

“For Jesus Sure Can Love”

Lent 2, John 3:1-17; March 8, 2020; 10:00 am
Congregational UCC, Buena Vista, CO
Rev. Rebecca K. Poos

PRAYER

God of wisdom and insight,

May the words that I speak, and the ways they are received by each of our hearts and minds, help us continue to grow into the people, and the church, that you have dreamed us to be. Amen.

START OF SERVICE: God So Loved the Cosmos

Written by **Matthew Laney**

For God so loved the world, God gave their only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may 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. - John 3:16-17

Despite their non-judgy, non-condemny tone, have you ever heard these verses used as a pretext for scaring people into salvation/heaven?

If so, here are three things that might help:

1. These verses are not angling toward heaven, hell, or purgatory. “Eternal life” in John’s gospel isn’t never-ending existence after bodily death. “Eternal life” is about abundant life here and now.
2. For John, Jesus is the door into eternal-life-right-now, also known as “salvation.”
3. These verses are not about people, at least not exclusively so. Jesus does not say, “For God so loved *human beings* that God gave...” Jesus says, “God so loved the *cosmos*” (“world” is “kosmos” in Greek). That includes flora, fauna and fungi; earth, wind and fire; rocks and clouds; protons, electrons, neutrons and quarks; blackholes, nebulae and dark matter. God loves all of it because all of it is God’s love.

One might argue these verses are reserved for beings capable of believing. But who’s to say only humans believe and worship? The Bible doesn’t say that. According to Scripture, all of nature (which includes every cell of your body) praises and worships God.

The cosmos is not separate from you or outside of you. You are it. You are God’s love. That’s what Jesus came to reveal, then and now.

3¹⁻² There was a man of the Pharisee sect, Nicodemus, a prominent leader among the Jews. Late one night he visited Jesus and said, “Rabbi, we all know you’re a teacher straight from God. No one could do all the God-pointing, God-revealing acts you do if God weren’t in on it.”

3 Jesus said, “You’re absolutely right. Take it from me: Unless a person is born from above, it’s not possible to see what I’m pointing to—to God’s kingdom.”

4 “How can anyone,” said Nicodemus, “be born who has already been born and grown up? You can’t re-enter your mother’s womb and be born again. What are you saying with this ‘born-from-above’ talk?”

5-6 Jesus said, “You’re not listening. Let me say it again. Unless a person submits to this original creation—the ‘wind-hovering-over-the-water’ creation, the invisible moving the visible, a baptism into a new life—it’s not possible to enter God’s kingdom. When you look at a baby, it’s just that: a body you can look at and touch. But the person who takes

shape within is formed by something you can't see and touch—the Spirit—and becomes a living spirit.

⁷⁻⁸ “So don't be so surprised when I tell you that you have to be 'born from above'—out of this world, so to speak. You know well enough how the wind blows this way and that. You hear it rustling through the trees, but you have no idea where it comes from or where it's headed next. That's the way it is with everyone 'born from above' by the wind of God, the Spirit of God.”

⁹ Nicodemus asked, “What do you mean by this? How does this happen?”

¹⁰⁻¹² Jesus said, “You're a respected teacher of Israel and you don't know these basics? Listen carefully. I'm speaking sober truth to you. I speak only of what I know by experience; I give witness only to what I have seen with my own eyes. There is nothing secondhand here, no hearsay. Yet instead of facing the evidence and accepting it, you procrastinate with questions. If I tell you things that are plain as the hand before your face and you don't believe me, what use is there in telling you of things you can't see, the things of God?”

¹³⁻¹⁵ “No one has ever gone up into the presence of God except the One who came down from that Presence, the Son of Man. In the same way that Moses lifted the serpent in the desert so people could have something to see and then

believe, it is necessary for the Son of Man to be lifted up—and everyone who looks up to him, trusting and expectant, will gain a real life, eternal life.

¹⁶⁻¹⁸ “This is how much God loved the world: He gave his Son, his one and only Son. And this is why: so that no one need be destroyed; by believing in him, anyone can have a whole and lasting life. God didn't go to all the trouble of sending his Son merely to point an accusing finger, telling the world how bad it was. He came to help, to put the world right again. Anyone who trusts in him is acquitted; anyone who refuses to trust him has long since been under the death sentence without knowing it. And why? Because of that person's failure to believe in the one-of-a-kind Son of God when introduced to him.

MY LORD, WHAT A PASSAGE!

John 3:16. Is there any more famous passage in the Bible? At least at sports events, right? That's the one! The one you see on huge placards, held up high in the stands by folks in the crowd trying to send a message.

What that message *is*, we're not exactly sure!

Oh, the words are clear—at least in the most common-quoted translation, but they are interpreted *many* different ways, and those swaying the breeze in the stands with the big 'ol sign may have no *clue* that their

message might not be getting across. Or, might not be as helpful as one might think.

