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**Second Sunday in Lent**

**March 16, 2014**

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**“Good News for Midlife Angst”**

*(John 3:16-17)*

Rev. David K. Groth

*“For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him” (Jn. 3:16-17).*

### **Collect of the Day**

O God, You see that of ourselves we have no strength. By Your mighty power defend us from all adversities that may happen to the body and from all evil thoughts that may assault and hurt the soul; through Jesus Christ, Your Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever.

**Amen**

One of my favorite characters in the Bible is Nicodemus. On the one hand, he is a Pharisee, and we know about them; as a whole they're not very likeable. On the other hand, Nicodemus is the kind of guy many of us would like to be. He is successful and influential. He is a member of the Sanhedrin, a select group of seventy men who essentially serve as the government of Israel under Roman occupation. He has a great job and surely a great wardrobe to go with it and great house. But even with all that, something's not quite right with Nicodemus. Something's gnawing at him.

I picture the Sanhedrin being a Good Ol' Boys Club; it didn't have too many young, college grads sitting on it. So I'm thinking Nicodemus is at least middle age if not a little older. Of course the text doesn't say any of this, but I picture a guy with mostly gray hair. He's a little soft around the waist. When he walks, his knees clunk and grind, and when he sits at a meeting he's in the habit of folding his hands together to hide the tremors. When there's any kind of white noise in the background he simply cannot understand a conversation. And he knows intellectually he's past his prime; he's just not as sharp as he used to be. He cannot reliably come up with words like "refrigerator" or "humidifier". Whenever he tells a story and gets stuck, he must endure his wife's hand gesture of irritated contempt which says, "Get on with it, already." And he still gets confused between the I-pad and I-pod and I-phone and the I-whatever else.

Nicodemus never wanted to get old; doesn't see

the point of it. To him, nothing is gained; things are only taken away. When he gets snarky he thinks of old age as a pathetic decline toward the state of a turnip softening in the compost heap. And when he took his old pick-up into the mechanic to give it the once over, afterwards the mechanic said, "Take care of this baby and it'll last you for the rest of your life." That was not good news for Nicodemus.

I might have taken a liberty or two, but do you have a picture of the Nicodemus in my head? If his years were a landscape, he's reached the top of his hill. Looking back he can see where he's been. Looking forward, for the first time he can see all the way to the end of his life, if only in outline. From the top of his hill he can see his whole life span, beginning and end, in either direction, not far from where he's standing. And the view makes him want to weep. He's rich, successful – and miserable.

The Sanhedrin has heard of Jesus and is already monitoring his whereabouts. Summary reports of his miracles are periodically brought before the Sanhedrin, as well as thumbnail sketches of what Jesus is teaching and preaching. It's all very dry and objective; no sensationalism or even interpretation is welcome; just information with which the seventy men can come to their own conclusions. But most of Nicodemus' colleagues have already made up their minds about Jesus. Some think he's a fraud, others a threat, and still others just another heretical preacher. Some wave him off as a flash in the pan. Others are not so sure. But Nicodemus finds himself privately intrigued by the ideas and character and reputation of Jesus.

And so one night, after dark, when the city was quiet and he would not be seen, he goes to the house where he knows Jesus is staying. I like this best about Nicodemus. He takes a chance. Even if it is after dark, he risks his chair on the Sanhedrin to sit at the feet of Jesus.

The Bible records only the basic framework of

their conversation, but it is enough to reveal an exchange that is a bit tortured. They seem to be talking past one another. Nicodemus flatters Jesus at first. Jesus ignores that and gets right down to business. "Unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God." This statement throws Nicodemus off balance: "Surely a man cannot enter a second time into his mother's womb to be born!" Jesus says, "of course not. It's a metaphor." The point is, "No one gets into the kingdom of God unless he is born of water and the Spirit."

Whenever water and Spirit are close together in the same sentence, you and I recognize that as the language of Holy Baptism. Nicodemus, of course, does not. You and I know that salvation is a gift given us by grace through faith, not something we can earn. Nicodemus isn't there yet. All his life he's been taught (and, in turn, has taught others) that salvation is based on keeping the Law in its purity. So he's confused by the words of Jesus. "How can this be?" he asks. Jesus stings him. "You are Israel's teacher and you do not understand these things?" Maybe Nicodemus has six honorary doctorates but he doesn't yet understand mercy and grace. It's been there all along in the Old Testament, but Nicodemus had theological blinders on. He's an expert in the Law, but knows nothing of the Gospel.

And so, in simplest of terms, Jesus tells Nicodemus of God's gracious plan for the world. "God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life." It's the Gospel in one concise sentence.

