



Good Shepherd Lutheran Church & School

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A Stephen Ministry Congregation

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The Holy Trinity

May 31, 2015

“Wondrous Love”

(John 3:16)

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“For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish, but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son to condemn the world, but to save the world through him” (John 3:16).

COLLECT: Almighty and everlasting God, You have given us grace to acknowledge the glory of the eternal Trinity by the confession of a true faith and to worship the Unity in the power of the Divine Majesty. Keep us steadfast in this faith and defend us from all adversities; for You, O Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, live and reign, one God, now and forever.
Amen

There is no shortage of theories about what ails us. Everyone has an opinion, a theory about the human condition and what's wrong with it. Depending on who you ask, the human condition may be described as oppressed, depressed, obsessed, repressed, over-sexed, under-sexed, driven, anxious, sinful. Perhaps the most consistent thing you can say about us is that very few of us are content. Almost all of us are not quite satisfied with life. We live with a permanent sense of incompleteness. We are hungry for more. Money, for instance: most Americans, if asked if they make enough of it will say, "I could use a little more." That's regardless of where they are in the tax bracket. And if we have one fear it is that we are missing out on something, that life is trickling away, and before we know it, it'll be over.

And so Nicodemus, though he lived 2,000 years ago, isn't so unfamiliar to us. I've always liked this guy. He's the kind of man many of us would like to be. He is successful and influential. He is a member of the Sanhedrin, a select group of seventy who, under the leadership of the High Priest, served essentially as the government of Israel under Roman occupation. He is a part of the elite, the upper crust. If he were living today, we would find him in D.C. or New York or briskly walking down Michigan Avenue in Chicago. He keeps himself fit and dresses well, looks sharp with a crisp white shirt, Hugo Boss suit and silk tie. He has two, three books going all the time, together with a number of periodicals, Golf Digest, New York Times. He has a nice looking family, though the nest is mostly

empty now. But still, Nicodemus is not satisfied. Even with all his success, he feels life is trickling away. The success is a veneer. Scratch the surface, and underneath there is little peace, little contentment.

Some nights he doesn't sleep very well. On those nights he finds himself thinking about things and asking questions which he assumed he had resolved long ago. "What's it all about? Why am I here? What's going to happen to me?" More than once, when he can't sleep, he has picked up his Bible and resolves to read it through. He finds Genesis to be brilliant, Exodus interesting, and he works his way through Leviticus, but he always gets derailed somewhere in Numbers, with all the ceremonial laws and the begetting and begotting.

I see Nicodemus in a number people I know. He's secure, his investments are on target, his house mostly paid for, the bills manageable. But the truth – which he finds himself pondering at night, is that it has been a long time since he has cared passionately about anything. Oh, he's concerned about his golf handicap and his mutual funds, but it's been a long time since an idea, a cause, a need, has stirred him and engaged his imagination and made his heart beat a little faster. And he knows there are more years behind him now than ahead. And he knows something's not quite right with him spiritually, but he doesn't know how to fix it.

And so one night, after dark, when the city is quiet and he will not be seen, he goes to the house where there is a man staying whose ideas and character and growing reputation intrigue him. I like this best about Nicodemus. He takes a chance. He risks reputation and influence and even position by going to see the young Rabbi from Nazareth. Immediately, what Jesus sees underneath the finery is a soul that is lost, wandering about, and, in a way, perishing.

The Bible records only the basic framework of their conversation, but it is enough to reveal an exchange that is a bit tortured. They seem to be talking

past one another. Nicodemus opens up the conversation with some flattery. “Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher come from God, for no one can do these signs that you do unless God is with him.” Jesus ignores all that and gets right down to business. “Unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God.” It’s a hit-the-wall transition and it throws Nicodemus off balance. “Surely, a man cannot enter a second time into his mother’s womb to be born!” Jesus repeats himself: “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit.”

Whenever water and Spirit are together in close proximity in the Bible, you and I recognize that as the language of Holy Baptism. Nicodemus, of course, does not. How could he at this point? You and I know that salvation is a gift given us by grace; it’s not something we can earn. Nicodemus isn’t there. All his life he’s been taught (and, in turn, has taught others) that salvation is based on keeping the Law in its purity. So he’s confused by the words of Jesus. “How can this be?” he asks. Jesus stings him. “You are Israel’s teacher and you do not understand these things?” Maybe Nicodemus has six honorary doctorates in biblical theology, but somehow he missed the most important truth: God is a God of mercy. It’s been there all along in the Old Testament, but somehow Nicodemus has these theological blinders on. As a Pharisee and member of the Sanhedrin, he’s an expert in the Law, but knows nothing of the Gospel.

