

2nd Sunday in Lent
March 16, 2014,
Jamie Samilio, MACE • John 3:1-17

Good Morning! When Betsy asked me to preach, she did not just give me the readings for the day, she asked me to focus on one specific verse from the Gospel and to “See what I could do with it.”

In Washington, DC, if I say 26.2, to most of us it means a marathon, 13.1, I discovered, is a half a marathon for those of us who are less athletic. Take 3.14—who doesn’t love a piece of pi, and 3/16 is today’s date. But for my purposes, John 3:16 is part of today’s Gospel. John 3:16 is likely the most marketed Gospel passage of all time. Do you remember when you first saw it on a billboard, bumper sticker, sign, or T-shirt?

My earliest memory of John 3:16 was riding in a car with my Mom. It was the license plate on the car in front of us. I thought, John got a car for his birthday on March 16th. John must be really proud of the car he got for his birthday and had a vanity plate made. My Dad was a car salesman, so like my sisters before me, I would someday get a car for my birthday, and I thought that perhaps I would have a plate that said Jamie 5:26 – how cool is that? Later, at a family gathering there was a football game on TV, and when they panned the crowd, there was a guy with a sign that read, John 3:16. “Wow! I exclaimed, look, that guy is from Erie. He was driving his car the other day on 12th Street and there he is at the football game.” My sister set me straight. It was not a guy named John who was overly ecstatic about his March 16th birthday, it was a Bible verse. “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.” God so LOVED the world.

Oh, I get it now, of course. On the surface, I understood what the words and numbers John 3:16 meant, but outside of my tiny world, I was clueless. I understood it in my head, but not in my heart.

Nicodemus and Jesus know each other, yet he comes to Jesus in the dark of night seeking answers, as if he is a little embarrassed to ask Jesus. Perhaps he is embarrassed, because birth is a bloody business that men would not have much to do with, especially a Jewish scholar. Like any good politician however, Nicodemus begins by acknowledging Jesus as a teacher and healer from God. Then, he starts asking questions. Nicodemus has come to Jesus in the dark of night, but there is the deeper darkness of unbelief that I think obscures his vision. He cannot recognize the new vision of life that Jesus is suggesting—that we can be born again in the Spirit; he seems stuck on just what life is. I imagine Jesus wanting to shake Nicodemus and tell him, “You are more than just flesh!”

But here is Nicodemus asking, what exactly do you mean by being born again? I mean, really Jesus, how does that work? I’m a grown man, what is it you are suggesting I do to be reborn? Like me and my license plate, Nicodemus understands all the individual words, but the concept is completely lost on him. He was stuck at life on the physical plane, and he was counting on his intellect to grasp this concept of rebirth—self-reliance

was not working for him.

Jesus must have been frustrated, and I am guessing the wind analogy came after Nicodemus continued to stand there with a blank look on his face. *You cannot see the wind, but you know that it is there; it is about the Spirit, it is not just about the flesh.* Sometimes I think we all understand words, but do not comprehend their true meaning. Trying to explain to someone the nature of God in human terms seems an insurmountable task. What part of the phrase, "God is incomprehensible did we misunderstand?" We can understand, however, that God is love.

But how do we experience the radical love proposed in John 3:16? At this point in preparing the sermon, I reviewed the commentaries and study Bibles, which seemed to offer the same responses. So I decided to see what my fellow Christians thought about being born again, and how that spiritual awakening changes us. I sent a survey to 20 people, both lay and clergy. The results were fascinating, and it gave me a real sense that we are not alone, we are one Body of Christ.

I edited the responses and pulled together common threads. I hope you find their words on being born again as interesting as I did. The first response typed some in all caps!

Jeez, not the usual Episcopal/Anglican survey questions! Born again? That's language from my all-Jesus-all-the-time-channel part of the family, and not a question I would put to myself. It has a very negative meaning—one that implies insiders and outsiders (no pun intended), one that creates divisions and breeds fear based on a more literal view of the Bible. It's a metaphor that does NOT work for me on a personal level!

What DO I connect with in a positive way...God loved the world even more than I can imagine, which means that we are GOOD and WORTH SAVING, and WORTH FIGHTING FOR, and therefore, WORTH LOVING with everything I can muster.

More than half a dozen responses I received commented on the negative connotation being born again has for them, because the phrase has been hijacked by fundamentalists.

