

And so...

John 3.16 is, arguably, one of the best known verses in the Bible. “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.” (John 3.16, NRSV) In the 1990’s it was de rigeur to see banners held up with “John 3.16” at professional sporting events. There was, in fact, one self-proclaimed Sports Evangelist called Rollen Stewart, nicknamed “Rainbow Man”, because of the wig and t-shirt he would wear at college football games*.

The placards proclaiming “John 3.16) became synonymous with “we believe in you, team”. It was a blatant evangelism tool that, with time, began distorting the initial message of the Gospel.

Let’s go back to the beginning of John, Chapter 3. Nicodemus, a well-respected member of the Sanhedrin who factors prominently during Holy Week. Nicodemus has come to see Jesus, under cover of night, to ask Jesus some questions about his faith; and to test a burgeoning theory that Jesus was sent from God. Nicodemus’ story is not fully told, but we can glean that he wanted to learn more from Jesus, but had to do so in private, lest the other members of the Sanhedrin saw him. It’s easy for us to criticize Nicodemus, yet we should also remember that he ensured Jesus had a proper burial and spoke up for him to the other members of the Sanhedrin.

Jesus is speaking to Nicodemus and trying to teach him that in order to fully understand the greatness of God he must die to his old life and be born to new life through Jesus.

Their conversation unfolds like this “Nicodemus said to him, ‘How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother’s womb and be born?’ Jesus answered, ‘Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit. What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit.’” (John 3.4-6, NRSV) This has often been misinterpreted to mean being “born again”, when in fact, it is referring to baptism.

The priest or minister will baptise with water, then the Holy Spirit arrives to bless the one being baptised, just as it did, in the form of a dove, as Jesus' baptism.

So what?

My Spiritual Advisor has a small brass plaque on her desk that was given to her by her Field Education professor, upon her convocation. She and the rest of her class received this small plaque which contained two words...SO WHAT?

So often we spend time and energy in discussion, or even in arguments about the meaning of words and phrases. And at the end of the day, does it really matter? Sometimes, it does. It really and truly does. Yet other times, if you run it past the "SO WHAT" test, it dissolves into the ether.

The use of the word "SO" in today's gospel, changes everything. Theologian Scott Stein, in his article "So, misunderstood" writes

Words like "so" are why so many people find learning English so difficult. Wouldn't you say so? In most English Bibles John 3:16 begins like this: "For God so loved the world". Read this way there are two possible meanings. One is for "so" to mean the extent or amount of God's love for the world, as in the Message version of the New Testament which says:

"This is **how much** God loved the world: He gave his one and only Son."

The second is for "so" to mean the manner or way that God loved the world, as in the New Living Translation which says:

"For **this is how** God loved the world: He gave his one and only Son."

From the blog "Prepared to Answer" (www.preparedtoanswer.org)

So...which one is it?

Surprisingly, it's the second one. **This is how** God loved the world. God gave his one and only Son. Jesus wasn't sent to condemn, but to show God's earthly children the way to salvation...the way to perfect freedom. God didn't do this so we could owe God. Nope. Not even a little bit.

God is not a score-keeping, clipboard holding, ledger-scribbling God. God doesn't need us. God doesn't need anything. Yet, we very much need God. And Jesus. And the Holy Spirit.

Images of light and dark permeate John's Gospel. From the fourth verse of the first Chapter John's Gospel speaks of light and dark. "in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. 5The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it." (John 1.4-5, NRSV) John is referred to as the one who was to testify to the light. He himself was NOT the light.

Nicodemus comes to see Jesus under cover of night. Jesus challenges him "And this is the judgement, that the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil. For all who do evil hate the light and do not come to the light, so that their deeds may not be exposed. But those who do what is true come to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that their deeds have been done in God.'" (John 3.19-21, NRSV)

At Seminary there was a popular phrase "If you cannot do it in the light, you shouldn't be doing it in the dark".

So what?

Well, if you are avoiding people seeing what you are doing, just as Nicodemus was avoiding being seen by his colleagues, should you really be doing it? And yet, Nicodemus, wanted, or actually NEEDED to learn from Jesus because he was curious, yet also quite certain that Jesus was the rightful King of the Jews. If Nicodemus was to stake his reputation on this itinerant preacher from Nazareth, he needed to know, without a doubt, that Jesus was who Nicodemus thought he was.

And so...

And so Jesus speaks to Nicodemus as both Rabbi (teacher) and as a peer.

The reference to Moses and the serpent is quite provocative. The Israelites were complaining to Moses about the lack of water and the terrible food. They were bored and tired and really needing to know "Are we there YET!"

Moses, by now, has had just about enough of the complaining. God hears the complaining and sends fiery serpents to bite those complaining, thus ending their complaints by killing them. Those who had not been bitten go to Moses, apologising and asking Moses to intercede with God. Which Moses does. And God tells Moses what to do. Make a serpent of bronze, place it at the top of a pole and anyone who is bitten and looks at it will not die. (Numbers 21.6-9)

Moses interceded on behalf of humanity. God sent Jesus to show how much we are loved. Yet, instead of understanding the gift we were given; instead of embracing the love that Jesus brought to the world, we taunted him, stripped him, flogged him and hung him on a tree to die.

And so...

And so, Jesus descended to the dead, or Hell, or Sheol and did battle with the devil for our souls. Jesus won. He rose from the dead.

So what?

Jesus is speaking to Nicodemus in advance of any of this. Jesus knows his death is imminent, and is trying to teach as many of his followers and believers as he can, in order that they can continue spreading the message of love, from God, for humanity.

And so, Nicodemus begins to understand just who Jesus is AND what he is doing on earth. Jesus does not condemn or chastise Nicodemus for coming to see him in darkness. Rather, he teaches Nicodemus, knowing that what Nicodemus learns will stay with him. So much so, that he interceded on Jesus' behalf...at first to stop the crucifixion, and then to ensure Jesus had a proper burial.

The part that often gets overlooked, or misunderstood in John 3.16, is our ego. We don't save people. Only God can do that. We don't condemn people. Only God can do that. And so, we should not, no, we MUST NOT judge people. Only God can do that.

And so, we need to check our ego; step back and know that Jesus is the son of God. He was sent that God may show the world how God loves us. This is HOW God loved the world. That Jesus was sent to show us. The way to salvation and perfect freedom.

And so... for that we can reply in only one way - "Thanks be to God". Amen.

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Lent 4
John 3.14-21