

Sermon on John 3:16, March 5, 2023

In today's gospel, we heard that famous and often quoted passage where Jesus says, "God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life." We see this up all over the place: on the sides of barns, people holding up posters at hockey games, on billboards, and it's quoted a lot by Christians. So let's look at this passage.

Jesus is talking to Nicodemus. He's a Pharisee and a leader of the Jews, which probably means a member of the ruling council, the Sanhedrin. And he comes to see Jesus. He's an honest man and a fair judge and he's seen the stuff Jesus is doing, the signs and healings, and he can't see any way that he could do that if God wasn't with him. So he comes to see Jesus. Mind you, he comes by night so he won't be seen fraternizing with this upstart prophet and get into trouble with his peers. But even so, he comes. And John tells us that he also later kind of stood up for Jesus when the Sanhedrin seemed to be judging him before they'd even talked to him and he came to help Joseph of Arimathea bury Jesus.

And he gets out his first line, about Jesus being a teacher sent by God, and then the whole conversation takes a turn he didn't count on, and Jesus talks about how we need to be born anew, or born from above, born of the Spirit. Nicodemus doesn't understand and he's thrown off balance so he starts to scoff and puts the worst possible interpretation on Jesus' words and mocks that: "What? We're supposed to return to our mother's womb when we're old?" But Jesus tries explaining it a different way and Nicodemus stays and listens and even takes Jesus' mild reprimand.

If you want to understand this passage, you need to know that the Aramaic word for breath and Spirit and wind is the same word. And Jesus plays on this, talking at one moment about the Spirit of God and another about the wind and also about the life-giving breath we take when we are born, only when we're born from above, the life giving breath is the Spirit of God.

And then he kind of summarizes it all. He says God loves the world so much that he sent his Son so anyone who believes in him – that is anyone who trusts in him – will not perish but have eternal life. And he adds that God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world but so that the world might be saved by him. By the way he doesn't say a word about going to hell. He talks about perishing. If we steadfastly refuse the life giving Spirit of God, we are liable to wither up and perish. And instead of this, Jesus is offering us life. If we put our trust in Jesus, then we shall have life, eternal life in the Kingdom of God.

I think this is really important. Some Christians use this passage to kind of bash people over the head and threaten them with hellfire. And they insist that you have to believe a whole set of things and then Jesus will save you, by the skin of your teeth more or less. That isn't what the passage says. The word believe can be used about believing facts, but when it's used about believing in a person, like Jesus, it means trusting. Trusting the person, not believing facts about them. It's about trusting in Jesus the Son of God.

And God's whole purpose in sending his Son was because he loves the world and wants to save the world. He didn't send Jesus to condemn us but to rescue us and give us eternal life. Not just Jews. Not just Christians. He loves the world – the Greek word is *cosmos* - and sent his Son to save the world. I think this is important. God doesn't play favourites. God loves us all, and not just human beings either. The whole world. And God doesn't want to condemn us, God wants to have a loving relationship with us. You don't always get that impression from some Christians, but it's what Jesus says.

I spent some time this week thinking about the imagery Jesus uses about birth. Why did he say that this relationship we have with him, with God's Spirit, is like birth? Being born anew. Is it just because of the idea of breath, that we take a breath when we're born and we take Spirit when we're born again? Maybe. But I got thinking about it. I don't know if this is what Jesus had in mind, but here are some of my reflections.

Just before a baby is born, it is alive. The heart beats. There is life there. It's a pretty restricted life. You can't do anything except move a bit. You can sense light and dark and hear some things, but it's all pretty vague. And that's about it. You're completely dependent on your mother. Your job is to grow. And then the birth process happens. I don't remember being born. I don't suppose any of us does. I remember giving birth and I know it's painful for the Mom. I wonder if our rebirth is painful for the Spirit? Interesting thought. Birth might be painful for the baby, too, but the squeezing is good for them. It gets the organs working. And then you're born and you take your first breath and you are capable of independent life, apart from your mother.

Not completely independent, of course. Someone has to look after the baby. But it could be someone else. The baby still can't do much. Its main job is still to grow and to learn. But in a remarkably short space of time, the baby is a toddler and is doing things for him or herself. And eventually they grow up to become an adult and then a lot of stuff is expected of them. They don't just laze around all day eating what's brought to them and letting other people look after them.

Mind you, some of us have had kids like that, kids who "failed to launch." The kid who lives in the parent's basement and plays video games and emerges for meals. And doesn't get a job or support themselves or anything. When this happens, something has gone wrong and parents start trying to get the kids to take responsibility for themselves.

I wonder if there's a similar process in our Christian lives? Some people talk as if the whole point of the Christian life is to get saved. And then to stay saved, by following all the rules properly. But I don't think this is true. Just to be clear, yes, we do get saved. That is, we are born of the Spirit and we are given eternal life. But I don't think that's the final purpose of it all. Our lives on earth are not just about being born. And nor is our life in the Spirit.

I think that's the baby stage of things, and we're expected to grow and learn and start to become responsible, to become more like our Father and Mother in Heaven. I think

we're supposed to start caring about other people and helping them out. I think we're supposed to grow up and start doing the work of spreading God's love that Jesus did.

The story of Abraham that we read today shows this. God calls Abram to leave his country and go to the land God will show him, the Promised Land. And God promises to make him a great nation and bless him and make his name great so that he will be a blessing. "In you, all the families of the earth shall be blessed," God promises. The blessings Abraham receives are not just for him. They're for the benefit of all people. God blesses him so he can become a blessing for others.

St. Paul tells us that it's because Abram trusted God or had faith in God and did head off into the unknown that the blessing took effect. And he compares Abram's faith with our faith. It is when we trust God that we also inherit the blessing – and become a blessing to others.

There was a woman in one of our churches named Joyce. She was fairly active in the church and community, in the usual sorts of ways. She helped with church suppers and so on. I'm not sure what else she did. But people loved to be with her. She was the kind of person who made you feel loved and cared for just by the way she said hello. She was getting elderly by the time I met her and I found she had a lot of wisdom. But mostly I liked to hang out with her because she made me feel good. Made me feel loved and valued and secure. She didn't actually do much to make me feel that way, except that she did love me and value me. Whenever we got together, we had a lot of fun and ended up laughing from sheer happiness. Some people in the church joked that it would be much better if we didn't sit together at meetings.

Joyce died and at her funeral a lot of people were talking about her and turns out she made everyone feel loved and valued. Everyone loved spending time with her. That woman had been blessed by God and she had become a blessing to everyone who knew her. She had grown into Christian maturity, and become a lot like Jesus, loving and welcoming and valuing everyone. She was a woman who had not only been born of the Spirit but had grown up in the Spirit and she spread the spirit of God's love all around her all the time.

That's our calling, too: to spread God's love around all the time, each in our own ways. Maybe as part of our Lenten practice, we can put a little extra effort into this. Into loving people. Into making other people feel great whenever they're around us, because they know we love them.

Today we have our annual meeting. This is a chance for us to celebrate the year past, and if you've read the report you know there's a lot to celebrate, a lot we've accomplished in a difficult year. We also look to the year ahead. How will we, personally and as a church, continue to grow into the full maturity of Christ? How will we continue to live out our calling to spread God's love here in Spryfield? These are exciting times. God bless us all as we grow in the Spirit of God.