

“What is the Meaning of All This?”

John 3: 1-17

This is one of the more memorable texts found within the Gospel of John, let alone found within the Bible. It contains one of many people's favorite Bible verses. I bet if I just said the words, “For God so loved the world” that anyone, including people not necessarily raised in the church, would be able to complete the next line, with “that he gave his only Son so that we might live”.

As infamous and as favorite as this particular verse is, we must remember that it is within a larger context, that it falls within a larger conversation. That wider context and conversation happens during a late night visit from Nicodemus who comes wanting to talk to Jesus. We are told that Nicodemus is a Pharisee. He understands that there is something special about Jesus but what it is he can't exactly put his finger on.

What follows next is a conversation in which two people are talking but each one is meaning something else.

Every time I read this passage, I am reminded of how confusing it is for us to talk about our faith. Everyone has our own interpretations. Everyone has their

own understandings. Everyone has their own meanings when it comes to words like belief and faith. Even though in a conversation, we might be using the same exact words to describe our faith, everyone has his or her own language they used to talk about how faith has transformed their lives.

It strikes me as ironic how we try to carry on a conversation about our faith, something that may be a little uncomfortable for us to do because it is so personal, We try to talk about our faith, with the thought always in the back of our mind that we might say something that might offend someone, only to be misunderstood, simply because we are not speaking the same language. We are not using the same definitions or interpreting the same meanings as the other person. Sometimes I wonder how the Gospel message has been shared for two thousand years when it can be so easy for us to misunderstand each other as people of faith.

That sort of confusion and misunderstanding is what is happening in our text today during this conversation between Jesus and Nicodemus.

As I said before, Nicodemus comes to see Jesus because he knows something is different, something is special about this man. He is trying to wrap his mind around the teachings and preachings of Jesus. Nicodemus basically asks Jesus, “What is the meaning of all this? What is the meaning of faith? What is the meaning of belief? What is the meaning of our relationship with God? Questions

I'm sure that we have all found ourselves asking at one point or another along our faith journey.

Now here is where the confusion sets in for Nicodemus. He has one understanding of faith and belief and Jesus' teachings and preachings are based on another. Nicodemus has been raised in the church. He knows the readings. He knows the law. He knows his God. But here comes Jesus, and he is preaching a new way of being, a different way of understanding God's love and grace. And Nicodemus just can't get his mind wrapped around it, especially when Jesus tells him that he needs to be born again, that he needs to be born anew.

Let me stop right here and say we are all familiar with the phrase "born again", especially in contemporary Christian circles. We hear about "born-again" Christians and we wonder what sets them apart from the rest of us who grew up in the faith. This once again is a case for confusion when it comes to language. Once again, this is another example of why it is so difficult for us to talk about faith matters and belief because we all have our different interpretations. I'm going to request at this moment for the sake of the flow of the sermon that we try to put aside what we think it means to be born again and allow the text to open our hearts once more.

Okay, so back to Nicodemus and Jesus and their two different meaning conversations. Jesus tells Nicodemus that he needs to be born anew which confuses Nicodemus even more because it is just not logical. No one can be physically born again.

But what Jesus is talking about in this case when he says the phrase “born anew”, Jesus is meaning a spiritual rebirth, not a physical one.

You see, part of Nicodemus’ struggle to understand Jesus is that Jesus’ teachings about God’s grace and God’s love are not logical. They don’t add up. They don’t make sense when compared to the ways of the world. Jesus’ teachings and preachings about God’s grace and God’s love just don’t fit into our very limited definitions and understandings.

At the heart of the matter, that’s what is behind Nicodemus’ questions to Jesus. When he asks Jesus, What is the meaning of all this? Nicodemus shows he is struggling. He can’t wrap his mind around God’s grace. He realizes that he is not able to define in clear simple words the idea or concept of God’s love. And worst of all, Nicodemus can’t capture his idea of a relationship with God in a formula that will strengthen his intellectual belief.

What Nicodemus is really looking for when he comes to Jesus is an answer to the question, What does it mean for us as people of faith to hold belief in our

God? And what Nicodemus discovers is that belief is not an intellectual thing. It is an act of faith that defies logic.

I can't tell you how many times when people find out that I am a minister, they want to have conversations about God, about faith, about what it all means. But my favorite is when people find out that I am minister and they say, "How can you believe in that stuff? It doesn't make any sense." Or "How can you believe in God when there is no proof?"

It always amazes me how so many people who claim to be atheists want to talk about God. It also always amazes me how surprised they are when I actually agree with a lot of their arguments when it comes to the absurdity of faith. Case in point, Mike's middle brother considers himself an atheist. It is always interesting to come together with him at the dinner table and see how the conversation goes. He respects what we do. He just doesn't believe in. To which I tell him that I think he is one of the most faithful persons that I know. I tell him that in so many ways he shows the love and grace of God better than I ever could from behind the pulpit and in my ministry. You see, Rich is a special education teacher. I'm talking severe disabilities that range from children being wheel chair bound with limited mental capabilities to teenagers who are forever trapped in bodies that will shortly betray them even more.

