

The World God Loves

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Genesis 12:1-14a; Romans 4:1-5; John 3:1-17

“For God so loved the world. . . .” -- John 3:16a

Two of Jesus’s most famous sayings appear within a few verses of each other, and both occur in a conversation Jesus had with Nicodemus, the Pharisee who came to see Jesus under cover of darkness. Of the four evangelists, only John preserves this conversation, and it’s one of the several examples in John’s gospel of what starts out as a conversation – Jesus talking with Nicodemus, Jesus talking with the Samaritan woman, Jesus talking with his disciples – that gradually morphs into a theological discourse in which Jesus tries to explain who God is, who he himself is, what God wants for the world, why Jesus is doing what he’s doing, and so on. These exchanges, in which Jesus and his interlocutor often talk past each other – as he and Nicodemus do here – become, for Jesus, teachable moments.

And what Jesus is trying to teach Nicodemus in their clandestine moment is that, if Nicodemus and whoever he represents want to understand who Jesus is and what he’s up to, they must be born again.

Now I know that when we American Christians of a certain generation hear that phrase “born again,” it can make us a little uneasy because it’s been commandeered by fundamentalists and conservative evangelicals. I appreciate your unease, but let’s try to push through those psychological and emotional weeds and see what Jesus is trying to tell Nicodemus and us by using that heavily freighted phrase.

In the first place, you probably noticed that when I read the passage out a few minutes ago, I didn’t read “born again” but rather “born from above,” which is a perfectly legitimate translation of the New Testament’s Greek. The Greek adverb *anothen* can mean “from above” or “from the beginning” or “again” or “anew” -- all of those translations work, and you have to decide which is best based on the context.

And in this passage preserved in John, Jesus is probably being deliberately ambiguous, with all senses of the word coming into play. Jesus is telling Nicodemus that no one can see the realm of God without being completely renovated – top to bottom, inside and out, to the studs and joists, root and branch.

The spiritual transformation of which Jesus is speaking is not cosmetic. It’s not a wallpaper or paint job. A little Spackle in the spiritual cracks is not it. This isn’t home improvement of a spiritual sort. It’s a new home, altogether. It’s a complete makeover. The house number may stay the same, but the dwelling is entirely different.

That’s what Jesus is getting at with that phrase being born again or born anew or born from above or born from the beginning. It’s that radical turn in the direction of one’s life I spoke about a while back.

And being born again, just like being born the first time, is something none of us controls, and that’s why I think the phrase, despite its fundamentalist overtones, still has value. One is born into this life, one does not bear oneself into it. When it comes to

being born – or born again – none of us gets to say, I did this.

Because we didn't. None of us is here of our own volition or efforts. Our existence in this world, as John puts it in the opening verses of his gospel, is by actions of the human will, but even in those cases only by the grace of God, as every couple knows who's struggled to have a baby and every pastor knows who's buried a stillborn child. Our physical birth, no less than our spiritual re-birth, is a gift from God, which is not an idea that we can-do, Midwestern American Protestants have much truck with.

And people like me are one of the reasons we don't. We pastors and other church leaders encourage church-going folk like you to work hard at spirituality. I encourage you to read your Bible, even memorize parts of it. I encourage you to come to church. I encourage you to live out your Christian faith in service to the world. Work, work, work, busy, busy, busy.

This morning I would like to nuance that go-get-'em-Tiger approach to the Christian life by reminding you, as Jesus told Nicodemus, that the moment that precedes all our striving and all our efforts at self-improvement depend on the gift of God's grace – the activity of the Holy Spirit in our lives that, again in Jesus's words, blows where it chooses. The Spirit chooses some and it does not choose others, and why and how is largely a mystery of God's foreknowledge. This is what our Reformed spiritual ancestors were trying to get at in formulating that doctrine of predestination, which has caused such uproar over the centuries. Simple common sense tells us that there are people in the world for whom the message of the gospel will seem ridiculous at best or pernicious at worst. Religion, for them, as for the Romans who despised the early Christian church, is a matter for weaklings – slaves and women. Power is what they worship – raw, physical power, and not the sort of through-the-looking-glass kind of power Jesus and Paul and the other New Testament writers speak – God's power in weakness.

That's not the kind of power our world respects and admires and craves. And yet it is just that world – that broken, messy, fallen, tragic, power-hungry, and sin-sick world – that God loves with a glorious and terrible love.

It is glorious in its unbreakable nature: it was here before the world, it's been here all long, and it will be here long after the world as we know it is gone. That love is eternal and it is unbreakable. It is the love, as George Matheson's hymn puts it, that will not let us go. When everything else has fallen away – and everything else will, one day, fall away, for every one of us – God's love will still be there, waiting for us in the world to come.

But that love, if we are to know it and experience it truly and constantly, comes at a terrible price: the price of the death of God Incarnate. The Word made flesh, God's only begotten Son, Jesus the Christ – the suffering and death we, through our ancestors, inflicted on him – that's the price and that's the proof of God's great love. It's still there, despite our best efforts to kill it – kill it then and kill it now.

And that's where that second great and famous saying of Jesus came from, just a few verses on in John, chapter three. It's in verse 16, which many of us memorized as children in the King James Version, and you can say it with me: "For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life."

We all know the abuse this tremendous verse has suffered in the hands of evangelical Christians, for whom their way was the only way to God. Great stress is laid on the "whosoever believeth in him" part of the verse, and whosoever doesn't is going to hell. That's the interpretation which has made this verse so obnoxious in the hearts and minds of so many.

But if you remember that the speaker is the Word of God made flesh – and that

comes from the opening verses of John's gospel – the verse simply says that if you wish to be saved by God, must believe in the God by whom you wish to be saved. Salvation is a matter of trust, and if you don't trust in God, even God can't save you. That's all – and everything – the verse says.

It doesn't say that Jews are going to hell. That Buddhists are going to hell. That gays and lesbians are going to hell. That Republicans, Democrats, or Wall Street Bankers are going to hell. The verse says that if you wish to be saved by God, you must trust the God by whom you wish to be saved.

And the God in whom we profess to place our trust is the God who loves the world enough to pay the great price of dying and rising for its sake. It is the world God loves. Not the Christians. Not the Jews. Not the good people. Not the bad people. Not the white people. Not the black people. Not the rich people. Not the poor people. Not the eagles or the mountains or the streams.

Just the world. The whole, great big mess of it, no exceptions. That's what drives pious people crazy about God. We love little pieces of the world, God loves the whole thing.

“For he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous.” That's Jesus telling us how God loves the world, and Jesus went on to tell us that if we want to love as God loves, we have to our enemies – you know, the people we love to hate, love to bad-mouth, love to think ill of, love to stereotype.

“Do good to those who hate you.” That's Jesus again, fleshing out what he meant by love your enemy. He's making it worse and worse for those of us who prefer to love selectively. We don't get simply to have less-than-hostile thoughts toward people who bug us or upset us or who would do us harm; we actually have to do good to them.

This is why Christianity is hard. It's not complicated it's just hard. It's hard to love the world, the whole world, no exceptions, which is how God loves it. And yet, if we're to be the sons and daughters of God, as Jesus was and as Jesus calls us to be, we have no choice. The path that is set before us is of unqualified love for the world, and we will choose it or we will not. The choice is ours, but the path is God's, for God so loved the world.