Not as helpful as one might think because we have come to understand this passage as very *conditional* and a kind of “line in the sand” when it was not intended to be taken like that. We take this passage to be so *exclusive* and conditional, when really, it’s just the opposite!

It’s also “all about us” and what we do, rather than what God has done and is doing—in the Cosmos and in our lives.

This most-quoted versed in the bible—at least the New Testament—about grace and God’s amazing and vast love for the *whole* world, no exceptions, gets focused, if we’re not careful, on a *requirement* of us—something we have to *do* in order to be saved. Here Jesus is trying to tell us to not take things so literally, and what have we done?!

Anyone remember that old hymn:
“Ye Must Be Born Again?!”

It came rolling back to me from my childhood—all.week.long—quite the ear worm. I can hear my dad singing it now. It’s about Nickodemus coming to Jesus by night and Jesus words are the Chorus:

Ye MUST be born again!

Ye MUST be born again!

I verily, verily say unto thee,

Ye MUST be born again!

Heavy on the “MUST!”

What if? What if it’s not a dividing line at all? NOT a line in the sand. But God really meant “the **WHOLE** world?!” Not, your little world or my little world, or even our understanding of the world, of faith and salvation. Even our limited understanding of what God was about in becoming incarnate in human form in Jesus. “Becoming flesh and dwelling among us?”

What if, as Bruce Epperly puts it,

“The words of John 3:16 are more than a slogan to be placarded at sports events; they describe the divine intentionality and universality. God loves the world. God wants to save everyone. Salvation touches all creation, **embracing our cells as well as our souls**. There are no limits, or impediments to the graceful providence of God.”

God’s love is on the move and it invites us to construct larger and larger circles of love, moving from our individual salvation to saving the world. (Epperly)

NICK at NIGHT

3 ¹⁻² There was a man of the Pharisee sect, Nicodemus, a prominent leader among the Jews. Late one night he visited Jesus and said, “Rabbi, we all know you’re a teacher straight

from God. No one could do all the God-pointing, God-revealing acts you do if God weren't in on it."

So, a spiritual leader in that day, Nickodemus, comes and seeks out Jesus in the dark of night. Under cover?

Perhaps.

What was he looking for?

How did he know where to go? Did he plan this trip—seeking out the Master Teacher? The teacher sent from God? Or did he wake in the night, anxious and unable to sleep, searching for something, his mind and heart racing—restless with some kind of urge to go looking for answers. Or a person who he thought might help.

Did he find what he was looking for, or just get into a confusing word-play acrobatic with Jesus? Was he changed by the encounter?

Jill Duffield suggests that Nick got more than he bargained for, because encountering Jesus and learning what it is to find new and eternal life means turning ourselves and our preconceived notions on their heads at times. But this is good news!

"You must be born again, surrender to the elements, give up your perceived expertise, your tight control of the divine, your power and all the marks of your worldly status. *Then* you will truly see the kingdom and know in the depths of your being the love of God for you and all the world.....when we give into our yearning to know more about Jesus and go to him like Nicodemus, our deepest convictions and certainties get

upended. New birth is indeed possible. Resurrection happens. Sometimes we need to come to Jesus in the darkness in order to recognize how badly we need the light, to attune ourselves to the presence of the wind and hear the Word without distraction.

For Nick: "His disorienting encounter is reorienting his life."

JESUS IN THE NEIGHBORHOOD

What are *we* looking for, when we come to Jesus? When we seek to follow him on the Way? Whether in the cover and confidentiality of night, or the bright light of day, we seek some wisdom, some guiding light for how to live our lives. And we find it when we ask Jesus how to *live*, because he tells us how to *love*.

In The Message paraphrase of the Bible, Eugene Peterson says of Jesus, the Word who was in the beginning and who came and lived among us, that:

¹⁴ The Word became flesh and blood,
and **moved into the neighborhood.**

Generous inside and out,
true from start to finish.

Jesus moved into the neighborhood. Right smack dab among us. Next door. Across the street. In our neighbor. In *us* as we interact *with* our neighbor near and far. And, it's from there that we start.

God, the Creator of the Universe, took human form and moved into the neighborhood. To teach us how to love.

What does that look like? How do we relate to others if we love like Jesus loves?

For starters, we honor, welcome, serve with love.

Jesus' way of being was different from the world around him. His relationship with God was an intentional way to live. To spend time together. To give attention, tending, nurturing of that relationship. Jesus grew closer to God by spending time and seeking presence.

Jesus' way of love meant taking risks. Gathering around the table, hanging out at the bar, rubbing elbows with folks from every walk of life and faith, tradition and social class.

