

Yay! We have John 3:16 in our gospel passage! “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.” Verse 16 is one of the most treasured and memorized verses in all of scripture. We see it on bumper stickers, on banners at sporting events, on shirts, and even smudged into the dirt on the back of semi-trailers. But often we fail to realize what is going on around this verse. Or even who this verse was spoken to.

A Pharisee named Nicodemus approaches Jesus one night. John’s gospel uses a lot of symbolism, so the detail that this took place at night is a hint that Nicodemus is still “in the dark” about Jesus’ true nature. Nicodemus begins the conversation this way; “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.” Now, if Jesus wanted to give a normal response, he would have said, “Thank you! I’m so glad you noticed!” But Jesus doesn’t say anything like that at all. Instead, he jumps to a statement about the Kingdom of God and that people need to be born from above. I’m certain that Nicodemus was taken aback. Even in Aramaic, this is no way to move a conversation forward. Perhaps Nicodemus thought the response was rude, which is why his response to the “being born from above” comment was, “Can someone enter a mother a second time only to be born again?” Nicodemus -- like anyone else -- absolutely knows it is physiologically impossible for this to happen. His statement wasn’t an inquiry, it was a taunt. Jesus offers another reply, ultimately making a connection between how the wind blows and how someone is born from the Spirit.

Okay, now this Jesus guy is talking about the wind. He is jumping all over the place in this conversation. Remember, this chat began because Nicodemus wanted to express a nice complement to Jesus. Nicodemus is now thinking that the conversation has completely

derailed. So he responds to Jesus incredulously, “How can these things be?” Jesus then states that Nicodemus is a teacher of the faith, yet he is in the dark on spiritual matters. If Nicodemus questions what Jesus has to say about the wind, then how can Nicodemus ever understand the spiritual point Jesus is trying to make? Anyone attempting to follow this conversation is now pleading, “So what is that point you are trying to make, Jesus?”

The clue to his point is easy to miss, but it is right there in front of us. Four times in verses 12 to 17, Jesus mentions the verb “believe.” A greater clue is that in verse 18, which immediately follows this text, Jesus says “believe” three more times. But believing isn’t a great word for us, especially to describe what is going on in this dialogue. See, in English, “to believe” is mostly an intellectual endeavor. “I believe it is going to rain today.” The Greek word Jesus is using is the verbal form of the word “Faith.” “Faithing,” if English had such a word. It is more than an intellectual assent, rather “faithing” carries with it a deep sense of trusting.

Nicodemus approached Jesus at night with a compliment that was merely an intellectual assent. “Jesus, we see you doing this stuff, so you must be sent from God.” It’s a nice comment to hear, but there is no “faithing” in it. Jesus derailed the conversation because he wanted to get past the usual chit-chat and move on to what is crucial and pertinent: faithing in God. Believing and trusting entirely in God.

It is somewhat surprising how Jesus explains “faithing” to Nicodemus. He does it by talking about being “born from above.” But what does that phrase even mean? How many different ways have we heard people try to explain what “born from above” or “born again” means? So try with me your best to erase those definitions from your mind for a minute. All clear? Okay. So imagine with me a newborn infant. That child is entirely dependent upon the mother. The baby’s existence is entirely in her hands, and that is perhaps the deepest trust and bond there ever is in a human’s life. So too is being born from above. What Jesus means by this phrase is that the person has a deep trust and bond with God, because that person

knows that every moment of their existence is in God's hands. Being born from above means that you are entirely dependent upon God, just as a young child is dependent upon the mothering care of a parent. Being "born from above" means having a deeply rooted "faithing" in God.

Nicodemus didn't have that, at least not at this point in the gospel. Nicodemus at this point could give intellectual assent to the ways God is working through Jesus, but Nicodemus was not yet at a place of faith that involved having an enduring trust in and dependence upon God. So now we reach verse 16, which I have always felt needs to be read with verse 17. "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." We read verse 17 because it makes clear verse 16 is not about the exclusion of those who don't believe. These verses are an invitation to see how much God -- the source of our existence -- how much God loves this world. The inclusive nature of these verses is more clear when we consider that immediately prior to this statement about God's love, mothering imagery was used. It doesn't matter if the child is cooing in the mother's arms or screaming at the top of its lungs to be let go; the mother is going to love it no matter what.

God is going to love, no matter what. That is what is at the core of these verses. Just as any loving parent would desire, God certainly desires for us to grow deeper in God's love. That growth in God's love takes place not through an intellectual acknowledgment, but through faithing; a belief rooted in trust.

Jesus could listen all day to people back then (and now) who offer compliments about his teachings and about his works. But he has no time for that, because he has a world to save and his desire is for people to have an enduring trust in what God is accomplishing through him. People like Nicodemus are missing the point and wasting Jesus' time if they just want to tell him that he is a swell guy. Verse 16 of John 3 is a magnificent verse, yet we

often cut its meaning short. Jesus seeks to move Nicodemus -- and us -- from a mere intellectual acknowledgment of God into a life that is deeply rooted in God's motherly love for this world. A life that is filled with "faithing."

Perhaps you aren't feeling that deep trust today, or recently in your life. Or you've never had that deep trust. Perhaps you look at encroaching turmoil, and you have difficulty relying on God to see you through it as a newborn relies on its parent. Perhaps faithing comes difficult to you. That's alright. Jesus didn't give Nicodemus the boot, and he won't give you the boot either. What Jesus gives is an invitation; an invitation to spend some time walking with him. To join him over a meal. To abide with him. An invitation to approach him as you truly are, so that he may meet you as he truly is.

Nicodemus makes a few more appearances in the gospel of John. In each appearance, there is kind of a development or progression with Nicodemus, as he inches toward faithing. In our final encounter with him, we are never told if Nicodemus reached "faithing," as if it is an accomplishment. Instead, in our final encounter with Nicodemus, we merely witness him do one thing: he tends to the dead body of a crucified Jesus.

Clearly Nicodemus knew that Jesus never gave him the boot. Maybe that is what faithing is. It is not a level of belief that we accomplish. Rather, faithing is a trust that even in the darkest of circumstances, the motherly love of God will never turn us away.

May this Lent be a season for us all to walk with Jesus. May we see his invitation to approach him as we truly are, and he meets us as he truly is. May we see -- in Jesus -- how much love God has for this world. And may God richly bless us to ever grow deeper in faithing.

Thanks be to God. Amen.