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Lay Preacher
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In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

I want to start out by saying that I am not so bold as to try to reimagine a way to preach John 3:16. Martin Luther called it “the gospel in a nutshell” - how could someone possibly top that? “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 the best-known Bible verse in the world. We see it everywhere: on billboards along the highway, on posters held up by fans at football games, on peoples’ social media profiles, on stickers stuck to peoples’ water bottles. Our world is saturated with John 3:16! But if we hadn’t just heard it, how many of us would be able to say definitively what John 3:17 says? “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.” Would we know the entire passage well enough to say with certainty what role Nicodemus played in it?

I find that I relate to Nicodemus in this passage. Like me, he struggles with nuance and tries to understand Jesus’s words literally. So he asks, “Can one enter a second time into the mother’s womb and be born?” But Jesus isn’t speaking literally. Nicodemus has missed the point: in order to see the kingdom of God, we must be born again in the Spirit, that is to say, to believe and participate in Christ. No one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit. Nicodemus is trying so hard to understand what Jesus is saying, but is going about it the wrong way; he thinks that Jesus is speaking literally about being born a second time rather than speaking metaphorically. Jesus and Nicodemus are speaking on different levels and it leaves poor Nicodemus incredibly confused. With the benefit of two thousand years of study and some hindsight, it seems obvious to us today what Jesus is trying to say and yet, Nicodemus isn’t picking up on the real message. Jesus isn’t trying to tell him he has to be physically born again, he’s inviting him to deepen his relationship with God and the Word made flesh.

I imagine this scene playing out with Nicodemus asking in astonishment, “How can these things be? What do you mean that what is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit? I don’t get it.” His astonishment is understandable. It’s echoed throughout the Bible, like when Sarah hears that God has promised Abraham a son and she laughs at the absurdity of it because she was past the age when it would have been humanly possible to have children. Or when Moses speaks to a burning bush about rescuing the people of Israel from bondage in Egypt and is like, “Who, me?” It makes sense then that Nicodemus would have trouble understanding the grand things Jesus is saying!

“Oh Nicodemus, bless your heart,” Jesus seems to say, “I’m trying to help you out and you’re just not getting it. How can I expect you to believe in heavenly things if you can’t even believe what I’m saying about earthly things? Let me sum this up for you: God loves y’all *so much* that

he sent me here to teach you how to get into heaven. I'm not here to judge you or condemn you, I'm here to save you."

John 3:17 says that God did not send the Son into the world to judge or condemn the world. Sometimes it feels like there is judgment coming from every side: people judging each other for wearing - or not wearing - masks; nations warring against other nations; legislatures passing bills outlawing gender affirming healthcare. Everywhere we turn, people are sitting in judgment against one another, often in the name of Christ. The Bible can be used as a weapon to marginalize and subjugate fellow Christians and non-Christians alike. Maybe you've seen it for yourself and wondered what on earth you can do about it. Is just one person enough to really make a difference? Yes! It is.

And we aren't without help. Moses was one person and he, with the help of Miriam and Aaron, brought the people of Israel out of slavery and into the promised land. Jonah was one person and he was able to save Nineveh from destruction. Mary was one person and she brought the Son of God into the world with the help and support of her husband, Joseph. With the help of God and support from one another, we can achieve great things. In Genesis, God promised Abraham that he would make of him a great nation and Sarah laughed. It was inconceivable! And yet, that's exactly what happened. God fulfilled His promise, just as he did with Moses and Noah and Jesus. If God can do those incredible things with individual people who didn't even have the benefit of Google or modern technology, imagine what He can do with you. Our duty as Christians is to spread the Gospel of Jesus, the gospel of forgiveness and salvation, among the people of the world. And you don't have to do it alone; our psalm today reminds us that our help comes from the Lord, the maker of heaven and earth. The Lord himself watches over us; we are never alone. The Lord will preserve us from all evil and will keep us safe.

John says that the Son did not come into the world to judge or condemn it, but to save it. Jesus came to earth to teach, preach, and minister to those who needed what he had to offer. He didn't condemn those who wronged him or hate those who hated him; instead, he offered them grace upon grace. Living like Jesus doesn't mean judging those whose values don't align with our own or persecuting those who don't think, look, and act like we do. Living like Jesus means showing grace and mercy in everything that we do, every single day. Living like Jesus is *hard* work, but we don't have to do it alone. We have one another, fellow Thankful Ones as other loving Christians, to help us find our way. We learn from each other and love each other. Together, we teach and discern and minister to and with each other. The work of the gospels is not solitary work.

Sometimes living like Jesus is especially hard. When Christians hurt others, it can be easy to forget the message of Christ and his witness of love, mercy, and grace. Just this week, Tennessee legislators passed a bill banning public drag performances and gender-affirming healthcare for transgender youth. The bill was amended to go into effect on April 1, a change from the traditional July 1 start date for bills like this, in order to get ahead of Pride month in June, when

parades and public performances, including stand-up comedy, slam poetry, and drag shows, usually take place. This bill will change the entire culture of Pride month in Tennessee, a month typically dedicated to celebration and affirmation of our identities and community and yet, measures rooted in fear threaten to overwhelm the joy we usually experience. There are days that it is hard to be a queer Christian and yet, isn't this exactly what the gospel is telling us?

God didn't send the Son into the world to condemn us, and Jesus tells Nicodemus that what is born of the flesh is flesh, but what is born of the Spirit is spirit. These laws are of the flesh, created by humans to oppress people they don't understand and maybe are afraid of because of that, but they aren't reflective of the kingdom of Heaven. No, God sent the Son into the world to *save the world* by giving to us a gospel of love. Jesus associated himself with people the world considered sinners and outcasts, often choosing their company over that of the outwardly pious. We, too, can make that choice, to love and affirm those the world doesn't see fit to be loved and affirmed. Our witness can be to love one another so much that we say, "No more." We can choose love over hate. Like Nicodemus, we can choose to trust in Jesus and his message, even if we don't completely understand it yet, and we have one another to help and encourage us as we take this journey. Living like Jesus is a journey that we take together.

In this season of Lent, I invite you to consider what living like Jesus might mean to you. Maybe it could be that you remind yourself every morning to choose love as you go about your day. Maybe it's reading through the gospels and making note of the times that Jesus chooses to love someone despite their shortcomings or sinfulness. In a world where there is so much opportunity for us to harden our hearts and choose to hate those who wrong us, we can instead turn to the gospel of Christ and let it keep us soft. It's hard work, but it's work that we do together.

Amen.