

John 3: 1-17 Lent 4

### Living a God Shaped Life

Today we learn what is central to a life of faith. What is central to our faith is God's love and what God in Christ has taught us about the true nature of that love. A life lived in faith is not about what we can do to earn or be worthy of God's love; faith is simply about believing, believing and trusting that God so loved the world that he gave his only Son so that we would not perish, but have eternal life.

We meet Nicodemus once again for a brief moment this morning as his famed nocturnal visit to Jesus is ending. If we cast our minds back over what we remember of that encounter we recall that in Nicodemus we met a man whose faith requires something of a journey.

An integral factor to this journey is a willingness to accept God's blessings as pure gift. The paradox of the kind of journey to which such an encounter with Jesus often leads us is that it might require us to let go of what a lifetime of religion might have taught us.

In reflecting for a moment on Nicodemus' story, what is important to know is that he does not represent a failure in his understanding of the faith of Abraham or a failure in his love for God; to the contrary, Nicodemus represents the best there is in Israel.

Nicodemus' failure is not his faith; it is his inability to see beyond what he can know and measure. Nicodemus' encounter with Jesus brings to light that part in all of us that seeks to rely on our own power.

His failure to understand Jesus' teaching highlights that part of ourselves that has a need to control, that part of us that seeks desperately to hang on to what is familiar and safe, that part of us that wants to measure, quantify and compare...

Nicodemus' encounter with Jesus illuminates that part of us that stands in the shadow of the cross, but still fails in some way to truly understand what that cross means. He represents that part of us that has somehow forgotten that it is not what we do that is central to a life of faith, but it is what God does that lies at the heart of our salvation.

After Jesus has exhorted Nicodemus to be born anew he goes on to say, "Just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life. Then he elaborates on the new birth necessary for seeing the kingdom of God. There is this lifting up of the Son of Man, the sending of this Son as a manifestation of God's love, and the consequences of these actions for the human family.

So perhaps what is important to realize in briefly remembering Nicodemus' familiar story, is that he is not a "bad guy" with whom we should avoid identification. Nicodemus in his faith is no different than any of us who as faithful Christians have in some dark moment of misunderstanding or fear, began to think that our eternal salvation is dependent upon something we do or avoid doing, as the case may be.

As a people of reason, tradition and scripture, we assert that salvation comes to us through the grace of God alone—but, down in the dark recesses of our souls where doubt and fear sometimes have their way with us in moments of despair or trial, a little voice whispers to us that tells us that we are not so sure.

We might think to ourselves: maybe if I had just gone to church more this or that wouldn't have happened...maybe if I prayed more often or read the Bible more? What if I was more forgiving or nicer to my co-workers...on and on we go.

Down deep in those dark recesses of our hearts and minds where guilt and regret can dwell, that voice taunts us about the things we have done or possibly failed to do in our lives.

And if we continue to listen to that voice, the pain and fear consumes us and we are left to the knowledge that we truly are broken vessels. We can become paralyzed to the point that we no longer trust others or even ourselves and live life in a defensive posture.

Left only to the sound of this small toxic internal dialogue whispering of our failures, we begin to feel we cannot even face God because we just can't get it right!

There are those times in life when we still do not understand that it is nothing we do that makes us worthy of God's unfailing love—nothing except believe, believe that through the power of the Holy Spirit, God has a deep interest in our wholeness and joy. Believe that God so loved the world that he gave his only Son so that we might have eternal life.

This does not mean that God sends the Son to die a horrible death. This piece of Scripture has been so abused and has been so ubiquitous on posters at football games that it has become powerless at best----- and at worst simply embarrassing for more moderate Christians to embrace.

But this is a profound and powerful teaching that could ease the pain of anyone who has ever doubted they are worthy of the love of God or ever doubted the true wideness of God's mercy. What this teaches us is that in Jesus of Nazareth we are able to see in the flesh the kind of love that God has for us as well as the kind of love God calls us to offer one another.

Trusting that truth and then shaping our lives to this often demanding but liberating reality is where we find that freedom from fear that God is so eager for us to both have and then share with others out of our solidarity with God's love.

We are not ever told that living out of these life-giving truths is easy, and it is clear that failing to do so has consequences for all of us. But, we are promised time and again that we have an eternity of God's own forgiveness and grace to discover that divine spark within ourselves and see that same divine light in others. The call to see the love of God reflected in one another is the ultimate sign of God's love for all.

The consequences for our failing to live out of God's love for all are spelled out in the human sorrow we see in endemic prejudice, chronic refusal to live lives of forgiveness, and in our need to make war, or hurt others out of fear and ignorance.

This is often the juncture where the connection between our actions and God's grace finds us most confused in that chicken and egg kind of way. Because while there is nothing we do or fail to do that determines our salvation, our life with God is not meant to be passive.

This is one of the many reasons we are called to come together every week for corporate worship---why God desires us to form a community of faith. We come to be fed by sacrament and word, and to allow prayer to become the center of our relationship with God—these are elements are vital to a life of faith---faith out of which action can grow.

In coming into worship week after week we gain the strength, refreshment and tools we need to live a God shaped life. But what is important to remember that these elements of a life of faith are simply a response to God's love. Our worship and the action it calls forth are not a path or means of achieving our own salvation or what we "must do" to appease a potentially angry God.

But day by day and week by week God's Spirit continues to guide, nurture, and grows us in this way both in the present and for eternal life. Eternal life is not something we are supposed to look forward to after death; Jesus is teaching us today to trust that eternal life has been won for us here and now and that we are positive actors in making it a reality for the world.

If we fail to act, God's mercy is still present, but the people with whom we live and work might not ever know and grasp the sweet beauty of this truth.

Giving our selves over to a God shaped life, a life shaped by the actions of mercy, grace and forgiveness, gratitude and joy is a life that neither fear nor death can destroy.

Today we can rejoice with our Psalmist that in the kingdom of God sin -----and the suffering which sin causes -----never has to have the last word—the last word always belongs to God and those who act out of God's love---and that word is always "mercy." The steadfast love of God endures forever. Amen.