



Sunday's Sermon

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Growing Together in Christ to Love and Serve All People

Second Sunday in Lent

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John 3:1-17

Basis and inspiration for this sermon taken from Feasting on the Word: Year A for Lent 2.

It hasn't happened here *yet*, but in Phoenix - 3 or 4 times a year - my doorbell would ring. And when I opened it, there would be 2 or 3 people there from one of the neighborhood churches. And after we exchanged pleasantries, they would ask me if I was saved.

They didn't know what I do for a living. I always answered, "yes." And every once in a while, one would ask, "Are you sure? How do you know?" And I answered, "Jesus took care of it more than 2000 years ago."

And like most people, I wanted to get back to my day so I didn't prolong the conversation. But every time after they left I thought, "there's so much more to this than just saying 'yes' on a head-level."

John 3:16 is, arguably, the most well-known verse in the Bible. It's so well-known that at sporting events, or anywhere, if we see a sign that simply says 3:16, pretty much everyone knows what it means.

And it ought to be understood as good news, because it is. It's about God's love not just for the planet we live on, but for the entire *cosmos*. But in situations like that when it's taken out of context, it's often used and understood as a way to push people, and almost get in their face.

In context, though, it's part of a story of a person who is struggling to understand who Jesus is and what it means for his life.

He lived in the first century. But in a lot of ways, Nicodemus is the epitome of a *twenty-first* century Christian: he's successful and self-confident; he's a leader in his community; he's spiritually open and curious, but also rational. He approaches Jesus directly and tries to figure out his actions and social networks. He's committed and curious enough that he makes an appointment to talk with Jesus face-to-face.

But Nicodemus made that appointment for the middle of the night because he wasn't ready to go public with his faith yet. He kept his faith secret and separate from the rest of his life. He wasn't ready to declare his faith in the light of day and let it change his life.

As they talked, Nicodemus admitted that he knew Jesus couldn't be doing what he was doing unless God was with him. But Nicodemus still didn't fully get it. And then Jesus confused him a little more by answering a question that Nicodemus didn't ask: not only is Jesus the presence of God, but those who are born from above will see the presence of the Kingdom of God in the things Jesus has done.

And then Nicodemus said, "Wait, wait wait...*what?! What do you mean 'born from above?!'*" Jesus tells him that to be born from above is to be born of the Spirit, and to be born of the Spirit is to believe in Jesus and by believing in him to have eternal life.

I'm gonna say that last part again: to be born of the Spirit is to believe in Jesus. And to believe in Jesus means having eternal life. In other words, to believe in Jesus means having eternal life *now*. It's that simple, and that mysterious all at once. It's God's invitation to a new life *today*.

For many Christians, to believe in Jesus is an intellectual agreement or declaration about certain things. That it's a "once and done" decision we make. And there are faith traditions that teach that when you say, "Yes, I have faith in God" you're then "born from above" or "born again." And that's it. You're done. You don't ever have to think about it again.

But faith isn't a once and done thing and it isn't something we do ourselves - it's more than that.

In John's gospel, faith in God and being born from above and believing in Jesus aren't so much about what you do with your mind as about what you do with your heart and with your life.

In John's gospel, believing in Jesus and doing something with that in your life are inseparable. Because when God invites us into new life in Jesus, it's an invitation to live eternal life *today*. And that affects more than just what we intellectually believe.

When I was in grad school, I went on a camping trip with the campus ministry group. And there was this one guy in our group who was just...annoying. And it didn't take long before he was on everybody's last nerve.

Most of us, myself included, gave him a wide berth because, to be honest, we didn't want to be around him. But in the times that we had to be, we were polite, we kept the conversation short and just dealt with it.

And I remember one afternoon one of the young women in our group started crying. And when we asked her what was wrong, she told us that she felt like a horrible person because even though she was polite to this guy, to his face, she wasn't in her heart. And she said that she knew Jesus expected better of her.

And the rest of us were just as guilty as she was. And we knew it. I don't know what that conversation did for everyone else in the group, but for me - it didn't make the guy any less annoying. But it shifted the way I interacted with him.

We've all been in situations where what we know intellectually about our belief in Jesus doesn't always match up with the way we live it. We get in our own way. But that struggle is part of the life of faith. Coming to terms with what it means for our lives.

When God invites us to new life in Jesus, it affects more than just what we intellectually believe. Because believing in Jesus isn't so much about what you think. It's about what you do with your heart and with your life.

Believing in Jesus goes beyond spending all your time with people that you like. It means figuring out how to genuinely get along with people you don't like to be around.

Believing in Jesus goes beyond only listening to one perspective. It means listening to each other during a difficult conversation. Taking the time to see it through, not for the sake of changing minds, but for the sake of understanding.

Believing in Jesus goes beyond knowing things like poverty and racism are wrong. It means asking tough questions about the systems that keep those things in place. And wrestling with the answers when they make you uncomfortable instead of looking for an easy way out.

Believing in Jesus goes beyond checking in on your neighbors who've isolated themselves during the Coronavirus outbreak and making sure they have what they need. It also means not stigmatizing or discriminating against certain population groups.

Believing in Jesus, experiencing eternal life today, means embodying your faith. And that isn't always easy to do. For Nicodemus, because of who he was, there was genuine risk if he'd lived his belief in Jesus in the light of day. For us, if we're honest, it's sometimes just easier to have the disconnect between head and heart.

But God's invitation to new life in Jesus is more than intellectual. It's deeper than that. And what it means is that we don't have to wait to experience eternal life. Because God gives that gift to us today. Thanks be to God. Amen.