The words are easy; the concept can be difficult. There has always been a hint of scandal associated with it. How could God ever love the world . . . all of it? How could God love even those who do evil? Often, we are simply unable to believe this. And so we start qualifying it. We add conditions to it saying, "God loves those who are decent." We tie strings to it. "God

will love us so long as we are kind to one another and active in our church and good citizens of the community.” Sometimes we argue with it and even reject it outright. "Can't be true" we say, in effect. "God can't love all of it: maybe God loves part of it, but surely not all of it. Likes it a lot maybe, offers to love it if it would simply start behaving itself." And the really sad thing is when we think like this, we've turned the Christian faith into a religion of law, just like all the others. When we think like this, we're thinking just like a first century Pharisee, and we've put on the same blinders that Nicodemus wore for so long. When we think like this, we deny for ourselves and others the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Don't spend too much time trying to figure out how God could love you or anyone else broken by sin. Just accept the simplicity of it. "God so loved the world that he sent his Son." That means, though you and I may be full of sin, we are still God's beloved.

If we believe God loves the world, it changes everything. If we believe that, then we have to come to terms with the fact that our enemies may not be God's enemies – that God may love those we hate . . . the drug peddler, the pedophile, the militant atheist. If we believe that God loves the world, then we must learn to believe every single human life is beloved of God and sacred to him, from the tiniest unborn baby, to the very old man dying of advanced Alzheimer's. God loves it all. He hates sin, to be sure, but still finds a way to love the sinner. He doesn't just tolerate sinners, which would be the most uncaring thing to do. No he loves them, and lays down his life for them.

"God loves the world." The Greek word for world is "cosmos." That means all of it. . . the ecosystem, the stars, the dogs, the snow crystals, his whole creation. If you believe God loves the world then the whole matter of environmental abuse, chemical spills, disappearing species . . . it's not only evidence of monumental stupidity, but also a matter for God's

church to be concerned with. If God loves the world, then warfare is particularly heartbreaking to God and should also be to his people.

If God loves the world, it must mean he wants his people to join him in protecting the world and trying to fix what's broken. God's love for the world certainly gives us something to do when we wake up in the morning.

But the biggest difference of all is the personal difference – God loves you so much that he gave his Son for you. Knowledge of this is what we need the most. Without this, without some indication of our value, there is a sense in which we perish. If you don't know you have value because no one ever told you--you will spend your life desperately trying to establish and prove your value. And if you have been told in some way that you have no value, because of abuse or because you're old, or ill, or out of work, or imprisoned, or because you're just not good enough or smart enough or productive enough. . . if you've been told that you are of no value, then you need to hear this passage again for the first time. God loved you so much that he sent his Son to die for you, that you may have everlasting life.

It is a wonderful thing to hear another say, "I love you." What we believe and practice as Christians is really quite simple: In Jesus Christ, God has said those most beautiful words to you. God doesn't hate you. He doesn't resent you. He's not trying to avoid you. He's not even neutral towards you, which itself would be good news for sinners. But the truth is God loves you. It's a love given without condition; a love so wondrous that it lays down life itself; a love that asks only that we receive it by faith, and allow it to recreate us, rebirth us; a love that asks only that we trust the one who gives it.

Nicodemus came at night to see Jesus. He came under the cover of darkness for fear of losing his position and reputation. And he heard of a God who didn't come down to condemn the world, but to save it.

He heard of a God who doesn't wait for men and women to become decent, but a God who loves them even when they're not, and takes on their sin as his own.

This message, this Gospel left a mark on Nicodemus. We know this because at the very end of the story, on the very day Jesus died Joseph of Arimathea goes in and asks Pilate for the body of Jesus. Joseph was a disciple, but secretly, for fear of being persecuted. Pilate grants permission. Guess who goes out with Joseph to retrieve the body? It's none other than our friend Nicodemus. The text says Nicodemus brought along 75 pounds of precious myrrh and aloes for the burial. It would have cost him a fortune. Taking the body down, the two men carefully wrapped it up with the spices with strips of linen and laid Jesus in a tomb near the place where they crucified him. What a good thing they did for Jesus. It was a risky thing to do, if they were found to be associated with Jesus. And it was a selfless, generous thing to do, because Jesus was dead. He'd never be able to pay them back. What a good thing they did!

We never hear about Nicodemus again, which is too bad; I'd like to know whatever became of him. I suspect he would go back to the Sanhedrin, because that's what he knew and that's where his pay check was coming from and that was his routine. And when those daily reports were handed out in the weeks following the crucifixion, and the thumbnail sketches given, I'm sure Nicodemus would have heard about people claiming to have seen Jesus alive again. Even those reports are bone dry: no sensationalism or interpretation, just information with which the men could make their own conclusions. Another day, another person, another crowd claiming to have seen Jesus alive and well. On receiving those reports, did Nicodemus smile . . . quietly, privately? Did he laugh spontaneously? Or could it be that he wept . . . like a newborn baby . . . or perhaps like an old man who was just given a brand new life? Amen.

