

John 3:1-18

March 12, 2017

I have this friend who calls me whenever his life hits a rough patch. Lest you are worried that I'm talking about you ... Lest you start looking around to figure out who I'm talking about ... He's not a member of our church and I don't think has ever been here. He called me again not long ago because things in his life were falling apart ... once more. Afterward, I couldn't help but want to say to him something like this: you are pretty remarkable. You and Jesus are the only two people I know who are perfect and sinless. Jesus is perfect, because He is the sinless Son of God. He is, because everything that happens in his life is always someone else's fault. It's never something he did or failed to do.

The epistle today talks about Abraham. How did many of the people of Paul's day regard Father Abraham? Maybe they would call him St. Abraham. After all, he was the perfect patriarch. God came to him and gave him a cryptic command and he dropped everything and obeyed and went. He trusted God. He worshipped God. He obeyed God and God blessed him! They thought if you want God's blessing, now you know what you have to do. You have to trust and you have to obey.

So, let's ask this question: did Abraham find favour with God on account of his works? Did he have something to boast about? Did he have a claim on God? What kind of leverage did he have? How do you think God sees you? God sees me at my Sunday best, all neat and tidy, sitting up straight, paying attention, singing the hymns. Think back over the last week. Recollect an ugly day when you said something nasty to the sales clerk or when you swore at the driver in front of you. When you yelled at your kids and kicked the dog. Is it any wonder that Scripture warns us about how devastating our tongue can be? The tongue is ... *a restless evil, full of deadly poison. With it we bless our Lord and Father, and with it we curse people who are made in the likeness of God.*

Now imagine that God sees you that way all the time. Rude, self-centred, loud, ill-mannered, He sees all your sin, He knows all your faults, there is nothing hidden from His all-seeing eyes. He hears every complaint and witnesses every tantrum. Now, all of a sudden, you don't feel so good. You thought you were doing so well. You thought you were making progress and getting your life cleaned up.

In John 3, Nicodemus comes to Jesus by night. It's hard to know why he's really there. Is it curiosity? Is it a quest for spiritual truth? Has Nicodemus been delegated to go to Jesus and try and catch Him in a carefully crafted trap? The leaders of the Pharisees have already objected to the message and ministry of John the Baptist. They have already stood up against Jesus when He cleansed the temple of the moneychangers. They challenged His authority then...what gives you the right? Are these smooth-talking words from Nicodemus just a ploy to catch Jesus off guard? Listen to Jesus in John 3. He doesn't let himself get distracted by less than important debates and discussions. Instead, He goes right to the heart of what is really important. Don't rely on how others see you. Don't depend on how you see yourself. Ask yourself ... how does God see you? And remember, He has seen you at less than your Sunday best. He has seen you and me at our absolute worst.

So, how do I connect with the kingdom of God? "What must I do to be saved?" Jesus in a very simple way takes Nicodemus right to heart of the matter. His life as a Pharisee was one of trying to create the perfect, holy life that he might hold it up before God, that he might be able to stand before God and say, "Look what I did." "I'm so proud of myself!" Nicodemus thought he had the answer: What must I do? Be perfect, be a Pharisee, keep all the commandments. I guess he never read Isaiah 64:6, "*All of us have become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous acts are like filthy rags; we all shrivel up like a leaf, and like the wind our sins sweep us away.*" Or if he did, he thought it was about someone else.

The truth is, any attempt at self-righteousness is doomed to failure. As perfect and holy and acceptable your life might look, your life of good works will not save you. In fact, there is nothing that you can do that can save you.

No one can enter the kingdom of God unless he is born of water and the Spirit.” St. Paul would later write, “if salvation could be gained through the law, Christ died for nothing.” If the Pharisees were on the right track, then the road to the cross was unnecessary. Nicodemus needed to come to terms with the reality that everything he’d done wasn’t good enough. He had to start over. You have to be born again.

After King David committed adultery with Bathsheba and then murder to cover up his sin, what did he pray? Lord, cut off my feet so I can’t be led into sin? Lord, cut out my eyes so I can no longer look at a woman in lust? No, he knows the root of his sin, and what he has to get rid of. So he prays, “*Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me. Cast me not away from your presence and take not your Holy Spirit from me.*” What David really needed was a heart transplant. David knew that he needed to start over, to be reborn! That’s what Nicodemus needed too. David also prayed, “*Restore to me the joy of your salvation.*”

Do you think Nicodemus knew the joy of salvation as he worked and struggled by his own strength to earn heaven by living a perfect life? Or was he, like Luther in the monastery, frightened of God and angry at God because God had set a standard of perfection that was impossible to attain? When Nicodemus came to Jesus that night, he didn’t need a pat on the back. What he needed was a good look in the mirror of God’s law and a strong dose of reality. The way to the kingdom of God does not lie in being good enough. It lies in the grace of God and the power of His Holy Spirit, whose work we call conversion or regeneration. It is His work to give spiritual life to those who are dead in sin. Without that rebirth, without that new and changed heart that trusts in Christ for salvation instead of your own goodness, you cannot be saved. Salvation isn’t by works. It is by grace through faith.

