

March 5, 2023
John 3:1-17

Lent 2
Pastor Jeff Laustsen

“Tenacious Love”

“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.”

Every night, the Parker family would turn on the front porch light and leave it on until morning. It wasn't merely a safety feature; it was a sign of hope that perhaps this would be the night in which Raymond would return. From childhood, Raymond had been known as a “problem child”; some even referred to him as the “black sheep” of the family. Raymond always rebelled against rules and expectations; he was the child who always challenged authority figures, from his parents to his teachers to any adult whose directives he would question and inevitably disobey. As he grew older, these childhood tendencies intensified; Raymond became a rebellious teenager, staying out long after curfew and running with the “wrong crowd” who always seemed to get into trouble. Raymond was well-known among the local police officers, and even spent some time in a juvenile detention center after being caught shoplifting at a local supermarket. When he turned eighteen, Raymond left home and moved to the city, where he fell in with a crowd that was involved in the drug trade. As a result, Raymond was in and out of jail and rehab, and it seemed like his life was headed for an early death. Most people in the community considered him a lost cause, and some would even counsel the Parkers to disown him and leave him to his own devices. Raymond seemed to be beyond redemption to many of his neighbours; he seemed to be a person for whom there was no hope.

But despite their neighbours' well-intentioned counsel about their wayward son, the Parkers never gave up on Raymond. They would respond whenever he phoned them, would always come to his assistance, and would always tell him they loved him. The porch light was a symbol of this never-failing hope, a witness to the community that the love the Parkers had for their prodigal son was a tenacious love, a love that would not be extinguished even if the hope of Raymond ever returning home remained slim. The Parkers' love for their son was a love that would not let him go, a love that was steadfast and sure for the son they loved unconditionally.

This tenacious, enduring, stubborn love is the love that Jesus describes in today's Gospel lesson in response to his encounter with Nicodemus, who is introduced in the Fourth Gospel as “*a Pharisee ... a leader of the Jews*” (John 3:1). Nicodemus

was probably one of those persons mentioned in the previous chapter of John as a person who believes in Jesus because of the signs he has seen: *“When he was in Jerusalem during the Passover festival, many believed in his name because they saw the signs that he was doing.”* (2:23). Nicodemus seeks out Jesus, one of the first acts of discipleship in John, and addresses him with the honoured title of “rabbi”: *“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.”* (3:2). By his use of the first-person plural “we,” Nicodemus might be serving as a spokesperson for a larger group who had been impressed by Jesus’ signs. However, John also reports that Nicodemus came to Jesus “by night”; in the Fourth Gospel, “night” (*nux*) is used metaphorically to represent separation from the presence of God (*“We must do the works of him who sent me while it is day; night is coming when no one can work.”* – 9:4). While he desires to have a conversation with Jesus, he comes at night so that perhaps he will not be seen by his fellow Pharisees, who have their doubts about the authenticity of Jesus’ teaching. Nicodemus’ opening words about Jesus contain several positive acknowledgements of Jesus’ identity: he addresses Jesus as “Rabbi,” acknowledging Jesus as a teacher of the Torah (as Nathaniel addresses him as *“Rabbi, you are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!”* – 1:49). Second, Nicodemus acknowledges that Jesus is a “teacher come from God,” a crucial Christological affirmation in John’s Gospel (*“And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a Father’s only Son, full of grace and truth.”* – 1:14). Third, Nicodemus speaks to Jesus simply as an individual, but as the leader of a community: *“The first-person plural implies that Nicodemus’ community shares in his positive acknowledgement of Jesus.”* (Gail O’Day). This certitude about what is and what is not possible with God, however, will be challenged as the dialogue with Jesus unfolds.

Jesus does not respond directly to Nicodemus’ acknowledgement of him. As he did not respond to those who believed in his name because of the signs they had witnessed (*“But Jesus on his part would not entrust himself to them, because he knew all people and needed no one to testify about anyone; for he himself knew what was in everyone”* – 2:24-25), he chooses to challenge Nicodemus with a teaching, the first of several that begin with the formula *“very truly, I tell you,”* which signals to the audience that Jesus is about to share a new teaching to which they need to listen. Jesus’ teaching in response to Nicodemus combines the traditional image of the Kingdom of God with a new metaphor that Nicodemus will at first misunderstand: *“Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above.”* (3:3). At the center of this statement is the Greek word *anōthen*, which means both “from above” and “again” or “anew.” To be born *anōthen* speaks of both a time of birth (“again”) and the place from which this new

birth is generated (“from above”). “Kingdom of God” also evokes the time of God’s reign and the place of God’s realm. The new birth of which Jesus speaks gives new access to God, as Paul teaches in 1 Corinthians: “*What I am saying, brothers and sisters, is this: flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God, nor does the perishable inherit the imperishable.*” (1 Corinthians 15:50).

