

The Upside Down Guide to Life:

The World's Strangest Love Story

John 3:14-21

March 26th, 2006 (the 4th Sunday in Lent)

“For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have everlasting life.” Few people would argue that John 3:16 is the most famous Bible verse in the world. Even people who have no contact with the Bible or church have seen “John 3:16” plastered on brightly-colored signs at major sporting events. That all started with a guy named Rollen Stewart. Initially Rollen just wanted to get on television so he wore an oversized, rainbow-colored wig to sports events. But after “Rock and Roll” Rollen (as he was called) became a follower of Christ, he felt called to travel around the country, wearing his rainbow wig and holding up big signs with the Bible reference “John 3:16” plastered on it. He even appeared in the crowd at the wedding of Prince Charles and Lady Di. “Rock and Roll” Rollen was arrested for his antics, but his loyal disciples kept his sign-raising “John 3:16” gig going.

Now you know the story behind John 3:16. Of course there is another story behind this verse – you won’t find it at the Super Bowl; you’ll find it in your Bible. As we just heard in our Bible reading, John 3:16 does not stand alone. You can’t just cut it out and put it on a t-shirt or a brightly-colored placard. This verse is part of a story, a story that begins in verse 1 with a man named Nicodemus. Read verse 3:1. In nearly every way imaginable, Nicodemus was a good person. He was religious. The Pharisees were the best and most moral people of their day. When it came to getting it right with religion and keeping the religious rules, there was no one better than the Pharisees. He was also an intellectual. The Pharisees were the biblical scholars of their day. Finally, Nicodemus was a community leader. “Member of the Jewish council” meant that he sat on the Sanhedrin, the highest judicial and spiritual authority in the land. So here he is – a lifelong church member with a PhD. from Harvard, sitting on the school board and church council and Rotary and the parade committee. They just don’t get any better than Nicodemus.

In verse 2 we’re told that Nicodemus came to Jesus at night – hence we could call this story “Nic at Night” – and gives Jesus a compliment (verse 2). In other words: “Jesus, you’re really close to being one of us, a religious insider, a good and moral person like us.” This opening launches Jesus and Nicodemus into an intense discussion that will lead us to John 3:16. Notice how Jesus begins the conversation by (as we would say) cutting the chase: “I tell you the truth, unless a man is born again, he cannot enter the kingdom of God.” Nicodemus – like every good Jew of his time – knew that God had promised over and over again in the Old Testament that He would cleanse and renew his people in a miraculous new-birth-like experience. Listen to one example of this promise from the prophet Ezekiel – (God said), “I will sprinkle clean water on you and you will be clean, I will cleanse you from all your impurities and from all your idols. I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you; I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh” (Ezekiel 36:25-26). God promised a spiritual rebirth, new life with a new heart.

Now the shocking thing for a person like Nicodemus was this: he already knew the Bible; he was following the routine and keeping the rules. He was moral and religious and good. And yet Jesus – the upstart Rabbi – dares to tell him, “Look, I don’t care how many degrees you have or how moral you are or how well you keep the rules or how long you’ve been religious, I have news for you: you need to be born again. It’s not about the externals; it’s about an inside job in which God touches your heart with the power of the Holy Spirit, cleanses your heart from sin and makes your spiritual life come alive.”

Then Jesus uses another analogy in verses 7-8. In other words, just as you can’t corral and control the wind, so you can’t corral or control the new birth, that internal, Holy Spirit process in which God touches your heart and makes you come alive. It’s not about your effort, your morality or religiosity; it’s about what God does for you and in you. You see, religion and religiosity are so tightly tied to control – it’s a process that we control from start to finish. We are the “seekers.” Jesus is going to say, “It’s really the other way around: God is the seeker; God is the finder.”

