

The Rev. Emily Dunevant

Numbers 21:4-9  
Psalm 107:1-3,17-22  
Ephesians 2:1-10  
John 3:14-21

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Fourth Sunday in Lent

You all know how much I loved going to church when I was growing up. Church was an important place for me – a place where I found belonging and purpose. A place that taught me how to pray, how to have faith during difficult times, how to love God and trust in what the Bible taught me. I was by most accounts a “good Christian.” It seemed when I was young that faith was straight forward. You did your best to follow the rules and Jesus loved you.

But when I went to college, things were more complicated. I started to hear things about who I should hang out, who was a good influence and who would be a bad influence and pull me away from God. The rules got a little more exclusive. The “good” people were those folks who believed a certain way, who worshiped in a certain church, who upheld a strict idea of who was saved and who wasn’t. They were the self-appointed “good Christians.” And over the years there seemed to be more and more people who didn’t fit their criteria of being good enough.

After a while, those good Christians were more and more vocal about my choices, too. There wasn’t a lot of room to question or doubt. And there certainly wasn’t much room to think differently about the bible. And so much of the criteria seemed to focus on John 3:16. More often than not, this verse became a litmus test of who was in and who was out. Who was saved and who had fallen short of having enough belief to assure them eternal life. I started to not like what I was hearing but it took a while to make sense of the dilemma.

How many of you have understood John 3:16 as a verse based upon judgement? How many of you have understood it to be a verse about love? Have you interpreted it through a strict lens of what faith should look like or have you valued it has a statement about the nature of our relationship with God? Is it an exclusive path to salvation or an inclusive invitation to redemption?

Taken alone, John 3:16 can all too quickly reduce salvation to a quick fix formula. Not to sound cynical but every time I see a sign at a football game bearing this verse, I can’t help but think that the individual holding that banner is hoping that it will result in a conversion of sorts for anyone who sees. I’ve heard the rhetoric before (too many times actually)...that by holding up that sign, they have been a witness to Christ and if we have seen the sign we have effectively been given notice. Believe and have eternal life or still live in doubt and perish. But as any good biblical scholar knows – no one verse can be interpreted without context.

And since this verse has become the pinnacle of Christian belief for so many people, I thought a little context might do us some good to expand this verse beyond the formula for salvation that is has become synonymous with. So let’s dig in.

Does anyone know who Jesus is speaking to in our Gospel reading today? He's speaking to Nicodemus. (And just so that I admit my bias, Nicodemus is one of my favorite biblical characters and you'll understand why in a moment.) Nicodemus is a Pharisee, a very wise and learned man and right before our Gospel reading, we find him going to Jesus at night and questioning him. Nicodemus knows there is something very special about Jesus but he is struggling to comprehend all that he has been hearing and seeing. Jesus says to him, 'Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above.'

As these words sink in a bit, Nicodemus, in his confusion, starts to ramble off all kinds of questions. "How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother's womb and be born? How can these things be?" Jesus knows he doesn't understand and tries to help him through his doubt and uncertainty. And then he tells Nicodemus those critical 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." And then Jesus follows those words with these: "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."

So, take this in for a moment, Nicodemus heard those words – those of John 3:16. He saw the sign at the football game. He was given the chance to understand. But, he doesn't.

Even Jesus' first hand words didn't convert Nicodemus. He simply left the conversation confused. In fact, we don't hear much about Nicodemus again until John 19. After Jesus is crucified. In a beautiful moment of gentleness, love and compassion, Nicodemus helps Joseph of Arimathea prepare Jesus' body for burial.

Nicodemus did not have a conversion moment. The words of Jesus from John 3:16 didn't produce a dramatic change for him. Instead, Nicodemus lived in a place of doubt and questioning. He had to gradually learn through his own life what those words really meant. For Nicodemus, coming to understand who Christ was and what faith meant was a journey that unfolded over time.

The reason he is one of my favorite characters in the bible is because he would have been the not-so-good Christian I used to hear about. He embodies what so many of us struggle with. We hear the words, we learn the promises but the journey to redemption isn't necessarily straight forward. It often takes years of learning and growing, of doubting and questioning. It isn't a litmus test of believing a single verse in the bible. Instead, I like to think it is a commitment we make to engage in the questions. A commitment to wrestle with the Bible and ask how can these things be?

Nicodemus reminds me that there is no timeline for our journey to God. He reminds me that Jesus gets our struggle with faith and that Jesus is willing to wait. Now, this isn't to say that there aren't those bright light on the road to Emmaus conversion moments. I'm sure there are. But what it does say to me is that there are many other ways that we find God.

Remember the verse directly after John 3:16. It says, "God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him." For me, that verse is the much needed expansion of verse 16. It's the context that helps us move beyond an exclusive understanding of this text. Verse 17 is the reminder that this is indeed not about judgement, condemnation, or a criteria for salvation but that it is a verse about love, compassion, and mercy.

I have often thought back on my own journey of faith. To the times when faith seemed simple – the times when I sang, Jesus loves me this I know for the bible tells me so. To the times when I got older and I was told I had to accept Jesus Christ as my Lord and Savior and that anyone who had not said those exact words and made that exact statement of belief was not a true Christian. And then to the years I found myself being that person, like Nicodemus, asking how can these things be and suddenly realizing I was that not-so-good kind of Christian, at least by the standards I had been taught by the John 3:16 banner wavers.

To today, when I find myself humbled at the foot of the cross, so grateful for Christ's unconditional love for me. Like Nicodemus, coming to terms with my faith and wanting to show Christ every day how thankful I am. It reminds me that faith is always a journey and that God is always right alongside of us – through our questions, through our struggles, and through our doubts. It reminds me that there isn't a not-so-good kind of Christian. Just you and me as we seek to know God more fully.

And then I remember, maybe faith really is that simple...Jesus loves me this I know, for the bible tells me so.

Amen.