Nicodemus’ response indicates that he does not understand the dual meaning of *anóthen* (a phenomenon in Greek that does not exist in other languages, including English). Nicodemus focuses on the meaning of “born again” and protests that what Jesus calls for is physiologically impossible: “*How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother’s womb and be born?*” (3:4). Jesus’ words speak of a radical new birth that is generated from above, but Nicodemus’ language and imagination do not stretch that much to grasp such a possibility. It shows that Nicodemus has not understood that “*Jesus had not come from God in the sense Nicodemus thought (a man approved by God), but in the unique sense of having descended from God’s presence to raise people to God.*” (Raymond Brown). In turn, Jesus responds by continuing his teaching, indicated by once again employing the formula “*very truly, I tell you*” as he states that “*no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit.*” (3:5). Jesus plays on Nicodemus’ womb imagery to say that entrance into the kingdom of God requires a double birth: physical birth (“water”) and spiritual rebirth (“Spirit”). He admonishes Nicodemus to “*not be astonished that I say to you, ‘You must be born from above’*” as he uses another Greek word that has a double meaning: “*The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit.*” (5:8). “Wind” (*pneuma*), like *anóthen*, has two meanings: “wind” and “spirit.” This wind/spirit blows where it wills; human beings can detect its presence but cannot chart its precise movements. It was this *pneuma* that gave the apostles the ability to proclaim God’s Word on the day of Pentecost:

- “And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability.” – Acts 2:2-4.

Even though Jesus had instructed Nicodemus to not be astonished by what he is saying, the Pharisee’s response is one of amazement: “*How can these things be?*” (3:9). Once again, Nicodemus’ preconceptions of what is possible intrude on the conversation. Jesus turns Nicodemus’ confident assertion earlier back on him: “*Are*

you a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things?” (3:10). It becomes apparent that “neither Nicodemus’ credentials (Pharisee, ruler of the Jews, teacher of Israel) nor his self-professed knowledge have brought him closer to understanding Jesus.” (O’Day).

In the next paragraph, the text shifts from dialogue to monologue. Once again employing the teaching formula “*very truly, I tell you,*” Jesus begins his discourse by speaking in the first-person plural: “*we speak of what we know and testify to what we have seen*” (3:11). Jesus may be indicating that this teaching is shared by John the Baptist and the first disciples, all those who testify to the Gospel in the early church. Jesus’ “we” stands in contrast to Nicodemus’ “we,” those who are impressed by Jesus’ signs and miracles but who do not receive the church’s witness, those who “*do not receive our testimony.*” Jesus expresses amazement that “*if I have told you about earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you about heavenly things?*” (3:12). “Earthly things” can be understood as referring to things about human beings, whereas “heavenly things” refers to things about God and Jesus to which Jesus has privileged access and that have not yet been revealed to Nicodemus and his community: “*No one has ever seen God. It is God the only Son, who is close to the Father’s heart, who has made him known*” (1:18). Jesus’ authority as the source of “heavenly things” is expressed by his statement that “*no one has ascended into heaven except the one who descended from heaven, the Son of Man*” (3:13). The Son of Man’s privileged access to God is expressed in spatial terms: the Son of Man moves between heaven and earth and brings the two together. Jesus knows heavenly things because he has descended from heaven. Jesus refers to the ascension here in the past tense, which “*places the witness of the early church in the mouth of Jesus and thus accords that witness greater authority and continuity.*” (O’Day). Jesus then moves from speaking of his ascension to his crucifixion as he likens his being lifted up on the cross to an incident in Numbers in which Moses lifted up a serpent in the wilderness as a sign of God’s gift of life for God’s people:

- And the LORD said to Moses, ‘Make a poisonous serpent, and set it on a pole, and everyone who is bitten shall look at it and live.’ So Moses made a serpent of bronze, and put it on a pole; and whenever a serpent bit someone, that person would look at the serpent of bronze and live.” – Numbers 21:8-9.