Well, now Nicodemus – the religious scholar, the good and moral person – is absolutely befuddled. “How can this be?” he asks Jesus. Jesus reminds Nicodemus of another Bible story. It might be a strange story to us, but it was certainly a “culturally relevant” story in Jesus’ day. Read verses 14-15. The story (which you can find in the Book of Numbers chapter 21) goes like this: God’s people had been wandering in the desert and it wasn’t exactly the Holiday Inn – no whirlpools or continental breakfasts or free cable - so they did what they did best: they started complaining. “Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the desert? There is no bread! There is no water! And we detest this miserable food!” (a direct quote from Numbers 21:5). Waa, waa, waa. Of course this involves much more than honest questioning or even childish whining; their hearts are in active rebellion against God. In effect, once again, they were telling God, “Buzz off, God! Leave me alone!” (If you’ve never looked into your heart and honestly faced your rebellion and animosity towards God, your compulsion to tell God to buzz off and leave you alone, and if you haven’t faced the fact that your animosity towards God never goes away, then you’re not ready for the astonishing good news of John 3:16). So in order to knock some sense into them, God sent a bunch of poisonous snakes that started biting people. At the same time, God also sent a solution to the venomous snake epidemic: their spiritual leader Moses made a bronze snake, tacked it on to a huge pole and stuck the pole in the ground. Then whenever anyone was bitten by a poisonous snake, he just had to look at the bronze snake and he would live.

Okay, so what’s the point of that? What is Jesus trying to tell us by bringing up this strange story. His point is three-fold:

- (1) we’re in big trouble – we all have this condition called sin, we’ve been bitten by it and it’s 100% fatal;
- (2) God always provides a way out of our trouble – always;
- (3) Believe, receive, take, grab on to, focus on God’s provision – that’s the only way. In this case, the bronze serpent was just a piece of bronze; the provision was God’s mercy and grace.

First, we're in big trouble. That's the whole point of Nicodemus' conversation with Jesus. Nicodemus, the good, religious, moral, ethical, decent, Bible-believing, community-involved man is still lost in sin. Actually, Jesus is saying, "Nicodemus, you're no better than the snake-bitten whiners in the desert." Later in this story Jesus would put it this way (see verses 19-20): "Light has come into the world, but men loved darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil. Everyone who does evil hates the light, and will not come to the light because their deeds are evil." That's the story of the human race. We don't like the light very much – and it isn't just really bad people; we all avoid the light. Religion and religious activity can actually be one colossal, organized way to flee the light and hide in the dark. The point is: we'd rather have darkness.

This biblical truth came home to me while watching the Academy-award winning film "Crash." The movie opens with a car wreck that serves as a metaphor for the way our relationships keep colliding into each other. We watch as a Persian shop keeper, a Hispanic locksmith, two black gangsters, a wealthy black film director, a rich white couple from the suburbs, and an idealistic white cop all wrestle with the darkness of the human heart. Relationships are marked by fear, prejudice, rage and lostness. Good people are bad and bad people are good. For instance, a police officer molests a black woman in front of her husband and then later that same day he risks his life to pull her from a burning car wreck. This same officer tells an idealistic young cop, "You think you know who you are, just wait a few years." By the end of the movie the idealistic young cop, who abhors racism and prejudice, kills a young black man and the illusion of his own decency goes up in flames.¹ "This is the verdict," Jesus said – and it's the same verdict in every heart, every home, every culture, every political party, every church and religious group – "Light has come into the world, but men loved darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil."

This is big trouble. It's like being bitten by a deadly snake in the desert. When we refuse and turn away from God's provision for our trouble, we're then in even worse trouble. Here's how Jesus put it (read verses 17-18). At this point we don't just need a little improvement; we need someone to remove our heart of stone and put a new heart within us; we need to be born from above; we need a new birth from outside of us that will permanently transform the nature of our heart. And that's exactly what Jesus has been promising.

