

God Loved the World So Much

John 3:1-17 *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.*

Nicodemus was a Jewish leader who came to Jesus under the cover of darkness. His colleagues felt somewhat threatened by Jesus, so perhaps Nicodemus wanted a secret meeting. Maybe Nicodemus was searching for something that he felt lacking in his life, something deeper than just knowledge about religion. Maybe he vaguely felt that he was missing the heart of religion, something he sensed Jesus was in touch with.

Jesus tells Nicodemus that he has to be born again, or from above, in order to “see” God’s kingdom, to be part of the truest nature of life as God made it. You have to undergo your own transformation, waking up to your true self and to God, a spiritual re-orientation. That’s what the spiritual life is about—waking up, being born afresh, living out of God’s kingdom now.

Jesus ends by speaking of the Son of Man being lifted up so that people might look to him, believe in him, and find life. It is an image for the crucifixion, yet also for Jesus’ whole life, death and resurrection. Looking to him, we discover and live what he calls “eternal life,” life as it is meant to be lived.

“Believing” in Jesus is far more than believing things “about” Jesus. It doesn’t mean essentially what we think. “Believing” in Jesus and “looking” to Jesus mean the same thing really: living with Jesus as the dynamic core of our lives, shaping our thinking, our actions, our relationships, our decisions. It means looking only to Jesus as we determine how we will live. Not to a political system. Not to a set of cultural values. Not to whether we are conservative or liberal or whatever. Those are all avoidances and beside the point. “Believing” in or “looking to” Jesus has to do with his being the “forming center” of our lives.

That’s the way to eternal life and salvation, says Jesus in John’s gospel. Eternal life does not mean, first of all, “life after death.” The kingdom of God Jesus taught and called people to enter into and serve is here and now. He gave us a prayer that says: “Let your kingdom come on earth as it is in heaven.” Eternal life has to do with the here and now, with this life and this world, and all of it being what God really made it to be—a blessing for all. Jesus is talking about a quality or depth or meaning of life that we touch by living as faithfully as we can in relationship with God, with each other, and with the creation from moment to moment, from day to day, right

where we are. It is something like what Paul Tillich called the “eternal now.”

The next part of the reading, I believe, is not meant by John to be part of Jesus’ words to Nicodemus. The NRSV puts them in quotation marks, but I think this is not right. John wants us to step back with him to perceive the deepest meaning of what has just happened. Who is Jesus really and what is his significance for us? This gives rise to the most famous sentence in the New Testament: *God so loved the world that God gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.* John wants us to see that in Jesus God’s love for us and the world is fully present. Jesus is a gift of God’s love for us. Jesus was a human being like us who lived in fullest harmony with God and God’s will for our lives. For John, Jesus’ whole life is a sacrament of God’s presence and love. And it is not just Jesus. It is us, too, as we “believe” in Jesus, as we “look to” Jesus. Our lives also can be sacraments of God’s presence and love. We can have this truest life because we share in Jesus’ life and he shares in ours. He is our true humanity, the way we are made and meant to be and live.

By “perish” John doesn’t just mean physical death but also spiritual death. We can be walking around dead as doornails. We’ve all felt that way at times, I think—overwhelmed by life, when the world of distractions and confused values and empty pursuits leaves us feeling spiritually vacant. We lose touch with our selves and with God. Instead of looking only to Jesus, we fall into glancing at him only once in a while, too distracted by everything else that claims our attention. And out of our inner deadness we cause and participate in destructiveness toward ourselves, other people, and the world. We become filled with fear or anger or hate. We obsess about success and failure, wealth and recognition, and all the stuff that the writer of Ecclesiastes called “vanity,” emptiness. Perhaps this is why Nicodemus came to Jesus in the first place. He was full of religious knowledge and status but felt dead inside. He was trying to discover how to wake up, come alive, be born anew from God’s spirit. He didn’t want to perish. He came to one who was fully alive in God’s love and who told him how he, too, could come alive in that same love.

The text for today ends with these words: *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.* Here we get the image of God sending Jesus to us. This is like the image of God loving the world so much that God gave us Jesus. The New Testament writings are all reflections back on the meaning of Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection. And as it looked back, the early Christian community found no stronger way to express the meaning of Jesus’ life than that he was given us by God, sent to us by God. And that is how the Christian community has continued to experience the living Christ. God continually comes to us as love in the presence of the living Christ.

