

The Result of God's Love: JESUS!  
John 3:1-17  
Lent 2A Pastor Pufahl March 5, 2023

How far does your love take you?

Several years ago, there was a family of four taking a trip together. It was their annual vacation. You know how busy life can be – work, sports, screens, life! This was their week to get away from it all and relax.

It was a typical family. Yes, they loved each other, but like any little boys, they would fight. The older brother would pick on the little brother, causing the little brother to cry. The once happy ride, singing along with the music on the radio was now filled with crying, name calling, and parents giving... 'instructions' ...to calm down and leave each other alone. It was distracting. As dad drove, trying to keep one eye on the road and one eye on the rear-view mirror to calm his sons down, he didn't see a car come flying in, missing a stop light, and smashing in the side of the car of his wife and older son.

The noise was deafening. No longer were there sounds of crying or name calling. Dad would trade this silence for that noise any day.

To break up the silence were the sirens of the ambulance approaching. Dad, mom, and little brother were going to be ok. Most of the impact hit on big brother's door. No noise was coming from him. Slow, shallow breathing was all they heard.

In the hospital the doctors worked on big brother. The rest of the family was bandaged up and waiting impatiently for news to come. Big brother had lost a lot of blood. This was a small hospital with very low supply of blood, especially blood which would match big brother's rare blood. His blood needed a certain type of blood for this transfusion to work. Little brother, the one big brother made cry, was an exact match.

Mom and dad tried to explain to their little son that big brother needed his blood in order to live. Little brother could see his brother in a bed, hooked up to many machines, struggling to stay alive. Still looking at his brother, he said, "Ok" and the doctors quickly whisked him away.

The pokes would hurt. Tears flowed from his eyes. He saw the clear tubes turn red with his blood. As mom and dad held his hand, little brother turned to them and said, "How long until I die?"

How far does your love take you? In that story, the little brother misunderstood what was happening. He thought he was going to have to give up all his blood so his brother could live. Yet, he was willing to do that. Again, how far does your love take you? Would you be willing to give up your life if it meant saving the life of someone you love?

We hear the stories of bravery. Soldiers who jump on a live grenade to save the rest. A person who runs in front of a speeding car to push the little child away from getting hit. Those stories tug at our heart strings. But would you do it?

Our lesson today takes us to a very familiar Bible passage, one which you probably heard and memorized before any other. John 3:16. But we really need to dig deep into this story to get the real meaning behind that familiar Bible passage.

We are told there was a man named Nicodemus who approached Jesus at night. A Pharisee and a leader of the Jewish ruling council. You could say he was an important man. Think about this group of people, the Pharisees. Were they fans of Jesus? Maybe look again at who was mainly leading the charge to have Jesus killed. Were they God-fearing people? Sure, but they wanted the spotlight to be on them more than on the truth of God's Word.

Here comes Nicodemus. Why at night? Perhaps to have less of a crowd. Perhaps to catch Jesus when he was tired. Or perhaps because he, Nicodemus, didn't want to be seen talking with Jesus. There seems to be some doubt in what he believed as he asked Jesus his question. Was he hoping Jesus would simply answer, "Yes, I am God" and then Nicodemus could call him a blasphemer? No one really knows but Jesus.

Either way, Jesus redirects the story back to the truth. One needs to be born again. The Pharisees believed in an afterlife, a heaven, but perhaps felt they could earn heaven on their own. Jesus' response? **"Very truly I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God unless they are born again."** It is not what Nicodemus believed.

More discussion would take place. Nicodemus couldn't understand. This was foreign to him. Jesus was explaining baptism. Jesus was explaining the change which happens because of the Holy Spirit in a person's heart. This is the change which needed to happen. Heaven doesn't come because we are good enough. Heaven doesn't come because we have done enough. Heaven only comes from

the faith created by the Holy Spirit to believe in all Jesus has done. Nicodemus still didn't understand. Jesus had some harsh words for him:

**“You are Israel’s teacher,” said Jesus, “and do you not understand these things? <sup>11</sup>Very truly I tell you, we speak of what we know, and we testify to what we have seen, but still you people do not accept our testimony. <sup>12</sup>I have spoken to you of earthly things and you do not believe; how then will you believe if I speak of heavenly things? <sup>13</sup>No one has ever gone into heaven except the one who came from heaven—the Son of Man. <sup>14</sup>Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the wilderness, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, <sup>15</sup>that everyone who believes may have eternal life in him.”**

Think that section through. The snake in the wilderness was put on a wooden pole. So would the Son of Man. Did the Pharisees and chief priests already start discussing how they would want Jesus dead? Was the thought of a crucifixion already on the plate? Had Nicodemus discussed this already with his fellow Pharisees? Where really was Nicodemus' heart? At this time, did he care about Jesus? Or not?

