

## **“Learning How God Loves”**

Part 3: Learning True Life: Lenten Lessons on Discipleship

**John 3: 14-21**

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### **Introduction**

On many crisp fall Saturday afternoons of my childhood, with the leaves turning gold, red, and orange, my father would enthusiastically lead us into the football stadium of the Clemson University Tigers, my dad’s alma mater. 80,000 people joined us--people who made regular pilgrimages to Clemson University with cars packed full of food for elaborate tailgates (tailgates involve opening the trunk of your vehicle, setting out tables and chairs, and staging an enormous feast of sweet iced tea, potato salad, deviled eggs, and chicken) Everyone at the tailgate and game dressed in obnoxious quantities of orange to support the Clemson Tigers. As a child, I paid close attention to the spectacle of people and the performance of rituals and songs in the pregame show that resembled a worship service. In this region of the world known as the Bible Belt (we were right at the buckle), without fail, someone could be spotted holding a white posterboard sign with black letters—John 3:16. (Have ya’ll ever seen these posterboard people? They don’t just inhabit the South?)

Something about that sign bothered me; I was accustomed to all the Sunday School lessons which were always stories about Jesus—those magic marker inked numbers just seemed to pull Jesus right out of context, and had him floating adrift amidst a sea of screaming fans. The posterboard made it feel like Jesus was a gimmick—just read this verse and you’re saved. The posterboard sign seemed to indicate that the Godly life is just a simple one-verse formula that you accept and you’re done. A posterboard flashing on a sports television broadcast couldn’t possibly convey an authentic encounter with the

gracious love of God, or teach what a life spent following Jesus looks like. Even as a child, I felt instinctively that a posterboard sign couldn't do justice to how God loves us.

### **Nicodemus—The Search for the Love of God**

There is a character in our text today who, like most people, is searching for the love of God; a search that can't be satisfied by mere markings on a placard. This seeker appears at the beginning of chapter three of John in the darkness of evening, his heart pounding with pressing questions. Nicodemus, a member of the intellegensia, one who served on the Jew's ruling body called the Sanhedrin, a rich, well-respected Pharisee, a person who knew all matters concerning religion and the law, seeks out a prophet ridiculed by his peers for overturning tables in their temple. Nicodemus, a cultured aristocrat who usually had all the answers, snuck out under the cover of night's shadows; he probably didn't want anyone else to see him—it would ruin his credibility as a member of the Jewish elite. In the midst of the darkness, with questions tugging at his heart, he came seeking the One who is the Light of the world

He greets this Jesus, and then opens with a well-crafted and polished introductory statement, just like any lawyer would do. (verse 2, chapter 3) “Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God; for no one else can do these signs that you do apart from the presence of God. Jesus responds, “Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above.” Nicodemus must have looked confounded and bewildered. He had given Jesus wonderful complements, and instead of clear answers is greeted with enigmatic talk of wind and water, light and truth, new birth and spirit.<sup>1</sup> With the irony typical in John's gospel, all Nicodemus' smarts and credentials don't bring him closer

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<sup>1</sup> William Willimon. *Pulpit Resource*, vol. 31, no1 Year B, 55.

to Jesus. He winds up just asking, completely stumped, in verse 9 “How can these things be?”

### **John 3:16**

Jesus takes over the conversation, speaking a monologue of ten verses that includes our pericopy for today. Jesus explains, with light radiating out in the darkness to Nicodemus, how it is that God loves. He says the famous verse sixteen as a part of that explanation. Nicodemus would have heard the description of how God loves in Greek a little bit differently than our English translation. I’m going to walk you through now 3:16 as a way of exploring more deeply how God loves. I hope that this might help us hear this familiar verse in new ways.

1. So first, the God so loved isn’t so accurate. So gives the nuance that God loved the world a lot—as in common usage “I love you so much.” However, Jesus says, “God loved the world *in this way specifically* (so isn’t a good rendering of *autos*). So, instead of a multiplicity of ways God could love, God does love in one particular way. The word for love is *agape*, which indicates a specific act of love. It’s not that God always loves the world (though that is true), but that God loves in the sacrificial gift of his Son. So now with our famous verse we are translating it: God loved the cosmos specifically in this way:

2. That he gave his Only Son *didomi*. For the gospel of John, this giving of God refers to the incarnation. God’s love for the world is revealed in the person of Jesus.

3. That everyone who believes in him- *pisteus*. In English, we commonly think of “believing” as an intellectual assent. We put our minds to something and accept it as true—this is belief. However, in Greek, the word *pisteus* contains the same root as for faith. To believe, then, requires the commitment of your whole life. For the Johannine community, believing isolated them from other Jews and demanded a complete relinquishment of life as

they once knew it. To believe wasn't something you could possibly do by the persuasion of a white posterboard with a verse written on it; believing requires your entire life—spent responding to God's love toward us.

4. May not perish but may have eternal life—*Zoen Aionion*—in Greek, eternal life, doesn't mean immortality, but it is a metaphor for living now in the unending presence of God. Jesus' offer of his own life, out of God's love for us, makes eternal life possible for those who believe. In the gospel of John, then, eternal life doesn't come in the bye and bye after we die. Rather, *zoen aionion*, means live lived NOW in the unending presence of God. This new life finds its source in Jesus' loving offer of his own life. For the persecuted community out of which the gospel of John came, understanding that their lives now were imbued with the radiant life-giving presence of God enabled them to continue to endure. (realized eschatology).

