3-11/12-17 Rev. Amy Haines

John 3:1-17 Love That Flows Through Us Dare You to Love Series

We know the verse by heart, the verse that Martin Luther called the Gospel in a nutshell.

“For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son,

so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but have eternal life.”

Yet can you also quote John 3:17?

“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.”

How many of us know the context for these verses, the story of Nicodemus?

Nicodemus was one of God’s chosen as a Jew, a Pharisee and a member of the Sanhedrin, meaning he was one of the religious elite who upheld God’s Law personally and in society.

We can presume he was rich, well educated, and a highly respected teacher. Like most Jews, Nicodemus did not believe he was in need of a savior, for his heritage claimed him as a descendant of Abraham and heir to God’s covenant promises.

Nowadays, many in our world do not believe they are in need of a savior, because they can either save themselves, or get by on their work ethic, their family name, their lucky breaks, even their church membership. Nowadays, many in our world believe they are in control of their own destiny, and have no need for an outside savior.

..Two-thirds of all Americans think their chances of going to heaven are "good."

--George Gallup, "Religion in America", Leadership, Fall, 1987. sermonillustrations.com

Yet less than half profess a personal relationship with Jesus Christ.

Many people believe that they will make it into heaven based solely on their good works or by living a good life, things they can personally control. These are the men and women who want a spiritual checklist rather than a relationship, a rules sheet rather than a way of life.

Nicodemus was secure in his heritage, believing he had it all— until the new rabbi, Jesus, began to teach his radical concepts of God’s kingdom. Nicodemus saw some of the miracles that Jesus was doing. He heard Jesus talk about God as one who knew God rather than just one who studied God’s Word. He immediately recognized what Jesus did and taught was different.

So under cover of darkness, Nicodemus risked his reputation to go to Jesus at night and ask this new teacher the questions he thought his soul was asking. Yet the conversation that followed with Jesus was nothing that Nicodemus expected and nothing that Nicodemus had ever encountered before.

Instead of swapping pleasantries and compliments, Jesus cuts straight to the heart of the conversation, straight to the basics of true faith.

“I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above.”

“I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit.”

Nicodemus believed that as a Pharisaic Jew he held the key to the kingdom of God simply by virtue of who he was and his place in society. But Jesus upset any and all expectations when he told Nicodemus—and us here today—that it does not matter who we are or where we have been—university presidents, preachers, teachers, housewives, felons or forgotten kids—

our status in society or even our faithfulness in the church are not the keys to God’s kingdom.

Nothing we **do** will gain us entrance to God’s heavenly kingdom. No position in society will be greater than the lowliest believer in Jesus. The only way to enter God’s kingdom is to be born from above, to receive God’s gift of salvation through faith in Jesus Christ.

Salvation is at the core of our gospel passage today. Salvation for Nicodemus; salvation for you and I; salvation for the world.

.. The president of a well-known university was shopping during the Christmas season and happened to pass by a Salvation Army volunteer, standing by a “donation kettle” and ringing a bell. As he paused to make a donation, the woman volunteer asked this educator: “Sir, are you saved?”

When he replied that he supposed he was, she was not satisfied, so she pursued the matter further: “I mean, have you ever given your full life to the Lord?”

At this point, the president thought he should enlighten this persistent woman concerning his identity: “I am the president of such and such university, and as such, I am also president of its school of theology.”

The lady considered his response for a moment, and then replied, “It doesn’t matter wherever you’ve been, or whatever you are, you can still be saved.”

--Bob Deffinbaugh bible.org adapted

The audacity of that Salvation Army volunteer to ask a university president if he is saved! Such was the audacity of Jesus when a Pharisee named Nicodemus came to him under cover of night long ago. Such is the audacity of God today when God continues to call to us through the pages of Scripture and the presence of the Holy Spirit.

Now I am not advocating that we go about asking everyone, “Are you saved?” I have not found that to be a particularly helpful conversation starter.

Yet as we gather for worship this morning we need to accept the fact that Jesus came as more than a miracle worker and teacher. Jesus came to save and to redeem. Salvation is a gift from God. Salvation is less about what we do and more about what God does for us.

The Greek word “anothen” which is often translated as “born again”, also means “born from above” or “born anew”. In many churches today, to be “born again” means we go to Jesus, we pray to welcome the Spirit into our lives. But to be “born from above” is not something we do, but something God does to us.

When we are born from above we cannot re-enter our mother’s wombs or erase our pasts. But we can begin life again, with a different set of standards and a different focus and foundation for life.

When we are born from above we begin to see the world around us in a different way, and then we become open to the Holy Spirit drawing us deeper in faith. When we open ourselves up to the Holy Spirit moving through us we also open ourselves up to God re-orienting our lives, re-birthing our character, renewing our foundation grounded in God’s unconditional love, the promise of life eternal, and the forgiveness of our sin through his Son Jesus.

Our upcoming Lenten passages this month vividly remind us that God’s love is truly for all the world. For every person in every generation. For God’s love is unconditional. Given freely to all of us. Before we believe or act or ask to be saved.

Several years ago Tom told his pastor, Rev. David Lose, a story about his six-year-old son and how it taught him about our struggle to accept unconditional love.

…Several nights earlier, Tom's son Benjamin had 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 many wish they could display, 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.

The same is true with us. If God makes God's great love for the world and us conditional, then we, suddenly, have tremendous power. We can negotiate. We can threaten to reject God's love. We can even tell God to take a hike if we don't care for God's terms. But when God just loves us – completely and unconditionally – and when God just goes and dies for us, well then the jig is up, there's just nothing we can do to influence God.