So here's the good news: God always provides a way out of our trouble. Now we can get to John 3:16. "For God so loved the world..." When you put this little verse in the context of this whole story, it's utterly shocking. "**For God so loved...**" What? Where did that come from? We told God to buzz off. One of the most profound insights from the realm of psychotherapy is that we build elaborate defense mechanisms so we can hide from others and especially from ourselves. We not only hate the light, but biblically speaking, we're in active flight from God. And yet, we read these startling words, "For God so loved..." I love what the crusty spiritual leader Martin Luther once said 500

¹ This summary is based on an article by Daniel Clendenin entitled "Life and light, Death and Darkness" found journeywithjesus.net.

years ago, “If I were God, and these people were as disobedient as they now be, I would knock the world to pieces.” That’s one option for God: just knock the world to pieces. Instead, we read “For God so loved ...” Repeat it over and over again. It’s simply astounding and you won’t find these words anywhere in the history of religion.

First, notice how wide it is: God so loved *the world*. Not just part of the world – like one nation or tribal group or ethnic group. Not just really good people. God so loved the world. This is not the way the world operates. During the Iraq war in 2003 there were some shocking pictures of a wounded Kurdish man in northern Iraq. He had been brought on a stretcher to the front door of a hospital. The hospital refused to admit the man, and the Arab men stood around him, spitting on him. He just wasn’t part of their group. Now, surely, this would never happen in our country! About the same time the *New York Times* ran a story of a middle-class Arab family living in Queens. Their oldest son was serving in our navy on the USS *Abraham*. His younger brother, a 12 year old in public schools, was routinely abused and taunted with these words: “We hope your brother comes back dead.”²

Think of all the people that you don’t like. Or if you’re too nice, think of all the people that you really just don’t give a rip about. You see them on the news. You pass them on the street. They clear your dishes at the diner or they press your shirts. They cross your path on your way to History or Biology. Go ahead, think of them. Seriously, I’m going to pause so you can see these people in your mind. (Pause). Now, stamp this word on their faces: **Loved by God**. If those words are not the greatest reality in your mind, if they don’t burn brightly in your heart every time you think of every human being on this planet, then you’re not thinking like Jesus yet. That’s how wide God’s love extends. “God so loved *the world*.”

Secondly, notice how deep it is. The Greek word for love that’s used in this verse and throughout the New Testament is the little word *agape*. As you may know, one of the most common words for love in Greek literature was the word *eros* from which we get our word *erotic*. It wasn’t just about sex; *eros*-love meant two things: love of the worthy and a desire to possess. *Eros* is drawn to the beautiful, the good, the perfect and the lovely. So Plato has Socrates ask, “Must not (*eros*) be only love of beauty and not of ugliness?” *Eros*-love is for beauty-contest winners and the Final Four champions. And secondly, *eros* longs for possession. *Erotic* love always says, “I must have him. I can’t live without her.” The New Testament authors did use *eros* – or a number of other Greek words for love – to describe God’s love. They chose a word that hardly anyone ever used, the word *agape*. It’s radically different than *eros* on both fronts: *agape* is love for the unworthy and it desires to give of itself. That is God’s love. God does not love you because you are worthy. God loves us in all our unworthiness.

Many people around the world this week will enter small rooms and introduce themselves like this, “Hi, my name is Matt and I’m an alcoholic” or “My name is Jane and I’m a compulsive eater.” Or perhaps they’ll go to one of our small groups here at TVC and say something like, “Hi, I’m a sinner, but I’ve never admitted that to another

² Both stories quoted in **The Seven Last Words of Christ**, by Fleming Rutledge, pages 40-41.

human being for ten years.” Now all of this is true, but let’s never forget that even in the midst of our sin we are also the beloved of God. That’s how the Apostle Paul greeted the church in Rome: You are “Gods’ beloved ones” he told them (see Romans 1:7). What do you call yourself when you wake up in the morning and go to bed at night? Who are you? What is your name? Failure-to-measure-up, not-good-enough, rejected one, inadequate one, loser? What is your name? “For God so loved the world...” God loves you. You are the beloved of God. Let that be your new name – the beloved of God.

