

“Come to the Light”

Last week I went to pick up the communion bread at Publix. In the checkout line I noticed that the lady ringing up my groceries was named “Mercy.” To strike up a conversation, I asked her if she happened to have any sisters named Faith, Joy or Hope (I actually knew a woman in law school named Faith who had sisters named Hope and Joy). Mercy smiled and said no, that her sisters did not have names like that, but that there was a reason for her name. She told me her mother had given her that name because of God’s mercy in her birth. She said her mother was, like her, a person of small frame who had to endure 34 hours of labor and deliver Mercy, an 8- pound baby, naturally.

I thought of Mercy’s story when I prepared the sermon for this week. The text of John 3:1-7, 16-21 has themes in which Jesus speaks of being born again to see God’s kingdom and of God’s great mercy in giving His only Son so that all may have eternal life.

One can understand John 3:16 as the very essence of the Gospel message. As the commentator William Barclay writes, the text tells us certain very great things. First, it tells us that the origin and the initiative of all salvation lies with God. Sometimes Christianity is presented as if God had to be pacified, as if God had to be persuaded to forgive. Sometimes the picture of God is presented as a

stern, unforgiving, legal God and a gentle, forgiving Jesus. But what the text tells us is that it was the love of God that started the salvation story. It was God who sent His son, and He sent his son because He loved the human race. At the back of everything is the love of God.

This text tells us that the mainspring of the being of God is love. It is easy to think of God as looking at humans in their disobedience and their rebellion and saying, "I'll break them and punish them and scourge them until they come back." It is easy to think of God as seeking the allegiance of men in order to satisfy His own desire for power, and His own desire for what we might see as a completely subject universe. But the tremendous thing about this text is that it shows us God acting, not for His own sake, but for ours. It was not to bring the universe to a heel. It was to satisfy His love. God is the Father who cannot be happy until his wandering children have come home. God does not smash people into submission; He yearns over them and woos them with love.

The third thing this text tells us is the width of the love of God. It was the world that God so loved. The Greek word used in this text for world is *kosmos*. It was not a nation; it was not just the good people; it was not only the people who loved Him; it was the world. The lovable and the unlovable, the lonely who have no one else to love them, the one who never thinks of God, the one who rests in the

love of God and the one who spurns the love of God---all are included in this vast love of God. As St. Augustine wrote, “God loves each one of us as if there was only one of us to love.”

John 3:16 came of age, as I did, in the American evangelicalism of the ‘70s, ‘80s, and ‘90s. The verse played a quiet role in the global church until the Second Great Awakening in the United States. It was not until the evangelical wave of the late 20th century that it became the singular words of the gospel in American life. Billy Graham recited the verse at crusades attended by thousands, who were often gifted copies of John’s gospel. Sports fans were broadcast across the United States wearing shirts and carrying signs emblazoned with “John 3:16.” This is the celebrity verse which roared through American stadiums.

But we must be careful. By turning the phrase “born again” into celebrity status, we risk losing the powerful offer of new life contained in Jesus’ words. Jesus says no one can see the kingdom of heaven without being born from above. The reader is asked to interpret this complicated statement. It is complicated because it is a new mode of life for which there is no precedent, life being born of water and the Spirit. It is life regenerated through the cross of Jesus.

Jesus’ offer of his life through being lifted up on the cross makes “eternal life” possible for those who believe. To have eternal life is to live life no longer

defined by blood or by the will of the flesh or by human will, but by God. It does not mean immortality of the earthly body, but it is a way of describing life as lived in the unending presence of God. What is important to realize is that eternal life, when one believes in Christ's salvation, is not held in abeyance until His return, but it begins now in the present. The offer of new life, "to be born," has only one source, Jesus' offer of his own life. To be born from above is to be born again through the lifting up of Jesus on the cross.

This is a demanding invitation because, if accepted, it means the recipient must be willing to be changed by the text, to welcome new life in the terms offered by the text. Belief in Jesus changes one's life so that one can have a new beginning that comes with a recognition of the full character of God that is revealed in Jesus. To believe in Jesus is to believe that Jesus is the Son of God and that God so loved the world that God gave the Son as a gift. The God revealed in Jesus is a God whose love knows no bounds and who asks only that one receive the gift.