Earlier I asked the question – how far does your love take you? I am sure if put to the test, you would exchange your life for the life of a loved one. If protecting your children would mean putting your life at risk, you wouldn't even think twice about it. You would run into that burning building or jump in front of that car. But would you do it for someone who you know doesn't like you? Would you be willing to save that bully? Would you risk your life to help that person who constantly hurts you?

Another story. There was a man who was very selfish. Never would he think about helping loved ones, much less anyone he didn't care about. In fact, he didn't care about anyone but himself. Whatever he wanted to do, he did. He didn't care if it hurt anyone else. He knew his conscience wasn't too happy with him, but he had shushed his conscience so often, that its voice wasn't too loud anymore. People told him it was wrong. They pointed out Jesus' command to love each other. He didn't care. He cared about himself.

Does that story sound familiar? Probably not exactly, but there are similarities. We too are selfish. I am sure not exactly like that man. But who usually gets first priority in your life? Is it Jesus? Is it others? Or...is it...you? Compare your love to others to how Jesus describes how we are to love others. Does it match up to what Jesus wants of us? Or does it fall short? My love falls way short. I would probably be willing to show love to others as long as my life isn't affected much. And how about my love for God? Is it where it needs to be? Is God always #1? Is he always #1 to you?

We really don't know a whole bunch about Nicodemus. We know he was a leader among leaders. We know he was part of a group of people who eventually hated Jesus. But there were two more times we hear about Nicodemus. One was when he seemed to defend Jesus when the Pharisees wanted Jesus dead. The other was later in John where we hear: **Later, Joseph of Arimathea asked Pilate for the body of Jesus. Now Joseph was a disciple of Jesus, but secretly because he feared the Jewish leaders. With Pilate's permission, he came and took the body away. <sup>39</sup>He was accompanied by Nicodemus, the man who earlier had visited Jesus at night. Nicodemus brought a mixture of myrrh and aloes, about seventy-five pounds.**

Nicodemus saw what Jesus prophesied. Jesus was lifted up. Jesus was crucified. Why? Because Nicodemus wasn't perfect. Because I am not perfect. Because you are not perfect. We hear it all the time at church. Jesus died because we sinned. Jesus gave up his life because we failed to love perfectly. Jesus was crucified because we don't put God #1.

But how much do you really think about that? Think about this relationship with Nicodemus. He was a Pharisee. Pharisees hated Jesus. They wanted Jesus dead. Could Jesus have just brushed Nicodemus off as one who didn't deserve his love?

Well, who are we? Are we any better than a Pharisee? Do we ever point our fingers at those Pharisees and wonder in shock – “How could they have treated Jesus that way?!” all the while treating Jesus the same way ourselves? Do we ever allow our head knowledge of who Jesus is and what Jesus did take away from our heart knowledge that Jesus died **because OF ME?!** Do we sometimes forget who we truly are, that Jesus shouldn't feel privileged that we are here, but instead that we should feel, at best, unworthy that God has allowed us into his presence? God had no obligation to save me. God had no reason to love me. I did nothing for him. In fact, his Word tells me that before Jesus, I was his enemy! Not a dearly loved child; not a person who could provide any happiness for me being in his presence. An enemy.

If that were our relationship and you and I were enemies, how far would your love go for me? Would there be any love? Would it just be hatred? What would your hatred push you to do? Would you desire for me to be with you? Would you go out of your way to help me? Or would you want nothing to do with me?

God saw us. He knows our sin. He knows our relationship with him and what it should be – enemies. And God reacted: **For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. <sup>17</sup>For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him.** How far did God's love for you take him? To send Jesus. How far did Jesus' love for you take him? All the way to the cross. Amen.