I tell Rich the time and care that he gives all his students is amazing to me. He tries never to miss a day of work because he knows how much the families depend on him being there to care for their children. And the thing of it is, Rich could easily just sit in a classroom, watch the minutes tick away until the end of the day without anyone really objecting, because let's face it, there are those who would say the young people Rich works with aren't capable of learning in the first place.

But not Rich. Rich tells us stories of his classroom and the things his students are doing. Rich tells us how he reads to them, how they love to see his pet spiders and snakes. Rich tells us how he worries when his students age out of the system and wonders what the future will hold for them.

You see, the beautiful thing is that Rich doesn't just see these young people as his students. He sees them as children of God, made in the image of God, and loved more than they could ever image. Those are my words, not his. He would probably cringe at the God language in reference to what he does. But this is how I see it. Each and every time I hear Rich talk about his classroom, talk about his students, I see the love and grace of God shining through. And for me, that is belief in God, living out the true caring for all of God's children but especially for the least of these. Rich's care for his students is not logical but every time I hear him talk about it I get a glimpse of the Kingdom of God.

That's what Jesus wants Nicodemus and us as his disciples to see and experience. He wants us to start realizing that we can't rationalize belief in God. It is not an intellectual thing. Belief is an act of faith that changes us and transforms. It defies logic and resets the unlimited possibilities of hope. You see, when someone tells me that it is absurd to be a person of faith nowadays, I couldn't agree more. It is absurd. It doesn't make any sense. It defies all logic.

But it is what I know is true. Because when it comes down it, take away all the language that surrounds faith and belief, what's left is Jesus' example. What is left is the way he lived in community with others, respected others, loved others as God had loved him. When we take away all the confusing language that surrounds our system of beliefs and faith, all that is left is God's love.

Then we can begin to realize this love is not something we can limit. It is not something we can define. It is not something we can control. It is something that just is, there available for all of us.

The interesting thing is that one of the commentators argues that we should change our understanding of the word "belief". We need to move away our definition away from it being an intellectual thing and reclaim it once more as an act of faith. He argues that the word "belief" found here in John 3 is better translated as "trust" or "connection" even going as far as translating it "bonded

with”. So really, John 3: 16 would read, “For God so loved the world that all who trusted in him, all who connected with him, all who bonded with him may not perish but would have eternal life”

As I have lived with this passage this week, lived with this new interpretation, the more and more I really like. It makes our relationship with God an active thing, something that bonds us with God, connects us with God. It reminds me that first and foremost, God’s love is at the center of it all, and once we experience God’s love, we are forever changed. We are born anew.

This very act relocates our identity. No longer are we known by how the world knows us. First and foremost, we are children of God who are called to bear the likeness of God out into the world, to bear the seed of God’s love and grace into the world, no matter how illogical it might seem.

You see, the logic of God’s love is not the logic of the world. It is not if we believe in God, then God will love us. God’s love is not a reward for our belief. God’s love is the very act that transform us and forms into the person God created us, and calls us to be. Our belief, our connection with God comes through stronger only after we have experienced the transforming power of God's love.

Earlier this past week, there was a story on NPR. It was probably one I wouldn’t have paid much attention to because it was about a band that I can take or

leave. But what caught my attention in this piece wasn't about the band's next tour dates or their upcoming album. It was a story about the lead singer's father and his moment of faith in which he was born anew. The interview shares that during the lead singer's childhood, his father had been an alcoholic but suddenly had a change of heart and converted to Mormonism. The lead singer shares that his father felt it so strongly that he was baptized that day. And, yeah, the church, they didn't - they weren't able to accommodate him with the church that day, so he got baptized in my aunt Joyce's (ph) swimming pool.

To which the interviewer replies: It was that important for him to get this done that day?

And here is what really caught my attention: The lead singer said this: "Yeah. And it was a - you know, a really life-changing thing. He start - he just became a lot more positive and a lot happier. And weird things started happening. He would - he brought home a homeless family to live with us for a while. He just became a different guy, I guess.

That's belief in God. The experience changes us. We respond to our connection to God and it transforms us. It is not logical. And yes. Probably absurd according to the standards of this world. But That is what God's illogical life giving love and grace does for us as people of faith. It helps us relocate and reclaim

our true identity as God's Beloveds. It allows our spirits to overcome whatever the world blows our way. All because we have been born anew. This experience allows us to live freely secure in the knowledge, that no matter how illogical it may seem, we know the TRUTH. We worship a living God who is still working in this world to bring healing and wholeness to all of God's creation.

the logic of God's love is not if we believe in God, then God will love us. God's love is not a reward for our belief. It is the very act that transform us and forms into the person God created us, and calls us to be. Our belief in God only comes after we have experienced the transforming power of God's love which has always been there for us. Even before we knew anything about God's love, it was there. Because in the words our Savior, who defied the world's logic time and time again, even to the point of dying on the cross, in the words of our Savior: "For God so loved the world that God gave his only Son so that we might not perish but have eternal life." Amen.