

Sunday, March, 2018
Fourth Sunday in Lent

Central Presbyterian Church
Eugene, Oregon



A Sermon preached by
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The Purpose of Love: Inclusive or Exclusive

John 3:1-17

I have said this before but it bears saying again, this text is one of the most misused, misunderstood texts in all of Scripture. It has provided motivation for some of the most destructive, exclusive, and unchristian impulses of those who take the name Christian. “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him should not perish, but have eternal life.”

Instead of the possibility of believing, for so many the implication of perishing takes center stage. It is taken to mean that if you do not believe – and let me point out it always means do not believe the way I believe – you will perish, be damned, go to hell! It is difficult to overestimate the harm, hurt and abuse that has been encouraged by this rendering of John’s Gospel.

The Christian Crusade against Muslims of the middle ages was based on the belief that Muslims were a threat to believing. The Holocaust toward Jews was nurtured by the notion that Jews were a threat to believing—in spite of the fact that Jesus was a Jew who came to the Jews.

Christian missionary work was often conducted among native peoples with John 3:16 in mind. If you do not believe the way we believe you will perish.

This became the motivation to use every tool at our disposal to stamp out Indigenous beliefs, including Indigenous language and culture.

John 3:16 becomes the cornerstone for an edifice of beliefs that include rejection of those who differ in sexual orientation or gender identity, the dominance of women by men, and manifest destiny--the sense of entitlement that Western countries have over the rest of the world. This understanding remains a potent and I believe destructive influence, from matters of individual salvation to the way we conduct foreign policy as a nation.

The irony is that of the four Gospel writers John was the least literal among them. All of the Gospel writers take great liberty with the actual words and events of Jesus life. They were not historians. They were theologians seeking to communicate a faith. John is the last of the Gospels writers and the one who exercises the greatest freedom in reworking and retelling the story of Jesus in order to communicate who Jesus is to his contemporary audience. John would be aghast at turning his Gospel into a wooden, sterile and literal interpretation of the things Jesus said and did.

At this point it may be useful for me to say a few words about the translation of this text. Our English translation it says, "...everyone who --(in the King James version it says "whosoever") believes... will not perish but have eternal life." This translation makes it sound like we are talking about individuals believing something, assenting to some creed. However, in the Greek text the word "*pas*" (translated as everyone, or whosoever) actually means "all" and the word "*pesteou*" (translated as "believe or believeth") means "persuaded." And there is that pesky word "*hina*" translated as "that" which is transitive and is better translated as "so that." And finally there's that phrase "perish but have eternal life." In the Greek the word "perish" is in the past-middle-subjunctive. This means an action that happened in the past, and which was perpetrated upon oneself, by oneself, but, if persuaded by the love God seen in Jesus, will not keep happening in the future. In other words we won't keep visiting death upon ourselves if we are persuaded by this life-giving message of Jesus.

So let me put that all together in a translation I believe is more faithful to the text in its context. "Because God so loved the world, he gave his only son, so that all may be persuaded and therefore no longer keep perishing but have everlasting life." In this translation it is not about the "individual" coming to a certain set of beliefs that brings salvation but about God's intent that the "*pas*" – the **collective** be persuaded by the work of his Son. In this text the focus is not on us and what we believe, it is on God's message and its saving power to persuade us out of death and into life. If we see the life and love of God in Christ we will not keep visiting death upon

ourselves but embrace the gift of everlasting life—in this life and in the life to come.

It is particularly ironic that in this text John's Jesus specifically and unequivocally rejects the very assumptions that have so often dominated the reading and interpreting of this text. When Jesus offers the metaphor of birth to speak about spiritual growth, Nicodemus taking a literal approach to Jesus words says, "how can one be born a second time from your mother's womb?" John tells us Jesus was amazed at Nicodemus' literal understanding of this evocative image and says to Nicodemus, "You are a teacher of faith and yet you are unable to understand what I am saying?" Do you see here that Jesus does not expect theological teaching and faith formation to come from literal renderings of the deeper truths to be found in metaphor and simile, poetry and prose, parable and miracle.

Jesus would be equally amazed at how his invitation to deepen our encounter with God through a rebirth of the Spirit is still used today as a basis for exclusion, rejection, dominance, and judgment. If the life and example of Jesus gives us reason at all to be literal in our reading of Jesus words it would not be John 3:16, but rather John 3:17 "God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world might be saved through him." Far from intending the exclusion of those who do not properly believe, John is trying to say that this is an inclusive message for all -- that we might know and experience salvation.

Neither Jesus nor John in his Gospel were interested in establishing a belief system to be the cornerstone for acceptance or rejection by God. They were

however very interested in the question how does one come to have faith? How does one grow and mature in one's experience of God? If our interest is in deepening our walk with God—of being included in the grace of salvation—rather than creating belief systems that exclude more than they include, then this passage from John, including John 3:16, read properly in context, has much to teach us.

Our text this morning offers three formative influences on our spiritual lives and our encounter with God. While these three are not exhaustive of the ways in which a person grows and deepens in their experience of God, it is difficult to imagine any substantial spiritual growth, any rebirth without them.