We must understand that it is each person's choice as to whether to receive this gift of eternal life. Some observers complain that God condemns some people to eternal damnation, that that's not fair. It is clear from John 3:17-21 that each person has a choice of accepting eternal life, and it is God's intent that each person be saved. It is not God who condemns; it is the person who condemns himself by

not accepting the gift of eternal life. The alternative to eternal life is to perish.

There is no middle ground in the Johannine vision. If one believes, one's present life is altered by the gift of eternal life. If one does not believe, one perishes.

We are also presented with the metaphorical language of light and dark. In life there is a balance between light and darkness. To love darkness more than light is the same as not believing and it results in judgment. Who people are is determined by their response to Jesus. Nicodemus did not believe that night he came to Jesus; therefore, he remains in the darkness. He came to Jesus at night and will stay in the night. Those who choose Jesus and His offer of salvation come to the light and have eternal life.

As we study this text, we understand how important it is that we take the message of John 3:16 to all persons. Eternal life is available to all, and all must make a choice. With today's communications such as the internet and smart phones, all corners of the world can be reached to hear the message of salvation offered by the gospel of John.

The words about judgment with which the passage today concludes (vv.17-21) underscore the seriousness of God's offer. The seriousness of this text's invitation was grasped by African-American slaves. Nicodemus' nighttime visit to Jesus offered an important biblical precedent for their own worship gatherings.

Slaves were allowed to participate in formal Christian worship only at their masters' discretion; they were not allowed to have their own worship and rarely were allowed access to the Bible (of course most were denied the ability to learn how to read). The slaves held clandestine meetings at night, known as the "invisible institution." These meetings continued even after emancipation. The slaves saw in Nicodemus' nighttime visit that it was possible to come to Jesus even when the powers forbade it. Nicodemus was a model, someone who was willing to act on his own against the authorities.

But the slaves' faith surpassed that of Nicodemus. Nicodemus' night visit was only exploratory, and in this story of John 3, he does not understand the invitation Jesus extends to him. The slaves, on the other hand, understood and embraced what Jesus had to offer. They were willing to risk their safety and their very lives to come to Jesus. The slaves are a powerful example of those who "come to the light" so that it may clearly be seen that their deeds have been done in God (John 3:21).

A century after the slaves' emancipation, as African-Americans continued their struggle for full participation in American society, in September 1954 a young Martin Luther King, Jr. moved from Boston to Montgomery, Alabama. This

was the city that would call him from the pulpit to the street, that would cement his call to follow Jesus into the work of justice.

Dr. King's first week in the pulpit at Dexter Avenue Baptist Church, he preached on John 3:16. That first sermon in his new home bears signs of the voice that one year later would be heard all over the globe---of the man who would stand on the shoulders of Rosa Parks and thousands of other Black women to lead the Montgomery bus boycott of 1955 and 1956 and would help change the world.

Let us listen to Dr. King's words that first Sunday in the pulpit. "God's love has breadth," said King, "It is a big love; it's a broad love...God's love is too big to be limited to a particular race. It is too great to be encompassed by a single nation. God is a universal God." In that Montgomery church, King told a different story of the verse. He leaned on it as a source of politically active theology. He further said, "This unlimited love has been a ray of hope and has given a sense of belonging to the hundreds of disinherited people who proclaim, like the enslaved preacher who risked everything to teach his enslaved congregants in the shadows of the plantation and told them, 'You ain't no slave...But you are God's children.'"

As we close today and I reflect on my own spiritual journey, I must admit that for much of my life, I did not know that the John 3:16 of King's sermon existed. When I was called into the ministry some ten years ago, I went to a

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seminary which taught me much more about the social justice contained in this most famous Bible verse. I learned that Dr. King's words made this familiar verse into a renewed cry for God's great love, a love big enough and vast enough to be for me and for the whole world. As we learned several weeks ago, part of living the Christian life is taking risks. Will you today take that risk to make sure John 3:16 is big enough for you and your witness to the whole world?