Can you begin to comprehend the depth of that all so familiar verse, “*God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life*”?

We have convinced ourselves that God sees us at our Sunday best. In reality, He has seen us at our worst, in all the ugliness of sin. We shout and fight and kick at one another. We harbour evil thoughts. Cruel words pour from our mouths. How can God love something, someone, as ugly as me? Why does God want anything to do with sinners? Why does He care about this sinful, fallen world? How can we begin to comprehend the incredible love of God for sinners?

I can study the mystery of the Trinity with an academic detachment. I can examine the work of the Holy Spirit as He calls me by the Gospel and enlightens me with His gifts. Neither of these is very painful but when I start to unwrap and look at my wounds and my sins that hurts. It’s like peeling off a Band-Aid to reveal the pus and infection underneath it. What do we see underneath our prim and proper exterior?

Nicodemus was a Pharisee, trained to see the sin and corruption in others and equally well versed in hiding his own under a veneer of self-righteousness. But if we don’t remove the veneer, we will never appreciate the depth of the love God has for sinners. God so loved the world ... it’s not a feeling, it’s a verb, an action word. The mystery is in the heart of God. He has a big heart. He has a heart for the world. He has a heart for the lost. Matthew 9:36: “When Jesus saw the crowds, He had compassion on them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd”

Because God so loved the world, look at what He did. He gave His only Son to suffer and die for the sins of the world. Don’t go past those words too quickly. Watch as three disciples follow Jesus into the dark recesses of the Garden of Gethsemane. Jesus moves slowly. White knuckles protrude from tightened fists. His head hangs in weariness. Peter, James and John glance at each other, wondering what to do. Their teacher has never been like this before. They saw Him cry when His friend Lazarus died. They saw Him cry only a week ago as He entered Jerusalem. He sobbed out loud over the neediness there. It was a cry laced with sadness, but not despair.

This is different. Overwhelming sorrow consumes the Christ. He utters, “My soul is deeply grieved to the point of death.” What must it be like to grieve to the point of death? Is it physical pain or mental anguish? Is it not also an agony of the soul as Jesus feels life itself slipping away? Here is the man of sorrows, acquainted with grief. Here is the One who didn’t think equality with God was something to cling to, but humbled himself and took on the form of a servant. Does He now regret that decision? Does He long for the days when the angels sang in His exalted royal presence?

Is the love that once sent Him into a woman’s womb now faltering, even a little bit? No! What do we call what is now written on the face of Christ? Is it the mingling of love and pain that only God could endure? There is love-pain written on the face of Christ. It will play itself out to the bitter end. Anything less would leave God’s children hanging in the balance. Anything less would leave sinners, us, under the unending curse of sin and death. This He cannot allow. And so, in some strange way, God the Father is pleased to crush His only Son. This is the love of God for sinners/

God loves this sinful world, filled with hatred and murder. Filled with immorality and dishonesty in every walk of life. No one cares for one another. Every imagination of the thoughts of man’s heart was only evil all the time. God loves me and you. He knows what our hearts are like. He knows our lips and our tongues. He knows how our lips run toward evil. How can God love such sinners? The answer cannot be found in us. There is nothing in us to make us worthy or deserving of God’s love. The “why” of God’s love is in God. And how wondrous that love is. It is a love willing to give, even if nothing is given back. God gave us His Son. He gave the best for the worst, for the fallen, for the corrupt, for His enemies. That’s why it is so hard for us to grasp or understand this most familiar verse of Scripture.

Why do you think Jesus stumbled under the weight of the cross? He is not only carrying the weight of the cross, He is, in reality, carrying all that it represents. It represents the eternal abandonment we all deserve because of our sins. Your Father in heaven has put Jesus on the cross and given us a promise. He has rescued us from the domain of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of His beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins. Turn to Jesus in the midst of your need. Look to Him from the midst of your trouble and you will be rescued. God’s love for the world put Jesus on the cross. His love for you and me in spite of our sins did it so that our lives might be changed, that we might be reborn, by water and the Spirit into a new and wondrous new life that will go on forever.