God's love comes to us and the world without condemnation. This is so important! Yet we so often miss it! God's love for us in Christ is experienced as completely and freely given. That's why we speak of God's grace, which literally means "gift" (*karis*). God's love comes to us regardless of the condition of our lives, regardless of how in the dark we might be. And it continues to come to us, to shine on us, in this way. If we could ever really get our heads, and especially our hearts, around that one thing, we would have no trouble knowing exactly what this eternal life is that Jesus talks about. Kaye had a professor of pastoral care in seminary who said that if we could just bottle grace we could empty the psychiatric hospitals and wards. Guilt, worthlessness, hopelessness about oneself, all stemming from the idea that love has to be earned, that we have to be good enough to be loved by God or by other people.

But John's gospel and the whole message of Christian faith is the complete opposite of that. Jesus is the sign and embodiment of God's love that comes to us without judgment, without condemning us, so that we can be saved, be made whole, be healed. It all starts with love, unconditional love and acceptance of ourselves, other people, and the world. This is very hard for us to hear because we see so much that is wrong with the world and want to fix it. That is not a bad thing. It's just that we must remember the starting point—loving acceptance of reality. There is much that is wrong with the world, with other people, with the church, with us. But the really good news is that God meets us with accepting love, not condemnation. Since God loves us in that way, we can then practice that non-condemning love toward others, the world, and ourselves. That's how real change begins.

Try that with someone who makes your blood boil. Try acceptance of this person as she or he is, including all the stuff that upsets you. Just accept. I don't mean feeling good about that person, or loving her or him in some cozy emotional way. I mean love as non-condemnation. Start from there and chances are you will see things begin to change. Maybe not in the other person, but in you. And maybe because of your ability to love unconditionally and without judgment even a little bit, the other person might just become different, too. No guarantee. But the situation is already better.

Try it with some of the things that make you so angry or depressed about this society or nation or world. There are good reasons to feel that way. But just begin a little bit trying to accept the situation as it is, without judgment. Accept your sadness about it, your anger or fear. This is beginning to love the world as God loves it. Not railing against it. Not being filled with anger and hate about it. Not turning our backs on it. Just being here in the world as those who see it in the most real light—as God's creation that is hurting, lost, fumbling around in the dark. Then we can love the world with the compassion of God and change becomes possible.

Try it on yourself. This may be the hardest of all because many of us have such a hard time loving ourselves. A warped presentation of Christianity has taught us it is selfish to love ourselves. We are supposed to forget ourselves, to deny ourselves joy or peace or fulfillment. This is wrong. How can we love other people or the world if we hate ourselves, if we do not have in us the nourishing reality of God's love for us? How can we touch others with this non-condemning love of God if we do not allow it to touch our own lives? A crucial part of the spiritual life, the inward journey we talk about, is practicing God's non-condemning love toward ourselves. We can become aware and more understanding of those parts of ourselves that are painful or unhappy as we simply embrace them and let the light of God's unconditional love shine on the whole of who we are. This is learning to be with ourselves in a loving and non-judgmental way, God's way. When we become more and more used to this, then we also find that change has already begun. We are not as fearful, not as self-critical, not as unhappy as we were. We become more able to love.

Of course we want things to change in the world and in ourselves. But it starts with profound acceptance, with loving non-judgment, non-condemnation. That's how God starts with the world, with us. When it begins with this kind of love, then change happens in the way a flower emerges from the soil and because of the indiscriminate falling of the rain and light of the sun. We know that when we are being criticized and berated, we don't make positive changes. It has the opposite effect, sowing seeds of resentment and anger. When children are berated, constantly criticized, or pressured, they don't respond well. They become discouraged and resentful and will find ways, sooner or later, to rebel. No wonder so many young people experience depression and have terrible self-images. Too much pressure. Too much non-acceptance. Too little love. Change happens from the point of acceptance, not condemnation. That is the nature of God and God's love.

In Jesus we touch the love of God that loves us and the world so much. It is a love that comes to us, yes, to call us into being fully who we are, recognizing that we are all pretty lost in one way or another. But it comes without condemnation, only acceptance. That's where it all begins, this new beginning, this new life Jesus calls eternal.