

March 14, 2021
Rev. John Chaplin

Sermon

“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.” John 3:16;

I imagine a number of you may remember memorizing that verse. If you grew up going to Sunday school, you cannot remember a time when you did not know this particular verse of Scripture. I'm old, so I remember the version that said *“he gave his only begotten son.”* It is and has been the centerpiece of Sunday school and vacation Bible school classes and frequently lifted up as a sort of summation of Christian faith. Seems like there was also a time period when that passage was everywhere. In every end zone, in every crowd, in every place that a television camera was pointing, it seemed as though you would find someone holding up a placard: “John 3:16.”

By beginning at verse 14, our text is cut off from what sets the scene, which is Nicodemus' fascinating night time visit to Jesus. So, our text this week is not the whole story of the conversation between Jesus and Nicodemus. It is, though, the climax of what John wants to say and assumes we have been there listening to these two all along. So, I'd like to dig into those preceding verses a bit.

Nicodemus is presented as a leading member of the religious hierarchy in Jerusalem, something like a professor of theology or religious judge. He has come to Jesus in the middle of the night to discuss things. We assume that he is afraid of coming openly to see Jesus. We don't know that for certain from the text. Later on, in John 19:39, we are told that Nicodemus comes again to see Jesus. But by this time he has been executed and the danger of being associated with Jesus has lessened. He comes with a friend of his, Joseph of Arimathea, “a disciple of Jesus, though a secret one,” They were to look after Jesus' corpse, this Joseph and Nicodemus, “who had come to Jesus by night”. It is why we might think it is fair to say that we are talking about a man who wants to keep himself in the shadows when it comes to Jesus, just out of harm's way and safe, NOT seen.

The first time Nicodemus comes, he comes because he appears to be troubled by what Jesus has been saying and doing, because he wants to question him, get into a debate. It is probably what you should always ask yourself about folks who ask you questions. Do they really want to know what you think and feel or do they just want to argue? The learned Nicodemus wants to argue and a religious debate is what follows in that well-known conversation about being “born from above” and the wind blowing where it will. Nicodemus wants some sign that Jesus really is from God and that the things he is saying and doing are true. Or, so he says.

If you were a child of spirit, Jesus tells him, you would know who I am and understand the things I am saying. But all Nicodemus can do in response is to ask Jesus more intellectual questions. When Jesus responds to his questions and Nicodemus evades it all with even more questions, Jesus seems to lose patience with him, as if he knows at this point he is dealing with someone who does not want to understand but merely wants to argue. Nothing Jesus seems to say is getting through to Nicodemus; and it is here that this week's Gospel read begins.

Jesus basically tells Nicodemus, “You’re going to have to decide whether or not you want to *debate* what I am all about or to start *living* it. The people who live the life I am do so in the light, where everything they do and are can be seen. The folks who don’t are the ones who stick to the shadows.”

Barry Robinson sort of dramatizes the conversation as a kind of pantomime. He says, “I’d get you to see Jesus standing up there on a stage with a single spotlight illuminating him. Then you would hear another voice speaking to Jesus from one side of the stage. There is no light over there and the one who speaks starts to approach where Jesus is. Jesus begins to beckon to the man in the shadows to come closer; and for a moment it looks like he might. He hovers at the edge of the light Jesus is standing in but never steps into it. The more the two talk, the more that second figure standing there with Jesus begins to fade back into shadows until finally he disappears back into the night from which he came.” Barry says: “It is the way it is, says Jesus. Those who hate the light always have something to hide. Those who love the light are not afraid of being seen for who and what they are.”

Now, we could end the sermon right there...but I just can’t!

I can’t leave it there! With the world divided so rigidly into light and darkness, with people preferring the condemning darkness to cover their evil deeds over dwelling with Christ in the bright light of truth. I think it’s all more complicated than that.

We live in a time when world leaders routinely invoke the language of good versus evil, truth versus falsehood, and light versus darkness. Paul Shupe says that we “justify acts of war and terrorism because “we” are good, true dwellers in the light of revelation, while “they” are evil, deceitful dwellers in the dark caverns of ignorance. We cannot read these verses with anything like simple, straightforward comfort.”

He says we might approach the Scripture read simply from the theme of “*For God so loved the world.*” It is possible to read the whole of Scripture from that lens, as God’s love story for the world. He says, “whenever inequality or injustice threatened the welfare of the poor and the powerless (and therefore the whole people), God’s love raised up prophets who declared God’s desire for compassion—shown not just to insiders, but also to sojourners and foreigners within the boundaries of Israel. He goes on to say, “It was God’s love that sent Jesus, God’s Son, to be incarnate in the world, where he taught that love is not merely for those who look and think and believe like us, but even for our enemies and those who persecute us. It was love that stirred the first century church to open the doors of communion not only to Jews but also Gentiles, not only to those deemed worthy but also those whose very existence was troubling: the lame, the blind, the eunuchs.”

As a community we say, “No matter who you are or where you are on life’s journey, you are welcome here at St. Paul’s UCC.” Ponder a bit on what it feels like when you insert a few words into that.

Hmmm... *God so loves the world*, that no matter who you are or where you are on life’s journey, you are welcome here.

God’s love is not limited to the insiders, to the believers who walk in the light. Life’s journey is sometimes a challenging, complicated mix of light and darkness and shadows. May St. Paul’s continue to evolve as a faith community in which God’s love is regarded NOT as being in short supply, open only to those who have seen and confessed Jesus as the Christ, but rather as poured out upon the entire world. If you see just a bit of this vision, it is precisely because Jesus is the Christ, the sure and confident sign of the very best we know: *God so loves the world*.....