

Willow River Parish: Clear Lake, Deer Park, and Faith Family

Title: God So Loved

Lesson: John 3:1-17 NRSV

3 Now there was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews. **2** He came to Jesus by night and said to him, "Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God; for no one can do these signs that you do apart from the presence of God." **3** Jesus answered him, "Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above." **4** Nicodemus said to him, "How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother's womb and be born?" **5** Jesus answered, "Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit. **6** What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit. **7** Do not be astonished that I said to you, 'You must be born from above.' **8** The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit." **9** Nicodemus said to him, "How can these things be?" **10** Jesus answered him, "Are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things? **11** "Very truly, I tell you, we speak of what we know and testify to what we have seen; yet you do not receive our testimony. **12** If I have told you about earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you about heavenly things? **13** No one has ascended into heaven except the one who descended from heaven, the Son of Man. **14** And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, **15** that whoever believes in him may have eternal life. **16** "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. **17** "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.

It's Trinity Sunday. Through God the Father, Jesus Christ, the Son, and the Holy Spirit who came to us, the three names of God were established. We call it Trinity. Today we celebrate Creator God—God for us, Jesus Christ—God with us, and the Holy Spirit—God in us.

The most important things in our Christian orthodox doctrine are the "Trinity" and the confession that "Jesus Christ is truly God and truly human." This is a mysterious area of faith that is hard to understand by our reason and knowledge.

The easiest description of the Trinity is Saint Patrick, an Irishman. He used to explain Trinity through clover.

Today's Gospel reading shows us the way to a life of faith. There was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a Jewish leader. (1) He came to Jesus at night. Through his questions, we can learn what being born from above is.

He was the only Pharisee who came to Jesus and sought to the truth. Unlike any scribe and Pharisee, he was full of questions about truth. As he spoke with Jesus, he focused on God, saying "Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God, for no one could do these miraculous signs that you do unless God is with him." (2)

At the time, the Pharisees were an elite group of no more than 6,000 people nationwide. It is interesting that such an elite came to Jesus in the middle of the night. Such an elite would draw people's attention, so it was appropriate for him to visit Jesus at night. He was very cautious, but he was also a person who was positive about new things.

By the way, it was hard to understand Jesus' words about the kingdom of God for even Nicodemus. Probably his knowledge hindered his understanding of the kingdom of God. Jesus answered, "I assure you, unless someone is born anew, it's not possible to see God's kingdom." (3) Jesus answered, "I assure you, unless someone is born of water and the Spirit, it's not possible to enter God's kingdom." Regarding the born again through water and the Spirit, Nicodemus said, "How are these things possible?"

So, Jesus said, "If I have told you about earthly things and you don't believe, how will you believe if I tell you about heavenly things?" (12) In fact, it is impossible for us living on earth to understand the heavenly things. Therefore, Jesus explained what it means through an example the Israelites experienced in the wilderness at the time of Exodus. That wilderness means a wilderness of doubt, a wilderness of complaining.

It was an incident of poisonous serpents that every Jew knows well. According to the book of Numbers, the Israelites spoke against God and against Moses, saying "Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness? For there is no food and no water, and we detest this miserable food." (Num 21:5 NRSV) During the time of wilderness, they often blamed God and Moses and even complained about Manna, the food of grace. Then, the snakes began to bite and killed the complaining people. As many people died, they regretted and came to Moses to pray to God to take away the snakes from them. (Num 21:7)

And the Lord said to Moses, “Make a poisonous serpent, and set it on a pole; and everyone who is bitten shall look at it and live.” (Num 21:8) So Moses made a serpent of bronze and put it upon a pole; and whenever a serpent bit someone, that person would look at the serpent of bronze and live. Looking at the bronze serpent was the beginning of faith.

The reason Jesus told Nicodemus this story is that the mystery of the cross is contained in it. Jesus said, “Just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up.” (14) This means the cross of Jesus. The mystery of being born again rests on the cross.

According to the law of the time, hanging on a tree is a curse. Jesus’s death on the cross was also cursed from the standpoint of the law because Galatians 3:13 tells, “For it is written, cursed is everyone who hangs on a tree.” Jesus would hang on the tree. He would be cursed, and he would be killed. But his death was a substitute death planned by God. Therefore, his cross means that Christ redeems us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us. (Gal 3:13) Just as those who looked at the bronze snake in the wilderness would live, those who look at the cross and believe in Jesus will be saved.

One thing to remember is that we should not worship the bronze snake itself. It is not by itself that saves us, but God’s love to save us. At one time, the bronze snake was used for the purpose of faith. (2 Kings 18:4) Then it is no longer salvation, but idol worship.

The same goes for the cross. The tree itself does not give us salvation. The tree of curse on which Jesus hangs, the faith that believes that the miserable death is the supreme love of God saves us. Anyone who believes will have life. Ephesians 2:8 NRSV tells that “For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God.”

John 3:16 is the most important Bible verse in the world and it tells 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.” The essence of this verse is “God so loved the world.” He so loved us. So, He gave us his only Son, Jesus. Beloved in Christ, do you believe John 3:16? Those who believe in this truth may not perish but may have eternal life. John 3:16 has been used as a slogan because it is the essence of Gospel.

Book “100 Bible Verses that Changed the World” includes John 3:16 also. This book is an introduction to 100 Bible verses loved by great people of the faith over the past 2,000 years. According to the book, Dwight L. Moody, an American evangelist, often preached about John 3:16. He worked as a shoe salesman in Chicago and served as a Sunday School teacher. When he was 23 years old, 1,500 children gathered to the church to listen his sermon.

He preached the love of God all his life. For him, John 3:16 was the most important verse because it is the essence of gospel. The verse, “God so loved the world” always touched his heart. Because of that love, he came to love people and get a passion for the gospel.

God gave us His only Son to save the world. He promised that he would never again destroy the world by a flood, so he sent his Son in the last resort. It was not to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him. (17)

One of my favorite hamburger shops when my family and I lived in California was IN-N-OUT. It is very family in CA because it’s delicious, clean, cheap, and fresh. By the way, the word John 3:16 are written under beverage cups because it was the last wish of the founder’s uncle of IN-N-OUT who died believing in Jesus. He eagerly wanted people to believe in Jesus and be saved through him.

According to Gospel John’s theological view, night symbolizes evils, lies, and ignorance. John 11:10 NRSV tells that “Those who walk at night stumble, because the light is not in them.” But, Nicodemus, who came to Jesus at night, came from darkness to Jesus, who is the light. John 3:21 NRSV tells that “Those who do what is true come to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that their deeds have been done in God.”

Nicodemus buried Jesus on the cross with Joseph. (John 19:38-39) Finally, he must have realized the faith of resurrection and the mystery of being born again. Paul Confesses that Christians die with Christ and live a new life. Being born again means living in Jesus Christ. Being born again means coming to Christ. Being born again means bowing down to God and praying.

May all of us come to the Lord like Nicodemus and follow and believe in the truth, Jesus Christ. Amen.