One of those wrote: I do not think of my faith as born again. My experience has been more of a "becoming." I have long felt that my spiritual journey was on a spiral path that goes ever deeper into the holy and of course the further I get along that path, the more it does affect the choices I make about my life, my actions, where I spend my time. I am not saying I am perfect at it - often the spirit is willing and the flesh is weak - but this becoming does call me to turn more away from the world's priorities and into God's desires for the world.

Of those who were not so put off by the phrase that they rejected the notion, one joked: I've been reborn so many times my soul has stretch marks. Another described it as: The sudden AH HA moment in which you realize God is walking beside you. Another described it as: The confidence that comes with KNOWING you are not alone.

Still another wrote: I think we are invited to rebirth many times. Just as cells regenerate

if they have been damaged, in effect, becoming reborn, we can be reborn when we fall or fail or are wounded, if we are able to find and share the blessings in our suffering. When this has happened to me, I have become more compassionate, less judgmental, and more connected to more people.

Echoing that idea of rebirth leading to service, one wrote: Born again means you see your faith as an opportunity--and not a burden--to help others.

“How do you do that?” one of the respondents wrote: “By attempting to take the mind of Christ in all situations, to recognize the in-dwelling Christ in us, and in all of our brothers and sisters.” And another mirrored in saying, “My faith tells me the world does not revolve around me and that all people have inherent value, regardless of their circumstances, and they deserve respect and care.”

Necessary steps along the way that these Christians mentioned, are letting go of selfish instincts, and of the things we think will preserve our lives but actually get in the way of forming authentic relationships. We work on overcoming fear—Love’s opposite—to make more room for Love.

Those who have had an experience of rebirth said the experience and even the changes it prompts, aren’t generally sustained for any length of time, and offer no protection from pain and suffering. But the experience may grace us with more humor and resilience in living out the inevitable defeats, pain, and suffering inherent in life. As my friend Luis always says, God offers us maximum support and minimum protection.

I don’t think it is fair for me to escape without saying what being born again means to me.

I am happy most of the time. I never feel that I am alone. I am aware of the presence of Christ in my life, in my mind, and my body, and my soul. I know I am loved unconditionally and I am free to love myself, forgive myself, and live into the work God has given me to do, with joy! But as several people I surveyed echoed, that blissful feeling does not stay with me, and I need to have it renewed. I renew it through worship, prayer, and meditation, but also by loving people wherever they find themselves on their spiritual journeys, and through daily acts of kindness.

Worship and inviting God in re-creates the experience for me, or at least sustains it. God has laws that we follow in this earthly life, and one of them that speaks to me on being born again is this: Things that cease to grow, die. When we pick flowers, or even come to the end of our days, we in this life on Earth are finite, and it is only through Christ that we will be joined to the infinite. I am aware that continued spiritual growth means that I hope to spend a lifetime experiencing awakenings and rebirths of my faith, and renewals of my trust in God, and new courage to turn my will over to Him.

Having a spiritual awakening—being born again—is not something that magically happens when my love/fear meter leans too far to one side. There is no angel stopping to check my meter and fill me with love when I’m closing in on empty, like some celestial

power company. To rekindle that experience of unconditional love, I need to invite Jesus into my everyday experiences—not just the major events, but everyday life. The more I extend the invitation, the greater the trust relationship I have with God. I invite God into my experiences, and God shows up.

What happens after I extend the invitation to God to guide me, for Jesus to be with me, or for the Holy Spirit to inspire me? Life happens, and I live it. What I do depends on the example I follow.

Ultimately, the message God has for Nicodemus and for us is this: God loves you just the way you are. You do not have to change. But when you are awakened to the fact that you are loved completely and unconditionally, that experience will change you. And the best thing we can do once we understand in our hearts that we are loved, is to pass on that love to each other.

While salvation is personal through Christ, we are meant to work in community. We are meant to be a people of God, a Body of Christ, in relationship with God, each other, and the whole world.

I think the key to what we do next is best described in Jesus' words on the two greatest commandments. We love the Lord our God with all our hearts and all our souls. And we love our neighbors as ourselves.

Love is the key word in the two great commandments and it is the key word in John 3:16. "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in Him may not perish but have eternal life."

In the end, I think it comes down to this: Brilliance requires creativity. Wisdom requires patience. Love requires nothing, but gives everything in return, and God is Love.

Amen