one among Doris Howell's four grandkids that didn't get a "believer's" baptism. Baptized at three years old when we joined the Presbyterian church, my grandmother was worried that his baptism didn't "count." Up until our young adult years, our grandmother would introduce us all by saying, "These are my grandchildren Elizabeth, Jamie, and Braden – and this is Jeffery. He's Presbyterian, but he's a good boy."

Our earnest, faithful Southern Baptist grandmother was well-meaning. There's no telling how many countless hours she spent on her knees in prayer for us all. She worried night and day. But what I wish she and so many other faithful followers like her knew was the sure confidence of v17. "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."



Indeed, God did not... lest anyone be confused, the sentence starts with a negative. God did not send the Son to condemn. God sent the Son to save. That negative is important, as so many assume that the primary disposition of God toward humanity is one of judgment and that God's character is inherently disapproving or condemning.

Love is at the heart of John 3. Not judgment, not fear, but love.

In her 2013 book, *Christianity After Religion*, former Edmunds Lecturer Diana Butler Bass points out that the English word "believe" comes from the German word for love. That's not the usual way we'd jump to define it. To love. Not to hold and opinion, but to treasure. In asking Nicodemus to believe, Jesus is asking him to love, to revel in God's great love. To be born anew is to be changed into the one we have always been created to be.

But God doesn't ask our opinion about it first. God doesn't even consult us. God loves us and God goes ahead and sends the Son to a world that will despise him, a world that will send him to die.

Lutheran pastor David Lose shares that he preached a sermon some years ago when he compared this passage, the sending of the Son, with the scandal of infant baptism. After all, he shares, "we similarly bring children to the baptismal font before they can offer their consent and simply immerse them in God's love. How offensive, some might say, that we do not wait until they are "of age" and can decide for themselves. But that's the heart of infant Baptism, when you think of it: God just plain adopts us, makes us God's own, and pledges to be both with us and for us forever. All this whether we are ready, interested, or eager to receive it or not!"^v

For this reason, Lose explains, he proposed the church should add four words to the service of Baptism to highlight the offensive, scandalous nature of the sacrament: "I baptize you in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit...like it or not."

A week or two after he preached this sermon, Tom, a member of his congregation, told him a story.

Several nights earlier, Tom's six-year-old son Benjamin protested his bedtime. Frustrated by his father's refusal to budge, Benjamin finally became so frustrated that he said, "Daddy, I hate you!" Tom, possessing the presence of mind I wish I more frequently displayed, replied, "I'm sorry you feel that way, Ben, but I love you."



To which Benjamin replied, “Don’t say that!” Surprised, Tom continued, “Ben, but it’s true — I love you.” “Don’t say that, Daddy.” “But I love you, Ben.” “Stop saying that, Daddy! Stop saying it right now!” And then it came: “Benjamin, now listen to me: I love you...like it or not!”

Even at six years old, Benjamin realized that in the face of unconditional love he was powerless. If Tom had been willing to negotiate — “I’ll love you if you go to bed nicely” — then Benjamin would be a player: “Okay, this time, but I’m not eating my vegetables at dinner tomorrow.” But once Tom refused to negotiate, refused to make his love for his son conditional on something Benjamin did, then Ben couldn’t do anything but accept or flee that love.^{vi}

If God were to make God’s love conditional, then we would have tremendous power. Then we can negotiate. We can threaten to reject God’s love. We can even tell God to get lost. But when God just loves us – steadfastly and unconditionally – and sends God’s Son for us, then there’s nothing we can do about it. God in Jesus has made God’s decision – a decision that is *for* us.

It is clear in John 3 that there is nothing Nicodemus or any of us can do to secure the new birth of which Jesus speaks. Only divine initiative “from above” can effect it, an initiative that springs from the immense love God has for the world. That love, however, is not coercive. The gift of it can either be embraced or rejected, and therein lies the reality of “judgment” in John. God and Jesus do not judge: self-judgment is in view. To John’s way of thinking, we judge ourselves by our response to God’s love in Jesus Christ. Those who receive it receive new life; but those who reject it cut themselves off from “eternal life,” that is, from the rich quality or “fullness” of life that comes from living, both in the present and beyond death, in the unending presence of God (1:18; 10:10).^{vii}

Nicodemus rather fades away from John 3. Though we meet him again, we are left to wonder where he stands. We are left to wonder whether he embraced love and life anew, or whether it took him longer to recognize the fullness of life. Arriving in darkness, he is left to wander and wonder out into the light.

Interestingly, Nicodemus, who comes to Jesus “by night,” under the cover of darkness, may well represent the secret believers or closet Christians in the synagogue. “We know that you are teacher who has come from God...,” Nicodemus says. Both Jesus and Nicodemus seem to be speaking as representative figures here, reflecting a larger conversation important to believers in John’s early community. Those Christians suffered expulsion from the synagogue for their confession of faith in Jesus (9:22; 12:42; 16:2). But not all Jewish believers confessed Jesus publicly. Some



remained in the synagogue as closet believers, or crypto-Christians, for fear of losing their position.^{viii} And John judges them harshly (12:42-43).

Nicodemus may well represent these secret believers, and perhaps Jesus' conversation with Nicodemus is a challenge to come out of the closet and be honest about who he is. Nicodemus is being challenged to cross a social boundary, to side no longer in private but openly with an oppressed group in his society.

This scene has much to teach us. Nicodemus lives in the heart of every believer who is tempted to settle down into the secure "wisdom" of the establishment and resist the challenge of ongoing revelation. Wondering where Nicodemus would be found today, I think he must be found anyplace where Christians in power related to powerless Christians. David Rensberger writes "...Nicodemus is to be found wherever one whose life is secure must face those whose life is insecure, or who struggle in the cause of God and decide to say, 'I am one of them.'"^{ix}

Jesus was calling Nicodemus to so much more than an altar call or a recitation of the sinner's prayer. Jesus was calling him to fall in love and stay in love. Jesus was calling him to come out of the darkness and risk the light. The work of Jesus was and is mind-bending, soul-altering work. Important work, because love is important to God.

Once we have been loved this fully, this completely, we are called to respond in love and extend it to all we encounter.

"Christianity in a nutshell" and the "Gospel in miniature" sound catchy. But in the end, they don't do John 3 justice. No love as steadfast, costly, and free as God's love for us can ever be reduced to a formula.

ⁱ Frances Taylor Gench. *Encounters with Jesus: Studies on the Gospel of John*, (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2007), p19.

ⁱⁱ Debie Thomas, "Where the Wind Blows" from www.journeywithjesus.net (March 1, 2020).

ⁱⁱⁱ Taylor Gench, 22.

^{iv} Thomas.

^v David Lose, "Dear Working Preacher: Like It or Not!" from www.workingpreacher.org (March 13, 2011).

^{vi} Lose.

^{vii} Taylor Gench, 24.

^{viii} *Ibid.*, 26.

^{ix} *Ibid.*, 27.

