

Introduction

Check-in & Introductions

The Whole World, No Exceptions

Sermon Reflection Notes

The scripture lesson this week includes one of the most recognized Biblical verses, John 3:16. Even those who have not stepped foot into a church in years, or ever, are likely to recognize the words: *“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.”*

It is easy to forget though, that God loves the world—present tense—when we hear news every day of pain, conflict, heartbreak, evil, and despair. People around the globe are at war, nation verses nation, brother and sister against brother and sister. It can seem unfathomable that God loves this world, as broken and hurting as it. And yet, this one verse, tucked into a larger, more complex, story, reminds us again that God loves us. All of us.

We read this week in our Lenten Devotional of the story of the lost sheep and the shepherd who looks for that one, leaving the others behind. We were asked: *“Are we capable of realizing that God loves all of us sheep the same? Are we capable of acknowledging that, in God’s eyes, we aren’t set apart or above the rest of the flock, that we are the same as our neighbor when it comes to God’s affection?”* We don’t like to imagine that we are no more special than our neighbor; we especially don’t like it when we don’t particularly like our neighbor. But the verse is clear: God loves us...all of us.

We have the example of Jesus to follow into this radical way of loving God and loving neighbor. Jesus did not just talk about love; he embodied it in his life and ministry, touching lepers, squatting by a woman about to be stoned, eating with the least and the lost. *“Jesus’ role as he understood it was not to lead the people in glory but to suffer for them in love”* (*Faces of Jesus: A Life Story*, Frederick Buechner).

We may get mired in the questions like Nicodemus, trying to take the words Jesus shared literally. How exactly is one ‘born again’ we may wonder. What exactly does it mean to be ‘born of the Spirit’? They can be irritating questions, ones we cannot answer and also cannot let go. Jesus pushes back, against Nicodemus and us, challenging us to think outside the box, to draw deeper into the mystery that is life and death and divine. Jesus doesn’t provide simple answers. He invites us to go deeper, to ask more questions, to seek him, to trust the love of God. Jesus poured out the love of God in acts of forgiveness and reconciliation, in works that fed the hungry, in love that others could not imagine and could not stay away from.

But Jesus didn’t stop there. He had the audacity to say to his followers: you must go and do likewise. Because, as a follower of Jesus, our role is not to bask in the glory and love that is unconditional, unearned, and unwavering. Our role is to display the love that is offered so freely to us to others, through our deeds and actions, our words and conversations, and our missions and ministries. Our role is to display God’s love through the living of our very lives, to make the love of God visible in us and through us...for *all* the world. No exceptions.

Scripture

John 3:1-17

¹Now there was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews. ²He came to Jesus by night and said to him, "Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God, for no one can do these signs that you do unless God is with that person." ³Jesus answered him, "Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above."
⁴Nicodemus 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?" ⁵Jesus answered, "Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit. ⁶What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit. ⁷Do not be astonished that I said to you, 'You must be born from above.' ⁸The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit." ⁹Nicodemus said to him, "How can these things be?" ¹⁰Jesus answered him, "Are you the teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things? ¹¹"Very truly, I tell you, we speak of what we know and testify to what we have seen, yet you do not receive our testimony. ¹²If I have told you about earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you about heavenly things? ¹³No one has ascended into heaven except the one who descended from heaven, the Son of Man. ¹⁴And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, ¹⁵that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.
¹⁶"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.
¹⁷"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.

Discussion Questions

1. We have lived many years—some of us more than others. Whatever our age, we are sometimes tempted to linger in 'the womb.' What lack of imagination keeps us from being born anew?
2. What is there in the darkness of the womb that causes us to stay there? What helps us to continue along the birth canal until we are born anew?
3. Who do we find it most difficult to see through God's eyes? What helps us to move beyond our own limited vision?
4. What does the word love mean?
5. What is radical and life-changing about love?
6. How do we fully trust in the unconditional love of God? How does that love change our presence in the world?

Closing Prayer

Jesus loves me this I know...As children, we learned the song. But it has been our failure of imagination to accept the truth of your love, O God. Jesus loves the little children, all the children of the world. But it has been our failure of imagination to accept the truth of your love, O God.

Give us imagination to accept your invitation to know that we are beloved, redeemed, reconciled, and made whole. Help us to live with the staggering freedom of being fully your beloved; help us to be signs of your gospel good news to the worlds around us and beyond us. Jesus loves me. Jesus loves all of us. Help us to embody that love, so that the world becomes your kingdom on earth, even as it is in heaven. We pray in the name of Jesus, the Christ. Amen.

"There is more than enough love to change the world."