

“Loving The God-Hating World”

John 3:1-17

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Whenever I get ready to preach and start to do the Biblical studies I think are necessary for sermonizing, I am always reminded of my own shortcomings in the area of Biblical scholarship. As many mainline Protestants, I was not and, to really confess, am still not a regular reader of the Biblical witness. My knowledge of it has expanded over the years but I must confess that I didn't go to seminary to learn about the Bible. And I have proof that I maintained that stance.

During the middle or second year of seminary, students must take and pass a Bible content exam in order to continue on the path to ordination. I have no idea if this is still true but back in the ancient days of the 1970's this was a requirement. My best friend in seminary was a Bible scholar and just about aced the test. I failed it, not once, not twice but three times!! Luckily for me but not for the denomination, my home Presbytery was a compassionate group- and agreed to offer me an oral exam which they agreed I could substitute for the Bible content! As a result, I am standing here today! See there are others to blame for this situation!

Now I want you to be aware of this so that no one feels in any way challenged or inadequate by the exegetical explanation I am about to stumble through. Our lack of Biblical knowledge is based, I fear, on our (and here I think mainline Protestant denominations have really fallen short) surrendering the field of Biblical studies to evangelical political activists who popularized a stilted and very narrow literal interpretation of certain Bible passages which they use to secure support for their political positions. For as you know, the simplicity of literalism and isogesis is that it sets up a simple yes or no, good or bad situation, a false dichotomy. We should spend more time reading the Bible and seeking to see it as a document which is extremely complex in its message but also which is very much a reflection of the time in which it was written, developed, the stories were told.

A few preliminary comments on the Gospel of John – this is the latest of the Gospels and in some ways the most theologically complex. Its beginning is a creation story in which Jesus as savior is defined as light and/or the word and its ending is an explanation of who wrote the gospel or at least upon whose words it is based. There are also a series of signs which the writer of John sets forth as the ways in which Jesus reveals his glory. And as an aside it is also the first of them which embarrass the Baptists and Methodists as it is the story of the turning of water into wine so a wedding reception can continue but I digress!

John's Gospel offers us a gospel filled with stories and sayings not found in other gospels and that includes this particular story we read today. The story is of a Pharisee who comes to Jesus in the dark of night and seeks a better understanding of who Jesus is despite his confession that obviously Jesus is from God because of the signs which he

does. Now in this story is a verse which probably all of us know and which is sometimes referred to as the Gospels in one verse. John 3:16 is known by most if not all Christians and many non-Christians. It is held up at sporting events and used as a means of evangelizing by many and I want to be honest and say I find that too bad because it is but one more attempt I think to make the Bible say something it doesn't. I think it's important that we examine the verse within the context and learn from it.

This reading is almost parabolic or parable like in its symbolism. We begin with a confession that Jesus is obviously from God as the signs he performs and the stuff he teaches are the stuff of the divine. Nicodemus comes in the dark searching for the enlightenment offered by this teacher and doer of signs. In John, light and darkness is a major theme. The entire gospel may be seen as a journey from the darkness of present to the light of tomorrow and the salvation offered by faith in Jesus as the Christ.

Now in our story we need take note of a couple interesting symbols used. The notion of being born again is one with which we Presbyterians are not very comfortable but in the context of this passage is important. We need remember that birth for the audience of John meant if not everything, it meant so much of how one would live one's life. First and foremost, the community into which one was born was probably the same one in which one would live one's life, marry within the community, raise one's children, and eventually die. In addition, one's social status, much like today, would be determined by one's birth. Then as it is true today, wealth was passed from one generation to the next and the notion of gaining wealth by entrepreneurial activity was almost unknown. If one were born poor, one would probably die poor, born rich die rich. When John's Jesus talks about being born again this is a real challenge to the notion of a birth-status conscious society. If I am born anew of the spirit does that mean I will be of a different status than the family to which I was biologically born? And this spirit by which one is born anew, if it blows where it will does that mean it ignores or denies the communal mores or expectations of the day? Could one of poor status and/or physical disfigurement which would deny one access to certain aspects of the religious benefits of the community be born anew without regard? Does this spirit really ignore the societal expectations of the time?

As we mull those questions, let's consider a second symbol in our reading. "Just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness" begins verse 14. The story from which this is taken is found in Numbers chapter 21 and is part of the wilderness saga of the Jewish corpus. As they wandered the people complained and the story tells us God tired of their whining so God sent poisonous snakes among them. As the people were bitten and died, God had mercy on them and told Moses to construct a serpent on a pole which when looked at by the people would cure them of the poisonous bites. So Moses "lifted up" a serpent and the people were saved! We need also be aware that the book we call Second Kings contains a follow up in which King Hezekiah destroys this pole when it is found that the people have come to worship the pole rather than the mercy of God which it symbolized. Juxtaposing this with the notion of the lifting up of the Son of Man, one may want to ask several questions. Does this verse imply that one need take care in one's worship of the Son of Man to assure that what one is worshipping is God and not

the symbol which points toward God's mercy and love of the world? Are the heavenly things the truth to which the symbols point and the earthly things the symbols themselves?

That's a brief overview of the context within which we find what may be the most famous verse of the Gospels – that God so loved the world that God sent God's only son that who so ever believes in him will have eternal life. This verse itself offers some interesting ideas. First the word for "world" is better translated "the God hating world" as that is how John uses this word throughout his gospel. And the eternal life offered is a present and not a future reality. It is not life after death as an eternal ongoing event but rather a reality to be realized in the moment! God loves the God hating world so much that God enters into it in the form of a human being and in believing in this we participate in God's reality of eternal life as a quality of living right now!

So what does that all mean? I want to offer three ideas. First, we use symbols to point us towards God and provide a means of accessing what it means to believe in God. When it is those symbols we begin to worship and not what they point to we lose. We lose our faith and the meaning it can offer us. We lose the opportunity to experience God's presence in new and more meaningful ways. We lose the opportunity to grow in a faith, which is alive and changing with us.

Second, God loves the world and we ought also. It is not true that God's love is limited nor is it a love which seeks to destroy this reality in some cataclysmic, apocalyptic event as punishment for our tolerance of each other. God loves the world and calls us to care for it. We ought not destroy the possibilities of tomorrow just so we can live comfortably today. We are called by God to love the world just as God does and that means to care for it and all its inhabitants – those with us today and their great grandchildren. We care for the environment and we seek to assure justice and peace for all people not out of some ideological commitment but as a response to God's love of the world! If God loves it, we ought also.

Lastly, our faith immerses us in eternity but that eternity is not someday when we die and go to some other reality. That eternity is a quality of life not a quantity. Faith adds meaning, hope, pleasure to our existence and enables us, even in the worst of circumstances to find hope in our struggle for justice and for peace. The promise of Easter is a promise of God's continuing participation with us without regard to what we do to reject God. AMEN.