--David Lose “Like It or Not!” 3-13-11 workingpreacher.org adapted

Yes, we still have a choice. A choice to accept or reject the love of God. A choice to follow or turn away from Jesus, God’s Son. A choice to welcome the Holy Spirit’s unpredictable presence in our lives or fight the Spirit’s holy nudgings.

If I were to go up to you after worship today and offer you a $5 bill, would you take it? Would you use it? You have a choice to receive it—or not, a choice to do something with it—or not. And unless you take it and use it, it means nothing in your life.

The same is true for our willingness to receive the unconditional love of God in our lives.

Will we accept the grace of God that saves us, or will we try to save ourselves? Will we accept the love of God to guide us, or will we try to do our own thing and go our own way?

I grew up watching The Brady Bunch, and Ann B. Davis played Alice the housekeeper on that show. Thirty years ago Ann was being interviewed, and the host made mention that a lot of her old friends thought that she had gone into a convent following her time on the show.

She laughed and kindly responded, “No, I live in a Christian community.”

Then she continued, “I’ve always known that God is love, but not until about twelve years ago did I know that God loved Ann B. Davis.”

--Derl Keefer 11-1-07 “Seeking Jesus” preaching.com adapted

This Lenten season, allow God to love you. Allow the Holy Spirit to work within you and flow through you. Love others as Christ has loved you.

It is one thing to say that we are Christians, but it is another thing entirely to live as disciples of Jesus Christ. Only once we have been loved fully by God, can we then respond in love, honoring God and sharing the news of God's love for the world with all we encounter.

When we accept that we have been born from above, we recognize that not only have we been saved from sin, we have also been saved to life in the Spirit. We are set free for new ways of kingdom living in this world.

John Wesley called this sanctifying grace—the ongoing work of the Holy Spirit in our lives that challenges us to be more like Christ. We never retire from sanctifying grace. We are called to continue to grow in faith from the moment we welcome Jesus in our lives to the moment we see him face to face. To be more like Christ is to allow God’s love to flow more though us to others, so that the world around us might see and experience Christ.

Elizabeth Randall reminds us:

..“God loved the world so much as to send the only Son

to turn our lives upside down and inside out,

to tumble us and transform us in the wind of the Spirit,

to make our lives so different it’s as if we had been born into a different world.”

--Abingdon Women’s Preaching Annual 2-A, p. 80

Think back on your own journey of faith. How are you a different person now than you were 5- 10- 15 years ago? What changes in your life have those around you seen and experienced because of your relationship with Jesus?

Have you moved from knowing in your mind that God loves you to knowing in your heart that God loves you? Have you moved from trying to do church to earn your salvation to participating as part of the community of faith as a way of saying thanks for your salvation? Have you moved from trying to control your life to allowing the Spirit to guide your life?

If your closest family members and friends would admit that they haven’t seen much change in you over the years, in what ways are you open to growing more like Jesus in the years still left in your life?

Faith is more than a one-time decision to follow Jesus. Faith is a daily decision to love God from the inside out, inviting the Holy Spirit to guide us each and every day.

Yet how many of us struggle with that daily decision to follow Jesus, struggling to live as those born from above, struggling to live as those born of water and the Spirit?

..Father Henri Nouwen, reflecting on the story of Nicodemus, once wrote,

"I love Jesus but want to hold on to my own friends even when they do not lead me closer to Jesus. I love Jesus but want to hold on to my own independence even when that independence brings me no real freedom. I love Jesus but do not want to lose the respect of my professional colleagues, even though I know that their respect does not make me grow spiritually. I love Jesus but do not want to give up my writing plans, travel plans, and speaking plans, even when these plans are often more to my glory than to the glory of God."

Upon reflection Father Nouwen realizes that he isn't all that different from Nicodemus. He continued by saying, "So I am like Nicodemus, who came by night, and said safe things about Jesus to his colleagues."

There's an element of Nicodemus in all of us. It's always easier to play it safe and keep Jesus off in the distance than to call him the Lord of our life. We need to know, however, that we cannot always put him off. --King Duncan, Collected Sermons, www.Sermons.com

The Gospel of John never says whether Nicodemus came to believe in Jesus that night, or went home to ponder all that he had heard. We do know he shows up twice more in the Gospel of John. First, he advises his colleagues to investigate Jesus more thoroughly before they rush to judgement. Finally, he brings a personal donation of one hundred pounds of aloe and myrrh to be used for the anointing of Jesus’ body for burial following the crucifixion. From this progression we can hope that Nicodemus became a follower of Jesus.

And if there is hope for Nicodemus, there is hope for you and I.

When we listen in on Jesus’ conversation with Nicodemus today, we need to recognize that Jesus is also inviting us to be born from above, inviting us to believe in him and receive the gift of eternal life, inviting us to be saved through the unconditional love and grace of God, and inviting us to open our lives to the Lord today.

We are called to trust in God’s Word, which proclaims: “For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but 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.”

Today, brothers and sisters in the family of God, I invite you once again to receive God’s saving grace. If you have never opened yourself to being born from above, I invite you to open your life to God’s Son Jesus. If you once said yes to Jesus, but since have tried to live as your own Savior, I invite you to relinquish control over to God, and open your life to God’s Spirit. If you daily try to live as a follower of Jesus and just want to offer praise for his forgiveness and grace, I invite you to offer your thanksgiving and praise.

Today, may we be changed, may we be reborn, may we take seriously this gift of faith so that tomorrow we may not only live by the Spirit but we may also go and be witnesses of life and love, of salvation and the promise of life eternal.

We are called to be born from above. We are called to be born of water and Spirit.

May it be so. Let us pray.