The first of those formative faith influences is the community of faith. Nicodemus comes to Jesus as one whose experience of God has been nurtured and supported by a community of believers. John begins his story by identifying Nicodemus as a leader of the Jews. One of the unfortunate consequences of reading John 3:16, with a belief system in mind, is the excessive, almost exclusive focus on individual salvation. The central question becomes am I saved? Have I experienced personal salvation? Do I know Jesus as my Lord and Savior? The role and place of the community, the common good, is always secondary, even incidental to a focus on the individual. However, in the Gospel it is exactly the opposite. Walter Brueggeman reminds us this kind of thinking infects our beliefs about stewardship too. "Commodity thinking (and here you can think about a set of beliefs) says that you share with your neighbor stuff that you can afford. Covenantal

thinking says that you share first with your neighbor, and then you and your neighbor live on what you've got together."

For people like Nicodemus, whose faith was formed by the Hebrew Scriptures, the role of a community of believers was primary in his faith development. In the Hebrew Scriptures the shaping of a loving and just community is God's central concern.

As a child Nicodemus was taught the traditions of this faith. As a youth Nicodemus was nurtured in the collective wisdom and experience of a community who had long sought to know God. As an adult, Nicodemus was sustained by a community who encounters God at the heart of creation, in Exodus movements of liberation, in prophetic calls for justice. For a Jewish audience faith was not an individual endeavor but a collective enterprise. It was not a personal accomplishment but a common gift and responsibility in which one was nurtured.

So you can imagine why, in our baptismal vows we promise to nurture children in the community of faith and the way of Jesus. You can imagine why it is important for us to participate in a worshiping and serving community. Not because we teach right doctrine but because we form hopeful, life-giving, compassionate hearts in living and serving together.

John reminds us of Nicodemus place in the community of faith because John, like Jesus, considers the role of a faith community central in our own faith formation. It is not "whosoever believes" but "pas" "everyone believing together." The songs and hymns we sing together on Sunday morning, the

prayers we offer, the support we give and receive, the study and reflection, all echo the important role a community of believers plays in our spiritual formation. The love of God revealed in Jesus is not a catechism of creeds but a laboratory of experience in which the disciples are formed by a relationship with Jesus not the formation of dogma.

When we absent ourselves from a the community of faith we are cutting ourselves off from one of God's primary tools for inviting us into a deeper and more intimate encounter with God. We come to faith through Christ, through Christ's body the church, not through our beliefs but through our "believing" – our active service, study, prayer, and fellowship together.

Service, caring for and about others then, is the second formative influence on faith and our encounter with God revealed in this passage from John. Nicodemus is quite clear the reason he comes knocking on Jesus door is that, through Jesus healing of the sick, feeding the hungry, caring for those in need, he has experienced the presence of God. He says, "No one can do the things you do apart from the presence of God."

When we participate in FISH, SMART, Habitat for Humanity, SquareOne Villages, the Dining Room, community supported agriculture there is more at stake than the good we might accomplish. For Nicodemus it was the acts of caring and compassion of Jesus, which further opened his heart to God's presence. When I was a youth leader I insisted that all the kids participate in some mission project each year because it was not in Bible Study or even in

fellowship that I saw faith grow by leaps and bounds – it was in service.

Among the many problems presented with a literal reading of John 3:16 is a resulting lack of concern for human suffering. If the overriding goal is to keep people from perishing in the life to come, then the problem of their perishing in this life due to lack of food or health care seems unimportant. Nicodemus reminds us we encounter the presence of God precisely in those places where our hearts are open and we respond to the needs around us.

The third formative influence reflected in our Gospel this morning is openness to the guiding of God's Spirit. The question faced by Nicodemus and anyone seeking to grow in faith is, are you willing to let go of your certainties about who God is? Are you willing to experience God in new ways? Are you ready like Abraham and Sarah to step out on a journey with God without the comfort of knowing exactly where it will lead you? Although Nicodemus came knocking on Jesus door, what he ultimately discovers is that Jesus is knocking on his door. Jesus is inviting Nicodemus and Jesus is inviting you and me to let the Spirit of God be our guide, to be born anew. Are we as a community; are we as individuals prepared to trust God enough to live without absolute certainty about whom God is?

Finally, let us return to John 3:16. "Because God so loved the world, he gave his only Son, so that all would be persuaded, no longer perishing but experiencing eternal life." In his life we encounter the one who came not to be served but the one who came to serve, to give his life for his friends. This is the

kind of love God has for us. This is the kind of love God wants us to share. On 9/11 we were reminded how sacrificial being can save another. Hundreds of firefighters and police officers risked and ultimately lost their lives in hopes of saving people they never knew. In countless acts of service by individuals in floods and fires we have seen the same. And frankly, if you look closely you can see these acts of compassion and service everyday by your neighbors and your sisters and brothers in the faith community. Can you imagine any of these courageous individuals being motivated by some belief, some creed that would determine who was worthy to be saved and who was not? That would be ludicrous.

Rather than creating a belief system that saves some and rejects others, John is simply expressing the depth of God's love, which can be encountered in the presence of Jesus. How do we grow in faith, how do we encounter this God who so loved the world?

I don't know about you, but it has been my experience, that my faith is strongest-- I feel most close to God when I participate in community, when I care about others, and when I let go of my certainties and remain open to the guiding of God's Spirit.

Prayer

Loving God, we all want to experience grace. We want to be saved and to save others. Grant that we, in following Jesus, would experience that grace not in what we profess but what we proffer within the human community. In giving, as Christ first gave to us, may we experience the gift of life abundant and eternal. Amen.