

“The Light of God’s Love”

March 14, 2021

Scripture: John 3:14-21

There are some passages of scripture that are so familiar, so deeply engrained in us, that they begin to sound more like bumper stickers or cliches, than the revelations of truth they’re meant to be. I find John 3:16 to be like that. It’s often displayed in crowds at sports events. (Remember those...crowds I mean?) I remember often seeing someone wearing a rainbow wig holding a big sign. The assumption, I think, was everything we need to know about the gospel can be summed up in that one verse. A lot of people believe that.

The problem I find with it is it promotes a kind of transactional faith. The traditional version of it is: “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 comes across as a sort of *quid pro quo*; so long as we agree to believe in Jesus we get the prize of eternal life. And of course “eternal life” is understood as a reward after we die. That verse is short and to the point and easy to memorize, but is the gospel meant to be transactional? Or is it meant to be transformational?

I think Jesus is inviting us to be transformed. When Nicodemus comes to him by night, as he does in this chapter of John, he’s not looking to make a deal; he’s looking for change. And sometimes change can only come when we hear things in a new way. That’s why I used this translation. By hearing this familiar section of John in a new way we can become open to new layers of meaning.

A couple of things jump out at me in John 3:16 in this translation. First, we discover that to “believe” in Jesus is equated with trusting him. Believing is something we do with our heads; trusting is something we do with our hearts. We’re not asked just to agree with what we’re told about Jesus by the Bible or by the Church. We’re asked to put our trust in him, even if we don’t fully understand who he is. We’re invited into a relationship with him.

Second, this translation avoids the idea of “eternal life” as something reserved for after we die. “A whole and lasting life” implies a way of living in the here and now. Jesus isn’t concerned with what happens to us after we die; we’re in God’s hands then and have nothing to fear. What matters is the life we’re invited to live now. We can remain on a destructive path, putting our trust only in ourselves and going it alone, or we can trust him and how God is present in him and discover a life that’s lasting and complete. The choice isn’t between eternal life and eternal destruction; it’s between living in the light of God’s love or hiding from it. The point is God’s love is never withdrawn.

Jesus offers transformation, not a transaction. And that transformation is embodied in the cross. In his book *The Universal Christ*, Father Richard Rohr, a Franciscan priest and spiritual writer, describes the path of transformation as one that requires great love and great suffering. He

writes, “Great love and great suffering bring us back to God, with the second normally following the first, and I believe this is how Jesus himself walked humanity back to God. It is not just a path of resurrection rewards, but always a path that includes death and woundedness.” (Rohr, p. 112) This is why Jesus makes reference to the story of Moses lifting the image of a snake on a pole in the desert.

In that story, an obscure one for many of us found in the book of Numbers, the children of Israel, after complaining about a lack of food, are set upon by poisonous serpents and many are killed. In response to their pleas for help God instructs Moses to create this object and lift it up so that those who are bitten can look on it and live. Suffering and death, embodied in the image of the serpent on a pole, becomes the means of preserving their lives. Jesus says in the same way the “son of man” must be lifted up to show us the path to real life.

By entering our woundedness, God becomes one with us and invites us out of the darkness of destruction and into the light of love. This is how, not just how much, but how God loves the world. God loves the world by being emptied of power and submitting to weakness and suffering. That submission is the God-light streaming into the world. But rather than blinding us and causing us to cower, it warms and exposes us. It helps us to see ourselves as we really are, beloved of God, and it allows us to see in others, in their suffering and struggle, the true presence of Christ.

And what I really appreciate about this translation from Eugene Peterson’s *The Message* is it avoids writing off those who reject the light as evil but describes them as addicted to denial and illusion. That’s something we can all relate to. And it’s something we can all recover from. We’re not lost forever. The possibility exists that we’ll one day reach the limits of our illusions and denials and find a path into the light of God’s love.

I don’t know what sort of denial or illusion Nicodemus lived with, but I know giving them up and stepping into the light is how we’re transformed. What are the illusions and denials that mark your life? Are you convinced that financial security and career success are all you need for a whole and lasting life? Are you laboring under the illusion that you can make your parents or your spouse or your children happy if you just work harder and produce more? Are you living the denial that you have no responsibility for the well-being of others in need, that their condition has nothing to do with your own? Is the darkness closing in on you, leaving you empty and alone? God has shown us what love is; the path to transforming your life is waiting for you. Trust Christ. Step onto the path of love and suffering he offers, and let your recovery begin.

Today we celebrate the ritual of love and suffering handed down to us over countless generations. At the table of Christ’s supper, we encounter the depths of God’s love for us. In his woundedness, his body broken, his blood poured out, we’re invited to become one with God, invited into communion, by taking Christ’s body into our body; walking the path he walks into the light of God’s love. Today your journey begins.