

LOVE IN THE TIME OF CORONAVIRUS

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Grace Church in New York
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Jesus said, *For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. (John 3:16)*

Congratulations to you all. You have braved a public gathering, and I don't see a surgical mask on any of us. You've come to church against the best advice of the CDC. I don't mean to be flippant, but these days it's nearly impossible to avoid the latest news about the coronavirus emergency. We live in a time of fear. We are told that this is not a drill. It really is a matter of life and death. Every day we hear reports of how Covid-19 is spreading from country to country, city to city, person to person, with a rising death toll. Thousands of people have been quarantined on cruise ships, other travel plans have been canceled, businesses have temporarily shut down, and the market is fluctuating. What is more, grocery stores are experiencing a run on Hostess Twinkies, and other food-like products with long shelf lives.

Perhaps you've come to church today hoping for a brief reprieve. You'd like to focus on heavenly things instead of such earthly things. Needless to say, the church is hardly exempt from examining how our own rites and practices can contribute to the spread of germs. A nearby diocese has postponed its annual convention, recognizing that most of the participants would be elderly, and at high risk for infection. The bishop of another neighboring diocese has directed that only the bread of the sacrament be offered, not the wine. A prominent Presbyterian church in the city has gone so far as to suspend Communion altogether until further notice. Here at Grace Church you'll notice hand sanitizers in the narthex, and the encouragement to use them early and often. Also new today is the instruction not to intinct – or dip – the wafer into the wine. Why? Because hands and fingers are the real culprits in transmitting disease. So at the passing of the peace, instead of shaking hands or even bumping fists, the new procedure is to bump elbows. It's called “the Ebola bump,” and short of sending a text message, it's the safest way to say, “The peace of the Lord be always with you.” Except, I thought we were supposed to sneeze into our elbows. Now we're bumping them? I'm very confused.

In today's reading from the Gospel of John, Nicodemus the Pharisee, who came to Jesus by night, was confused and not particularly feeling the peace of the Lord. The Pharisees were an influential party amongst the Jews of Jesus' day, and they were particularly concerned with the spread of sin. Sin, they believed, was like a disease that could spread from person to person, and only by separating from the rank and file of the population could they protect themselves from infection. The name Pharisee itself means “set apart,” or separated. What distinguished the Pharisees from the rest of the people was their scrupulous keeping of the Mosaic Law. For them, the Law of the Lord was their bulwark against sin, but obeying it was far more complicated than the Ten Commandments we recited at the beginning of the service. The Pharisees would ask how each individual law might apply to every conceivable situation in life. For example, to clarify what it really meant to keep the Sabbath holy, they would add layer upon layer of guidelines to the commandment, many of which then became laws unto themselves. They developed the laws of purity that governed the washing of hands, cups, pots, and vessels of bronze. They advised steering clear of certain types of people, who undoubtedly were being punished because they, or someone in their family had sinned: the lepers, the lame, the blind, the widows, the orphans. You see, bad things only happened to bad people because of sin. The Pharisees lived in fear of sin.

Nicodemus was a Pharisee. If you've read parts of the Bible and heard a sermon or two you might be inclined to boo and hiss whenever a Pharisee comes on the scene. Jesus himself took sharp and frequent issue with the Pharisees, though today we have to admit their ideas about hand

washing were ahead of their time. The truth is, most of the Pharisees were good people who seriously tried to fulfill the requirements of the Law, and by their example, call the rest of the Jews to live a life that was pleasing to God. Why, then, would Nicodemus come to Jesus by night? Did he mean to engage in a theological sparring match, and attempt to entrap Jesus in his own talk? No, it seems that Nicodemus was a sincere inquirer who had recognized the presence of God in Jesus. It could be that something was troubling his soul, causing the peace of God to elude him. Perhaps Jesus would have an answer. The conversation that ensued was far ranging, and John's account of it contains some of the most recognizable and important verses of the New Testament. Nicodemus and Jesus talked about natural and spiritual life, earthly and heavenly things, being born again or anew or from above, and salvation.

This week, as I read the familiar passage again and again, I began to hear a new tone to the voice of Jesus. It seems to me that Jesus was neither criticizing Nicodemus nor demanding that he change everything about his life. Rather, Jesus was complimenting Nicodemus, even encouraging him to relax because he was on the right track. Consider: the first thing that Nicodemus said to Jesus was a perfectly pleasant and respectful way to begin the conversation, "*Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God; for no one can do these signs that you do apart from the presence of God.*" In other words, "Jesus, I've seen the power of God at work in you, and I want to know more." Jesus replied, "*Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above.*" Jesus commended Nicodemus for his spiritual insight, "Nicodemus, you are a keen observer. You've seen the kingdom of God; you recognize the presence of God in the signs I've performed. This tells me that you are alive to the Spirit. You are being born anew from God."