Third, notice how costly this love is. “For God so loved the world that *he gave* ...” Agape love always gives. *Wait, a minute*, you might say, *I thought God-church-religion was always about what God takes away. It’s about what I give for God that really matters.* We always hear, “If you’re going to follow Jesus, there’s a price to pay. So give – give of your time, your talent, your money. Give, give, give!” There is some truth to this, but we have to see what always precedes this: “God so loved the world that he gave...” God gives. The Greek construction goes like this: “God loves so that he gave.” In other words, God’s love isn’t just a sentimental feeling; it is costly sacrifice. And what did he give? He gave his “only-begotten son.” The Gospel story doesn’t focus on how much we give up for God; it always focuses on how much God has given up for us.

That’s the point behind the strange phrase in verse 14 where it says that “as Moses lifted up the snake in the desert, so the Son of Man must be lifted up.” What’s he talking about? It’s referring to Jesus’ death on the cross, the time when he was “lifted up.” Now this is really strange because we are the ones who should have died. We’re the ones with the poison in our systems. We’re the ones who run away from the light. And yet, God takes our place. Notice this doesn’t pit an angry God the Father against a victim Jesus who bears our sin. No, they are in it together. The work of Christ on the cross is God at work, God saving the world.

What do we do with this? We respond, receive, and believe. The word Jesus used for believe is almost always in the present tense, or “keep on believing, keep on trusting, keep on receiving.” In other words, faith isn’t like jumping through a hoop so you can get through to the other side. It’s more like a marriage or a life-long friendship: you keep walking with this person through life. Faith is like that: it’s a walk with God that lasts your whole life. Does that sound easy? It isn’t. It isn’t easy because the prerequisite of faith involves coming to the end of trust in our own righteousness and religiosity. It means giving up control. It means admitting that no matter how good I am my heart needs a new birth. I need to be born from above.

What does it mean to believe? There is a true story of a man named John Paton who moved to an island in the South Pacific. His gave his life for a clear mission: love them, share life with them and then translate the Bible into their native language. Unfortunately, as he was translating the Bible he discovered that they didn’t have a word for faith or believe. It’s an important word in the Bible so it threw his entire project in jeopardy. One day, though, he joined a bunch of men for a hunting party. The hunting party spent a few grueling days traveling up a steep mountain trail before they shot a large deer. Of course now they had to carry it on a pole all the way down the mountain

pass. As they reached their home, utterly exhausted, they dropped the deer on the ground and flopped into a large chair on the front porch. As he sprawled on the chair, one of the men said, “My, it is good to stretch myself out and rest here.” Paton jumped to his feet and recorded the phrase. He had found his word for faith. So whenever he came across the words faith or believe in the New Testament he translated it like this: “For God so loved the world that whoever stretches himself out and rests on Christ shall not perish but will have eternal life.” That is faith. It is the end of self-effort in order to find salvation or earn God’s love. It is the beginning of trusting and resting in Christ.

Someone might say, “*But I did that twenty years ago. This is so boring and elementary.*” No, no, no, this is your life. Every day is just more of trusting and resting in Christ in deeper and more areas of your life. That’s what it means when Jesus promises the gift of eternal life. In the Bible “eternal life” doesn’t start when you die and go to heaven. It starts now. It’s the life that you live now because God has made you alive. You don’t grow beyond this – and once you do, your faith will start to wither and die. Life is just more and more of stretching yourself out and resting on Christ. So if you stumble and fall this week, your life is trusting Christ. If you believe the lies of our culture that you’re not good enough, smart enough, beautiful enough, you return to this truth.

Do you believe that God loves you? No, do you really believe that God loves you? Is that the greatest reality in your life? Is that the greatest reality you want to share with your family and friends and co-workers and neighbors? Do you believe that you really are the “beloved of God”? As you grow in that knowledge, as you learn to make that truth your treasure, your foundation, your joy, your song, your ultimate truth, you will become secure. Because your security will not rest in the praise of others, or the judgments of men and women, or your own righteousness; it will rest on the judgment of the Living God, the God who said, “For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only son that whoever believes in him will not perish but have eternal life.”