

Sermon for Lent 2A
Sunday, March 12, 2017
“We all need love”

Text: John 3:1-17

I speak to you in the name of the one true God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

I have traveled many times throughout the southern part of the United States. One of the things that was striking was the large number of massive churches, billboards with inspirational messages, and the number of cars that carried religious-themed stickers on their bumpers. There's no wondering why this part of the country is called the “Bible Belt.” But, it seemed to me that the two themes that stood out the most in all of this Christian advertising was, “You must be born again,” and “John 3:16.” I bet if I asked a good number Christian folk if they could recite John 3:16, they would at least be able to start it: “For God so loved the world...” and so on. It is one of the most familiar passages of scripture, up there with Psalm 23 and the Lord's Prayer. They are invitations into a new life through Jesus Christ.

So, there are these two major themes presented in our gospel lesson today: being born again and God's love for the world. Nicodemus was a Pharisee and a leader in the local Jewish community, but something compelled him to learn more about what Jesus had been preaching, so he sought Jesus out at night. He didn't want anyone he knew to see him, so he went in secret. He was afraid of what people might say, but he recognized that something was different about Jesus, that there was something genuine and special about him when he said, “for no one can do these signs that you do apart from the presence of God.” But when Jesus told him that one must be born from above, he was puzzled, because he was thinking of a physical re-birth, of coming out of one's mother's womb again, which is impossible. Rather, Jesus was talking about a spiritual rebirth. Being born again from above. “What is born of the flesh is flesh,” but “what is born of spirit is spirit.” A rebirth, a renewing and reorienting of one's mind, and heart, and very soul toward things that demonstrate that we are indeed created in the image of God.

As Jesus continued, however, Nicodemus still seemed puzzled, “But how can these things be?” This supposedly learned biblical scholar couldn't understand what Jesus was talking about, so Jesus had to break

it down even further, foreshadowing his own crucifixion by saying he would have to be lifted up in order that all might have eternal life. And then, Jesus says those familiar words—words that sum up his whole reason for being among us: “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.” To Nicodemus, he may have needed some more time to piece it all together, but for us, we know them to be words of comfort and hope. And I think the hope is captured in verse 17, which says, “God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.” See, it tells us that believing in Jesus Christ is the key to eternal life, but the world isn’t condemned by him but saved by it. There might be some out there in the world who don’t get the memo, but because of God’s great love for his creation and by his mercy, they have a shot at salvation, too.

The ironic thing is that, too often Christians have preached these words of spiritual rebirth and the hope of salvation through God’s gift to us, yet too many of us in this world get marginalized or written off, as it were. Too many are being left out—those fearful of deportation, our transgender sisters and brothers singled out as criminals, those of races other than white, women who continue to march for equal pay and rights to make monumental decisions concerning their health, our Jewish brothers and sisters hated once again for their loyalty to the God of Israel—our God—our Muslim brothers and sisters vilified for devotion and obedience to, again, our God, our environment and the cosmos in danger of destruction and corruption by human hands. There are too many in our very midst who are being told that they aren’t loved, that they don’t matter, but John 3:16 and 17 say that they, in fact, do! We all matter and we are all loved by God, because he let a part of himself suffer as one of us, be crucified as a criminal, and die just like all of his creation, so that we could become more like him, so that we could recognize that we are already his image. We already reflect what he’s all about.

What John 3:16 invites us to do is to seek out and recognize the many ways that God is at work in our lives and in the lives of others. It’s not our business to condemn someone else because they’re not like us, whatever that means. You can rest assured that there’s at least one condemnable thing about each and every one of us, if you look hard enough. So, that’s not it. Rather, Jesus let Nicodemus know, and

reminds us still with these words, that whether we got the memo or not about Jesus Christ, we all have a shot at salvation and redemption. Those of us who did get the divine e-mail, are the ones responsible for sharing the good news, for telling the world that there is something to live for, something to hope for in Christ Jesus. We are the ones who are expected to live that out, so that others can be inspired to do the same. We have no business going around trying to condemn folks, when we have this message of hope to share. If we handle our task properly, then hearts will be transformed, lives will be changed, and our sisters and brothers in this world will experience new life—a rebirth—through him who is mighty to save, Jesus Christ. Amen.

Resources

Karoline Lewis, “Commentary on John 3:16” in <http://www.workingpreacher.org/craft.aspx?post=4835>

David Lose, “Lent 2A: Just one more verse” in <http://www.davidlose.net/2017/03/lent-2-a-just-one-more-verse/>