If only Nicodemus had just said "thank you" and stayed quiet from then on we'd be singing our final hymn today far sooner than we actually will. You see, it's with his next question that Nicodemus went off the rails. He interpreted Jesus' words about new birth with a flat literalism, and on those terms alone pressed to understand how anyone who was old could be born again. As we read on in the passage we can see the patience of Jesus in the pains he took to steer the conversation – and Nicodemus – back on the track of the love of God. For our purposes today he concluded: *For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.* Nicodemus, God loves you. God loves the world. I see in you a work in progress.

Many would say it is I who have gone off the rails here in imagining that Jesus in any way was commending Nicodemus. Jesus, they would say, was throwing down the gauntlet to Nicodemus, challenging him to realize that his Pharisaic approach to protecting himself from sin was hopelessly outdated and ineffectual. I think of a particular exhibit at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. Whenever I go I enjoy the display of medieval knights and armor. Henry VIII himself commissioned one of them, and it is known that he wore it. Another suit or armor that catches my attention has a dent in it from an early musket ball. The suit dates from a time not long after Henry, when hand-held firearms were first being used effectively in battle. For a brief period after the invention of guns, some armies still sent their soldiers into the field wearing medieval armor. They didn't last long against the new firepower, and that was the end of the knight in shining armor. Likewise, the conventional take on what Jesus said to Nicodemus was that everything must go. The Law was insufficient to protect him from sin. He needed to shed his old ways and believe in Jesus if he were to triumph in spiritual warfare. He needed to be born again.

What does it mean to be born again? Many will say that it should be a dramatic, emotional experience, akin to the moment you realize that you've fallen deeply and profoundly in love with someone. Suddenly, God becomes strikingly real. Your whole outlook on life and your entire personality change for the better. You've been born again. Some Christians will go so far as to say that being born again is a matter of eternal life and death. It is the only true and effective inoculation against sin and damnation. It is the key experience of life in Christ, and so they will

ask, “Have you been born again?” I often reply, “Yes, but probably not in the way that you were born again.” You see, God moves differently through all of us. For some people, awakening to the reality of God’s living, loving presence is indeed a sudden experience. For others, the dawning is more gradual. Still for some, they’ve never known a time when they weren’t aware of God’s presence. We are all a work in progress.

Nicodemus was a work in progress. Based on what Jesus said to him, I think it’s safe to conclude that this Pharisee was in the lifelong process of being born again. It was happening, whether or not he understood it. Consider: Jesus used the analogy of birth to illustrate spiritual awakening. Every one of us, without exception, went through the process of being born from our mother’s womb. Did any of us in the moment comprehend it? Does an infant being born understand the experience of moving from darkness to light? Of course not. But comprehension is not a requirement for participation. Likewise the wind. In the days of Jesus people didn’t understand weather patterns the way we do. They didn’t know where the wind came from or where it went. But again, comprehension wasn’t required to feel a breeze, or see the rustle of leaves in the tree, or harness the power of wind to fill a sail.

“Relax, Nicodemus,” is what I hear Jesus saying to the Pharisee. “You don’t need to understand what it means to be born from God in order for it to be happening.” It was happening. Nicodemus saw the power of God at work in Jesus. He sought him out with sincere questions. The writer of John’s Gospel gives us two more brief glimpses of Nicodemus, both indicative of his turning to Jesus. When the leaders of the Pharisees were plotting to entrap Jesus, Nicodemus spoke up in defense of the one he had gone to see by night. He said they ought to go hear and see for themselves (7:50). Then at towards the end of the Gospel, after the crucifixion when Joseph of Arimathea came to claim the body of Jesus, Nicodemus went with him and brought expensive spices for the burial (19:39).

What did Nicodemus believe specifically about Jesus? We don’t know for sure. But we can see that step by step, he was coming to trust that the words and deeds of Jesus conveyed the grace of God. He was coming to believe that the grace of God – the love of God – would be sufficient to protect him from sin. He was coming to faith in Jesus. What is more, he could have his new faith, and keep on washing his hands, too. One thing we can all understand these days: cleanliness is next to godliness.

A story is told of Karl Barth, one of the greatest Christian thinkers of the 20th century or any other. From before World War One until his death in 1968 Karl Barth was a Protestant pastor and university professor of theology who wrote and taught with passion and conviction, and had a profound influence in the Christian world. His massive work, Church Dogmatics, is a twenty-plus volume scholarly treatise dealing with all the issues of belief and existence. One of my professors in seminary had listened to Karl Barth give a lecture, and he remembered that merely the way Barth said the word “God” conveyed the richness and the depth of the life time of thought he had given to theology.

Toward the end of his life Barth was being interviewed, and the question put to him was something on the order of: what have you learned in all these years? How would you summarize your life’s work? People braced themselves for a deeply profound, yet highly technical statement that would be largely inaccessible to anyone outside of an ivory tower. The great theologian thought for a moment, and then responded: “*Jesus loves me, this I know, for the Bible tells me so.*”

Jesus himself put it this way in describing his life and work, when Nicodemus came to him by night: *For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.*