Jesus' love also turns *over* tables! Divine love is not afraid to *speak* truth in love and to *listen* to the truth in love.

Not afraid to disturb the status quo, upset the way "we've always done things" if they are not life-giving, or helpful, even hurtful to people—inside and outside our community.

CHANGE

It's easy, right? "Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength. Love your neighbor as yourself." That's all we have to do!

But, as Nick at night found, it's not so easy in lived life, real life, when the rubber meets the road. For, we might have to change if we're going to live in the deep, deep love of Jesus. For it will not let us go. But, it will also not let us stay where we are!

THE CROSS BIRTHMARK

Remember way back on Ash Wednesday (yeah, that was just last week ago or so ☺) when we put a cross of ash on our foreheads?

That Cross of ashes puts a mark on our forehead just like the cross of water at our Baptism and at our Renewal of Baptism puts a mark on our forehead by Creator God.

It is the Cross of Christ to take us through our Lenten journey into the wilderness—that time of wandering, wondering, temptation, struggle, even battle with dark forces within and without ourselves.

It would be helpful if we could physically keep it—that lovely, dusty, ashy Cross—on there all throughout Lent—Not as a sign of piety or an announcement to the world: "Hey, we are religious types!"

But, keep it there, in broad daylight, as a ***Birthmark*** of our identity as part of the body of Christ! And, proof that we are seen through **Christ's** eyes—*always* loved accepted for **who we are** deep in our core.

But, we can keep it there in our minds and hearts. And, we can look in the **mirror** every day and put it there in our mind's eye; look at our own beings through the eyes and the heart and the love of Christ.

And, *as* important! To look at **one another** through the eyes and heart of Christ—in every encounter. Like the Celts practiced so well:

“The Christ in me greets the Christ in you.”

FOLLOWING JESUS

So, we take that cross of Ash on our forehead, that birthmark, and we carry on the journey of Lent. Focused on following in the path of Jesus. Hoping it will change us. Bring us new birth, into new life.

That’s what “being born again” truly means!

Henri Nouwen says that in the following, in the modeling, is where we find the change. Change in ourselves, change in our lives—to a more loving place. We come full circle.

“Following Jesus is following the voice of the One who calls us away from useless wandering or from just sitting there. Jesus says, “Follow me.” If we choose to listen and follow, our life gradually comes into focus. It is no longer tiring. We know where to direct our energies. We know what is important and what is not. Following Jesus means to let go of the “I” and move toward the “other.” Following Jesus means to dare to move out of ourselves and to slowly let go of building our “self” up. It means being guided by the other who draws us into an entirely new way of being.”

When we speak about following Jesus we speak about a movement that comes from our heart. From the deepest place of our person. To live our life in his spirit, in his light, in his heart, but with our spirit, with our light, and with our

heart. To follow Jesus means to give our unique form and incarnation to God’s love. To live our lives as authentically as he lived his. It requires change. A new heart and a new mind.”

COMMUNITY

Finally, to live our lives as authentically as Jesus, we follow Jesus into and within community. That’s where we learn to love as most truly ourselves.

Nouwen describes this as a mosaic:

We all reflect God’s love in different ways. Together we are like a mosaic. In a mosaic one stone is bright, another stone is gold, another stone is small. If we look at it closely we can admire the beauty of each stone, but if we step back from it, we can see that all the little stones reveal a beautiful picture and tell a story that none of the stories can tell by itself. Together the different stones reflect the face of God to the world.” (Henri Nouwen, Following Jesus, p. 46ff)

And together we find we are saved.

For, salvation is not an “in or out” thing—a conditional, “us and them” dividing line in the sand, like many would have us believe. (Probably the ones swaying in the stadium with their big signs would lean toward this interpretation.)

In spite of how it’s come to be understood in our modern religious culture, getting our little religious tract and praying the 4-Step prayer of accepting Jesus

into our hearts and “getting saved,” is *not* all that Jesus meant, or scripture really understands. It’s so much bigger and better and broader than that narrow rule-book.

Rev. Owen Owens puts it well:

“Persons are saved when they respond to Christ’s inviting love, and decide to rest their entire lives in God’s care.” (Owen Owens)

And we are saved when we come together in community to “walk each other home.” To link arms and hearts in following Jesus together. In love. With Jesus in our neighborhood, showing us the Way.

There we are again. Back to where we started. “For God so loved the world. The whole world. All the little children of the world. Us. Each one of us. A unique and shining, yet a little broken, messy piece of the puzzle.

¹⁶⁻¹⁸ “This is how much God loved the world: He gave his Son, his one and only Son. And this is why: so that no one need be destroyed; by believing in him, *anyone* can have a whole and lasting life. (The Message)

Amen.

Solo: “Oh, the Deep, Deep Love of Jesus”