

“Again and Again, God Loves First” | Rev. Michele Ward
Sunday, March 14, 2021 | Fourth Sunday of Lent
Numbers 21:4-9 | John 3:1-21

Brown Memorial Park Avenue Presbyterian Church | Baltimore, MD

John 3:16 is arguably the most memorized verse in the Bible, and arguably the most misunderstood. It appears, on its own, as if the rest of the dialogue and the story around this single statement of Jesus is the good news in a nutshell. But without the rest of the conversation, this sentence is left in an interpretative vacuum, easy to slap on bumper stickers and available to argue the process of conversion.

But when we look at where John places this verse in the gospel account, we learn that a religious leader named Nicodemus inspires Jesus to speak these words. Not only that, but this conversation happens directly after Jesus overturned the tables in the temple, drove out the moneychangers, and directly challenged the financial habits of the religious institution of the temple. I have always wondered if Nicodemus was there that day when Jesus was angry and cleansed the temple. Can you imagine if this was your first encounter with Jesus? Would his anger and his prophecy about being raised up in three days scare or fascinate you? Would you seek him out or avoid him?

Regardless of whether Nicodemus was at the temple or not, he seemed to have enough insider information to find out where Jesus was staying and arrange to meet with him at night, when no one could see Nicodemus seeking Jesus out. He goes to Jesus under the cover of night because he wants to remain hidden. He does not want anyone to see him, a religious leader, visiting this backwater rabbi from Galilee, the very one that turned over the money changer tables and livestock and way of economic gain particularly given his role as a Pharisee.

But as he asked Jesus questions, Nicodemus does not seem to get closer to answering his questions. He responds with literal questions about birth, not understanding the metaphor of being born from above. He does not understand what it means to be born of both water and spirit and asks Jesus how these things can be. I find that I relate very much to Nicodemus as a human being with a literal mind. I find it challenging to understand the abstract Jesus in the Gospel of John, but as we've been engaging in this gospel in weekly Bible study I have found deeper resonance in this Gospel that there is deep love and deep presence that Jesus is inviting us to live. He tells Nicodemus the things he is asking underneath his other questions. I love the question that Jesus asks him back. "If I have told you about earthly things and you do not believe how can you believe if I tell you about heavenly things?" Jesus is claiming something quite absurd, I think, in this moment: that being born of water and spirit is an earthly thing being full of kinds of life is an earthly thing, he continues to tell him that just like Moses lifted up the serpent Jesus would be lifted up, referring to his own crucifixion which would be come at the very end of the Gospel of John. Referring to himself as this healing power because the serpent

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was a healing force for the people in the same way that Jesus is claiming that his lifting up will be in that time and place.

I find this story so shattering and jolting because it happens right after this temple encounter where Jesus upends the economic ways of the temple. I found myself reading a reflection by Richard Rohr this week called “Economy of Grace” and I wanted to share a quote from that with you this morning. Richard Rohr writes, “God’s freely given grace is a humiliation to the ego because free gifts say nothing about being strong, superior, or moral. Thus only the soul can understand grace, never the mind or the ego.”¹ I couldn’t help but think in economic terms this week thinking about Jesus overturning the tables and then turning around and telling Nicodemus what his economy way. I almost feel like this story is Jesus’s business plan for what grace looks like in his economic world. It is possible to be born multiple ways, multiple times. It is possible to receive this gift freely and that Nicodemus does not need to crawl back inside his mother’s womb and be born again.

That is grace. There is nothing that Nicodemus has to do to earn it. He does not need to understand it intellectually. He does not need to prove his worth. He does not need to work harder or smarter. He simply needs to receive it. And that is where he gets stuck. This kind of grace is the kind of grace that Jesus offers every single one of us. This is the kind of grace Jesus has for each of us.

It is so hard to receive it because our economy is not built on receiving things that we do not deserve. We’ve all been taught that we must earn what we have, that an equal amount of work will sometimes equate with an equal amount of success. If we have enough privilege and enough luck and enough grit, our culture tells us to pull ourselves up by our bootstraps to pursue the American dream that way. We are told that we are capable of bettering ourselves if we just work hard enough and do enough, but there is nothing about that at all in John 3.

Nothing about anything that he needs to do as a person differently besides believe. He does not need to memorize any more or teach more or perform more in the temple. He simply needs to receive this grace. And I believe that there is something inside Nicodemus that lives inside each of us because we were all made from that love--the love that grace stems from--and because we are made from that love, there is a piece of our heart, our soul, that understands what that grace is and longs for it and reaches out to God for it. So much stuff gets in the way of that, all those expectations culturally or economically that I laid out get in the way of our own internal messaging about our value or about

¹Richard Rohr, “Economy of Grace,” May 23, 2017. Accessed March 11, 2021.
<https://cac.org/an-economy-of-grace-2017-05-23/>

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what God thinks of us gets in the way of receiving that grace. And perhaps, even the way that this very passage has been taught to you before might be getting in the way of receiving that grace.

But the good news I have for you today is that that grace is free. And like our friend Kid President said earlier, and like Andrew said in the baptismal liturgy, “We were all made for love. To be love and to give love.” The only way this works is because God loved us first. The very source of love giving us the ability to receive that kind of grace giving us the ability to extend that kind of grace. So I ask you now to put yourself in that nighttime conversation with Jesus, asking Jesus questions like, “how can these things be?” Free yourself from what is holding you back from receiving that freedom of grace. Allow God to love you the way that God has loved you always. Amen.