And so, in the simplest terms, Jesus gives the Gospel to him. "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life." The Gospel in miniature, Luther said. It’s the Gospel in one concise sentence. It’s the towering sugar maple packed back down into the helicopter seed. God loves the world and everything in it, even the stars, the mountains and

valleys, the oceans and deserts. God loves all of it and all people of this world. And then bringing Nicodemus back into focus – this individual life, this person – God loves so much that he went to the cross to die for him.

Many have a hard time believing it, that God could love the world. They qualify it. They add conditions to it saying, "God loves those who are decent." They tie strings to it. "God will love us once we show we're worthy of his love."

Part of what's wrong with the human condition is that we have a hard time simply hearing and receiving God's Word. We hear that God loves the world, but then we start sending it through the filters. "God really doesn't love the world...likes it a lot maybe, offers to love it if it would simply start behaving itself." And sometimes we have been persuaded that God not only doesn't love the world, but rather dislikes it, with all its messiness and tragedy . . . and God really doesn't much care for us either, what with all our sin.

Don't spend too much time trying to figure out *how* God could love the world. Just accept the simplicity of the words. The world is God's beloved. God desires the world, hungers for the world, aches for the world, even delights in the world.

There are many in Watertown who have not yet heard that news, at least not in a way that has penetrated. And they don't avail themselves to the message. They don't come to church, and chances are poor that they'll hear it outside of church because that's become a forbidden topic.

The fastest growing segment of in America's religious landscape are those who are not affiliated with any church and denomination. They are called the nones, those who do not identify with any organized religion. They tend to be young, their median age is 36 and falling. Maybe they went to church as kids, but they're not active in a faith community today. Church makes them nervous. They do not know the rituals. They do not feel they blend in with the rest of the

crowd, and in a lot of ways, they don't. Sometimes they'll come in for a baptism, and we'll notice they're not dressed for it. They might look a little rough around the edges, or maybe they'll look quite nice. But their kids don't know the first thing about sitting still in church, listening, folding their hands to pray, or whispering. If you glare at them for their disruptive behavior, I can tell you they will never come back. If you glare at them, I will glare at you.

These are among those whom Jesus loves. These are among those whom Jesus is calling us to love and serve, and he's brought them right into this sanctuary, or into our school, a softball lobbed right into the strike zone. We cannot afford to miss the opportunity. Instead of shooting them an impatient glance, how about, with a smile, offering to help them out? Scoot over closer and show them where we are in the service. Pick up the dropped hymnal or offer to hold the baby if they need to take the toddler to the bathroom. Before or after the service introduce yourself, welcome them, tell them you're glad they've come and you hope to see them next weekend.

Sometimes the "nones" do actually make their way into an Adult Confirmation class, and I find myself spending a lot of time helping them get past the god of their childhood – the one who smote you, who frowned at your every move, who like Santa, kept detailed lists of who's been naughty and nice. There is a god people believe in, and there is the God who is, and they are not the same. So I try to help them say good-bye to the god they no longer believe in so they can get to know the God who reveals himself to us in Christ Jesus – the God who knows them best and yet loves them the most. The God who forgives them again and again, setting them free, even if they do not realize it. I try to help them get to know the God who is 100-percent committed to being their God, even though they, like us, are never 100 percent committed to being his disciples. I try to tell them, in so many ways, what Jesus told Nicodemus:

God so loved the world, that he sent his only begotten Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have everlasting life. I try to tell them this love changes us, redeems us, forgives us, saves us, and that our response to that love is very important. It changes everything about how we live our lives. It affects the way we spend our time, what we do with our money, how we raise our kids or interact with foreigners and strangers and people very different from us.

And then, as did Jesus, we always talk about how it is we get into the kingdom of heaven. It's not by our works. It's by water and Spirit. So we talk about baptism in the name of this Triune God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, and why we baptize infants as well as adults. Baptism is not about our choosing God. Baptism is first and foremost about God choosing us. It's about God's decision to claim us as his own, and put his name on us. Baptism is about sin being washed away, but even more so, it's about entering into God's grace .

Nicodemus came at night to see Jesus. He came at night and heard about a God who doesn't come to condemn the world, but to save the world through his Son. Nicodemus heard about a God who doesn't wait in splendid heavenly isolation for men and women to become good or decent before he loves them, but rather, "while we were yet sinners Christ died for us" (Rom. 5:8). And in that giving, that sacrifice, that supreme act of love, he offers life--full, joyful, complete, everlasting life.

It's a wonderful thing to hear another say, "I love you" whether from your parent or your spouse or your child. What the Bible teaches is that the One who matters most, the One who knit you together in Your mother's womb, the One who died for You, the One who has worked faith in You, the One who matters most has said those most beautiful words to you. It's a love without condition; a wondrous love that lays down its life for you, a love that asks only that we receive it by faith.

God doesn't hate you. He doesn't resent you. And he's not on the fence. He loves you. Amen.

