

“Made for Good Works”

March 10, 2024

Scripture: Ephesians 2:1-10; John 3:14-21

There may be no better-known verse from the New Testament than John 3:16. It's a favorite especially among evangelical and fundamentalist Christians. In fact, it's so iconic that if you watch a golf tournament on TV or sometimes a baseball game you might notice a fan in the line of the camera holding up a sign that just says, “Jn. 3:16” confident that everyone knows what they're talking about. This verse has the unique quality of affirming God's amazing love and generosity with the subtle threat of eternal damnation for those who discount it. For many it represents the final word on the conditions for salvation: “everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.” That's the bottom line.

There's a strain of Christianity that likes to offer God's grace with one hand while holding the threat of a billy club with the other. It's not exactly good news; it's sort of good news, but feels a little shady. My biggest objection to it is that it comes across as formulaic. All we have to do is say the right things in the right order and we solve the puzzle of salvation. We win eternal life if we just believe the right way. But if we get it wrong...watch out!

When our faith life is reduced to a set of belief statements, when all that's required of us is to sign the dotted line and sit back to do nothing, I can't help but feel we've missed the point of Jesus' ministry. And I think we're misinterpreting Jesus' words as we find them in the gospels. We have this need to pin down the single claim that will answer all our questions. We don't like ambiguity or room for doubt. And we certainly don't like the idea that something is expected from us in response to Jesus' words.

But throughout the gospels, including in John's gospel, Jesus invites his followers to act on their awareness of God's kingdom. We might even say that it's through their actions that God's kingdom is manifest. In other words, the presence of the kingdom relies on our actions in the world, on our good works.

If you were raised in the Protestant tradition, then probably you have heard that salvation is the result of grace, “through grace you have been saved,” as the writer of Ephesians tells us. And we're called to put our trust in that grace, the unearned love of God revealed in the crucified and risen Christ. What that means for us is we're not anxious about the fate of our souls. We have nothing to fear. And we're not doomed to a life spent looking over our shoulder wondering when the hammer's going to come down on us for something we said or did. We can be done with that. We can let go of our fears and follow our hearts.

Augustine once said, “Love God and do whatever you please: for the soul trained in love to God will do nothing to offend the One who is Beloved.” Our love for God, rooted in God's great love for us, compels us to act in ways that reflect that love in the world, bringing it to light, as Jesus says. But if we do not act, if we do not find ways to reveal God's love through compassion and generosity and justice, then how will God's love be revealed?

This passage in John's gospel that in isolation sounds esoteric is actually in response to someone who comes to Jesus under cover of darkness to learn more about his ministry and teaching. Nicodemus is a Pharisee and a religious leader, but something in Jesus' teachings has struck a chord in him. He wants to know more. Now, I don't know if Nicodemus is fictional or not, he might be, but he gives voice to questions we all carry about the meaning of Jesus' teachings and where they might lead us if we follow them. If you read the conversation they have, you'll find that Jesus is a little baffled that this teacher of Israel doesn't seem to understand the ways of God Jesus is teaching. Nicodemus is confused when Jesus says, "You must be born from above," meaning through awareness of the Divine. Nicodemus thinks Jesus is saying we have to be born again, literally, which isn't at all what Jesus means. So often in the gospels Jesus and his dialogue partners, sometimes opponents and sometimes followers, seem to be talking past one another.

Jesus wants to usher his listeners into a deeper understanding of God and their relationship to God. He wants to help them make contact with their spirits and recognize the image of God they carry within them so they can see that image in the world around them. So often our religion gets in the way of our faith. We become so fixated on getting things right that we ignore the presence of God at work in us. I suspect that's what's happened to Nicodemus. He's spent his life doing all the right things, holding all the right beliefs, until he can no longer recognize God's image outside of his narrow religion.

When Jesus says, "Those who believe in the Son are not condemned; but those who do not believe are condemned already," he's not saying there's some kind of test we need to pass to avoid being condemned. The word "believe" is better translated "trust." He's calling us to put our trust in God's presence revealed in Christ and not in our pious rituals. We're condemned already when we fail to trust in that presence and rely only on ourselves. When we rely on ourselves, our rituals, the safety of our tribal community the way Nicodemus has, whatever we do in the world is shrouded in darkness, which is where Nicodemus lives. Jesus invites us to the light, where our deeds are done for the sake of the whole world so everyone can see God's presence revealed.

That's what the writer of Ephesians means by, "You were dead through the trespasses and sins in which you once lived." They're saying that by putting trust in the world's understanding of things—how to excel, what the social order should be, who's in and who's out—their lives were mired in a sort of living death because they couldn't see beyond themselves. But in God's great mercy they were made alive together in Christ. So now they see the world and their place in it in a different way, from the perspective of Christ who is "seated in the heavenly places." They see the world through the eyes of God. And all the distinctions, all the divisions have fallen away.

In a book titled *Eager to Love: the Alternative Way of Francis of Assisi*, the Franciscan priest Richard Rohr calls this "seeing the infinite in the finite." He writes, "Francis knew that if you can accept that the finite manifests the infinite, and that the physical is the doorway to the spiritual...then all you need is right here and right now...There are not sacred and profane things, places and moments. There are only sacred and *desecrated* things, places and moments—and it is *we alone* who desecrate them by our blindness and lack of reverence." Jesus calls us to

look past the obvious, to look deeper into ourselves and all that's around us to see the sacred and respond to God's presence through actions that are worthy of the life we have in Christ.

In practical terms, what that means is we no longer demean or belittle those we've been told are less worthy or want to hurt us. When we hear people being described as "vermin" because of their beliefs or their religious or sexual identity or their migration status, we're called to see Christ in them, to embrace them as bearers of God's image. And in a world where division is used to score political points, where leaders with autocratic aspirations want to fabricate conflict, we're called to resist those efforts and stand with the scapegoats and victims. Because we are made for good works, as the Ephesians writer says, we cannot stand by silently and allow our sisters and brothers to be vilified and attacked.

The writers of the gospels and the letters in the New Testament were writing for life in the real world, not to escape it. We aren't meant to be isolated from society. Our call is to engage the world from this new perspective we've been given in Christ, to see the world through God's eyes. That's what we're made for. Our good works reveal God's presence and without them the truth of who we are, the infinite present in the finite, remains hidden.

That famous verse in John's gospel, as I said, has often been used more as a cudgel than an affirmation because we usually hear it isolated from what follows. We're told in the very next sentence, "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." God sees the world through the lens of salvation, not condemnation. And those of us created in Christ Jesus for good works are the instruments God will use to bring God's light to the world.

Amen