As the serpent was lifted up in the wilderness, “*so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.*” (3:15). The verb *hypsoo* is yet another word that has a double meaning: “lift up” and “exalt.” The physical act of lifting up is also a moment of exaltation; in the crucifixion Jesus is exalted, for “*there*

is no exaltation without crucifixion” (O’Day). As the lifting up of the serpent had a salvific dimension for the people of Israel, Jesus’ offer of his life through being lifted up on the cross makes “eternal life” possible for those who believe. “Eternal” does not mean mere endless duration of human existence, but life that is lived in the endless presence of God. Eternal life is also not something that is held in abeyance until the believer’s future, but begins in the believer’s present. To be born “from above” is to be born “again” through the lifting up of Jesus on the cross. Eternal life is the assurance of God’s steadfast, loving presence, the source of our confidence that nothing will “*separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.*” (Romans 8:39).

It is in this context that John presents what is perhaps the most well-known verse in the entire Bible: “*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.*” (3:16). Martin Luther called this verse “the gospel in a nutshell,” and it is a verse that has been memorized by generations of Christians and can even be seen in such unlikely places as sports arenas. But as well-known and beloved as this verse may be, there is a message that can be lost in our understanding of “world,” which in English refers merely to the entire planet. In Jesus’ usage of the word, however, “world” (*kosmos*) refers most often to those human beings who are at odds with God, attitudes and behaviors that are inimical to God:

- “He was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him.” – 1:10.
- “The world cannot hate you, but it hates me because I testify against it that its works are evil.” – 7:7.
- “If the world hates you, be aware that it hated me before it hated you. If you belonged to the world, the world would love you as its own. Because you do not belong to the world, but I have chosen you out of the world – therefore the world hates you.” – 15:18-19.

According to everyday logic, God should be angry with this world and punish it. Yet, God loves this world that did not love God in return; “*God loves the world, so God consequently acts for the good of the world.*” (Ronald J. Allen). Another way to understand the nature of God’s love would be to translate this verse to state that “*God so loved the God-hating world that he gave his only Son.*” It is the nature of God’s steadfast, unconditional love (*agape*) that Paul refers to when he states that “*God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us*” (Romans 5:8). It is through Christ’s death and resurrection that all who believe that this gift is “for you” have the assurance that they will not perish but will have eternal

life, that *“if we have been united with him in a death like his, we will certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his.”* (Romans 6:5). John 3:16 may rightly be called the “gospel in miniature” because it encapsulates the message of grace that is at the heart of the good news of Jesus Christ, that we are *“justified by faith apart from works required by the law”* (Romans 3:28), that *“there is nothing I can do to make God love me less, and there is nothing I can do to make God love me more.”* (Philip Yancey). The gift of grace that is ours in Jesus Christ is our assurance that *“God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him”* (3:17), for *“there is therefore no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.”* (Romans 8:1).

- “But the Lord Christ says, ‘I have not come to judge, to bite, to grumble, and to condemn people. The world is too much condemned. Therefore I will not rule people with laws. I have come that through my ministry and my death I may give help to all who are lost and may release and set free those who are overburdened with laws, with judgments, and with condemnation.’” – Martin Luther.

The love of God in Jesus Christ is a tenacious love, a love that will not give up on a person even when that person may give up on themselves or when others give up on that person. It is the love that seeks out the lost sheep, the love of the waiting father that embraces his prodigal son, a love that rejoices when one who was lost is found. It is the *“love that will not let me go,”* the love that proves itself in that even *“if we are faithless, he remains faithful – for he cannot deny himself.”* (2 Timothy 2:13).

- “To believe in Jesus is to believe that Jesus is the Son of God and that God loved the world so much that God gave the Son as a gift. The God revealed in Jesus is a God whose love knows no bounds and who asks only that one receive a gift. If one receives the gift, one receives eternal life, because one’s life is reshaped and redefined by the love of God in Jesus.” – O’Day.

The Parkers’ porch light remained lit for years, and for years their neighbours thought it to be a waste of electricity, since there was no way that the prodigal Raymond would ever be seen again. But one day, the doorbell rang; and there stood Raymond – thin, dishevelled, a shadow of his former self. But his homecoming was an occasion of great joy for every member of the family, because their tenacious love never gave up on their beloved son. It is that same tenacious love that calls us to come home, to return to the Lord our God, the God who so loved the world was not always loving in return, so that everyone who believes that the death and resurrection of Christ is a gift for us may know that they are beloved children of

God, and that there is always a place for them and a light that is kept burning in the house of the Lord.

Amen.