So out of John 3:16, we receive a beautiful picture of God's love for us. God's love, revealed in Christ, enables us all to live lives of light and beauty in the very present now. However, I would be remiss to not also include as a part of God's love verses from the remainder of our text for today. Verse 17 affirms Jesus as a savior, but then in verse 18 comes a shift. Those who don't believe in this love of God are condemned. They are judged for loving darkness instead of light, and for moving toward evil. Nicodemus, who came to Jesus in the dark and remains in the dark, would be one who couldn't accept the light. These verses seem to depict a God of judgment, of a God condemning rather than loving. How do we balance the loving description of God in verses 16-17, with the judgment of verses 18-21? (refer to conversation from Wed. night prayer service)

## Johannine Community

Whenever we're confronted with texts that challenge us, that depict a God we'd rather not have, we have to dig deeper, to pray more, and to seek greater understanding. In the case of the contrast between a God who loves us in Christ and a God who may judge us as belonging to dark, I sought to understand more deeply the community out of which these verses were written. I mentioned a little bit before that for the Johannine community, choosing to respond to the love of God in Christ required intense discipleship. Following Christ for them meant living a life in which opened them to persecution.

Such persecution came because the Johannine community was composed of Jews out of Greek culture who had left their area synagogue. Other Jews who followed Christ had decided to stay in the synagogue. The community of John felt great pain and hostility from other Jews, both those who followed Christ and those who didn't, and from Greek Christians. They struggled to carve out an identity for themselves and became a very cohesive, intense group.<sup>2</sup> Imagine them as a community of covered wagons, circled together against the intense storms of the outside world, where everything outside of their circle was darkness.<sup>3</sup>

The Johannine community, out of their experience of alienation in the world, developed a perspective on the world that was quite polemical and sectarian. They understood the world as composed of insiders and outsiders, of darkness and light, of believers and non-believers. For them, the decision to follow and believe in Christ involved a dramatic break from the world. To become a part of Christ involved a crisis judgment. In fact, the word for judgment in Greek, *Kitisis*, also means 'crisis.' For the Johannine

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<sup>2</sup> Raymond Brown, *Introduction to the New Testament* (New York: Doubleday, 1997), 373-376.

<sup>3</sup> Insight from Dr. Richard Hays, "Lecture on John" *Duke Divinity School Introduction to New Testament Class*.

community, when Jesus comes to you, you have to choose the light, or you remain in darkness. Jesus's coming into the world out of God's love confronts you with a decision to believe or not. There is no middle ground, no journey of faith---it is now or never. You are either saved or you are lost. You either have eternal life right now---or you live a death-filled life.<sup>4</sup> For the Johannine community, God's judgment is entirely passive, prosecuted not by God but induced by our reaction to the light of Christ. Judgment is disclosed through the crisis we experience when we encounter the living Christ and are either drawn to the light or flee into darkness in fear and brokenness.<sup>5</sup> Thus, judgment for the Johannine community doesn't mean that a supposedly loving God in verse 16 casts you out into darkness by verse 21. Rather when we encounter the love of God, and we chose not to receive it, we live in darkness. When we embrace the love of God given to us, then we live a beautiful life with God now, in the eternal present, with our brothers and sisters in the faith.

### **How We Share God's Love**

The Johannine community's proclamation of how God loves us and how we might experience judgment comes out of an entirely different experience than our own of Christianity in the Western world in 2012. This is not to say that Christians don't experience persecution now---in fact there are more martyrs than ever in places like Egypt and Syria. However, in the US we are protected by centuries of religious freedom and a culture heavily imbued with Christian influence, even if many choose to live secular lives now. We are not an oppressed community of covered wagons circled in upon ourselves. Therefore, we need to read these verses in our text today with nuance. Many within our Carbondale community have been hurt by Christian judgmentalism and by being accused of sin. Witnessing to

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<sup>4</sup> Rudolf Bultmann, *The Gospel According to John: A Commentary*, trans. G.R. Beasley-Murray, Hoare, and Riches (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1971), 159.

<sup>5</sup> David Lose, "Love or Justice" [workingpreacher.org](http://workingpreacher.org) accessed on March 12, 2012.

God's love by going up to someone and asking them, "Do you love darkness rather than light? Do you do evil deeds? You must come to the light!" is only going to wreck more harm.

An understanding of the Johannine culture behind these verses, and the difference within our own culture should nudge us toward a greater emphasis on God's grace and love in our verses today. Yes, as any good parent will tell you, what we do does matter, and judgment and accountability has a place in the Christian life. However, in our community especially, there is a much greater need to emphasize that by believing in Jesus we can have eternal life—in the present moment. We can live in the abundant love of God in Christ, knowing that each moment is graced. We can share with our neighbor, not by trite posterboard signs, but by a life of joy what it means to be in Christ. We can invite the Nicodemus in our town to come into the light, to come to Easter with us, to experience the gift of God's love. We can share with all whom we meet—and remind ourselves that God loved the world in this way—God gave his Son so that whoever believes with their whole life may have, right now, in this very moment, an abundant eternal life with God.