

THE HEART OF THE GOSPEL

A SERMON FOR LENT 2
SUNDAY, MARCH 16, 2014
FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH
MARIANNA, FLORIDA
TED W. LAND, INTERIM PASTOR

JOHN 3:1-17

Almost everyone who claims to be a Christian can recite John 3:16 from memory. We still occasionally see someone standing in the end zone at a football game, or in the outfield at a baseball game, holding a sign that simply states, John 3:16. I think Tim Tebow wore it on his face while playing football at Florida, and then started switching out to other verses after folks began to notice.

John 3:16 is the heart of the gospel. It tells us what we need to know: that God loved the world so much that God gave the only son. That no one who believes in the son will perish. That everyone who believes in the son will have eternal life. That is what we need to know in order to know God's plan, God's purpose, in sending the son, Jesus, in to this sinful world.

Dr. Clinton Morrison, who was Dean at Louisville Seminary when I was a student there, taught us that a text without a context is a pretext. John 3:16 may be the lone exception to that rule. But it is important in studying scripture to know the context in which each verse falls.

I daresay the average person who can quote John 3:16 at the drop of a hot would be hard pressed to put the verse in context. If I had asked you to take a pop quiz as you came into the sanctuary this morning, would you have known that Nicodemus was the person to whom Jesus said those wonderful words?

By the way, there is a rule that says that I have to tell one bad Irish joke every year in honor of Saint Patrick's Day. Here it is: do you know who the only Irishman mentioned in the Bible is? Nick O'Demus!

Well of course, Nicodemus wasn't Irish. He was a leader of the Jews, a Pharisee. That may explain why he came to Jesus under cover of darkness, to learn from Jesus, to learn about Jesus. His cohorts in the Pharisees did not believe in Jesus. They did not believe He was the Messiah, the Son of God. They wanted to eliminate Him, to kill Him, to wipe Him off the face of the earth, because they were the people of the law and they saw Jesus as one who had come to overturn the law. And in a way they were right, because Jesus came to set the law aright, to do away with all the senseless laws and invoke instead the law of love.

The Pharisees were filled with condemnation. And here comes Jesus preaching forgiveness, preaching love, sitting with tax collectors and other sinners, speaking to women, even Samaritan women, using lepers and beggars as good examples. No wonder they doubted and questioned and feared Him. But at least one among them, Nicodemus by name, wanted to hear more. At least he was open minded enough to come to Jesus and converse with Him.

Here, in this conversation, some of the greatest words of the New Testament are spoken: "You must be born again", or born from above as this translation has it.

There are some folks who don't consider us Presbyterians as "born again Christians". There are others who have compared us to the Pharisees. There are those who would limit the Holy Spirit, who don't heed the words that Jesus said right after He talked about being born again: "The wind blows where it chooses but you don't know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit." (3:8) The wind that is the spirit blows over us and changes us and blows us where it wills, not where we will, and we do best when we unfurl our sails and let the wind carry us where we are supposed to be.

To carry this metaphor further, the Pharisees kept the sail wrapped tight, and rowed the boat where they wanted to be, regardless of the wind or the waves, the tides or the current.

They were literalists. They took everything the Bible said literally, and tried to live by all the laws, even the ones that contradicted each other, because they were laws written at different times for different reasons. Nicodemus could not envision, imagine, grasp what Jesus was saying when He told Him that He had to be born again. It just isn't possible.

This is the great danger of fundamentalism in any religion, be it Christianity, Judaism, Islam, Buddhism: I'll give you an example: we Christians call ourselves Children of God, and that language is found throughout the New Testament. To a Muslim, those words are an insult and a slander against God. The concept of being a child of God, a child of anyone, through any process other than biology is foreign to them. So Jesus cannot be the son of God, and we cannot be Children of God. No more could Nicodemus see how one could be born again.

Jesus challenges Nicodemus, asking him how he as a teacher of Israel cannot know these things? He cannot know these things because his mind is too narrow, his vision too limited, his dogma too rigid, and his world too small. Jesus comes in with the wind of the spirit, and literally blows the minds of those who are too narrow open wide, He opens the eyes of those wearing blinders, He bends, nay, breaks their rigid rules, and He tells them that He came to save the whole world, not just a little band who consider themselves God's chosen people.

You know, in spite of the rise of Islam, and it has been dramatic and traumatic in the last 100 years, there are more Christians in the world today than ever before. Despite the fact that church attendance and membership is down in Europe and the United States, in Latin America, in Asia, in Africa, churches are growing, booming, giving birth to new churches.

They really believe that God so loved the world, not just the Jews, not just the Americans, not just the Presbyterians, or the Baptists, or the Methodists, or the Mormons.

They have heard the beating of the heart of the gospel, and it is to that drum beat that they march. And they sometimes march through the valley of the shadow of death, and they sometimes march through the fires of hell, but they are marching towards the life everlasting, towards the hope of the kingdom of God, towards the embracing arms of a God who loved this sin-sick world so much that God sent the only begotten son to die for our sins, all our sins, all the sins of all the world, so that those who believe might indeed be saved.

And that is all I know and all I need to know. God loves me. God forgives me. And you. And you. And you. And you. And all of you. Amen and Amen.

