

Psalm 103: 8-14

John 3:1-21

### **The Gospel according to...**

We've sung a few gospel songs this morning. How are you doing with that? Are you shouting amen? Are you having your faith affirmed? Or are you squirming a little? I stumble on a few of the theological assumptions in some those lyrics. It's OK, we're not here to agree on everything.

*[If I were to sum up my sermon today it would be in the verse we sang: "But we make God's love too narrow by false limits of our own, and we magnify it's strictness with a zeal God will not own."<sup>1</sup>]*

"Gospel" is one of those words that has taken on many more meanings than it's dictionary definition. By definition, gospel (evangelion εὐαγγέλιον) means good news.

Take a moment to reflect, ask yourself, if you as an individual were to get good news from God this morning, what would it be? If we as a church were to get good news from God today, what would it be?

Often in church circles the word Gospel is used as a shorthand for the message that Jesus brought with him. It's referred to as "The Gospel" but I'm not convinced we all understand that word in the same way.

For example, when I searched Amazon for the phrase "the gospel according to..." There were many books starting with that title. The gospel according to: Disney, Coco Channel, Biff, St. Francis, Tony Soprano, Moses, Tolkien, Beatles, Harry Potter, Peanuts, Dogs, Pixar, Starbucks, Star Wars and Simpsons and the list goes on.

And of course, there are the four official versions of the good news in the New Testament alone: Matthew, Mark, Luke and John – in which each of those Jesus presents good news in many different ways to many different people. Not to mention the unofficial gospels according to Thomas and Mary Magdalene.

So in light of this, I decided to revisit the classic "born again" passage that often stands in for the gospel. It's about Jesus' encounter with Nicodemus. Come with me for a bit.

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<sup>1</sup> HWB 145 There's a wideness in God's Mercy, lyrics by Frederic William Faber

The problem for those of us who have grown up with the Bible is that we think that we already know the passage because we've already heard it so many times. John 3.16 who ever had to memorize that? Are we listening to what it says?

I am going to re-read it (with a few side comments). Try to listen to it without bringing all that baggage from before. (*Appended after the sermon text*)

Did you notice anything that you hadn't noticed before? (*Comments from the congregation – audio only*)

Pharisees were part of a brotherhood of very well-intentioned people, who wanted to lead a life pleasing to God. They would make a pact to live out every law of God. This is why Jesus is calling this person to a higher way of living. He presumes that he already does understand. I like to think of them sitting in the evening drinking a cup of tea, with a lantern that is fluttering in the wind. All the conversation about light and dark is playing out right before them.

Jesus in this passage has often been given a preachy tone. This time when I visited the story I saw two people who love God having a conversation, trying to figure it out, and it's complicated.

There is a lot in this passage. The other word is this word you "must" be born again. It's not a command; it's a statement of fact. You need to be born by the Spirit to understand the Spirit. If anything Jesus' words are encouragement to Nicodemus to have his faith more deeply.

Then, of course there is the key verse where we hear that "God so LOVED the world" that Jesus came to offer a life-giving way rather than a death-dealing way of life, Jesus came not to condemn but to restore, heal, save.

There other thing I noticed is that Jesus did not invite Nicodemus to say a sinner's prayer. In fact he didn't mention Nicodemus' sins at all. He just encouraged him to live by the Spirit. To live a life that does well when it's brought to light. That people can plainly see what a life grounded in God's love looks like.

Of course, one the most common versions of "the gospel" that comes out of this reading – and I find it hard to understand how – is not mentioned in any of the official gospels in the Bible. It goes something like this: You individually are a sinner. Period. God loves you deeply but a price needs to be paid for that sin not get in the way of God's love for you. Fortunately, Jesus paid that price by dying on the cross and IF you admit you are a sinner, AND "accept" that Jesus died because of your individual sins, to pay that price for you (individually), you can have unimpeded access to God's love with the added benefit of avoiding hell and going to heaven after you die.

I want to say more graciously that this has felt like good news to some people, including myself, and has worked well for them. It worked for me for many years and I even preached it and believed it almost wholeheartedly and lived by it. But always with that little twinge.

I think I need to confess to you at this point that this sermon was born out of anger and frustration. I'd like to think of it as righteous anger, but most people think their anger is justified, so you'll have to decide after you hear what I have to say.

I am learning about anger in a spiritual sense. One of the things I'm learning is that it is a feeling -- therefore not right or wrong, it just is. What you do with anger is you ask yourself what is it about. What is the deeper truth, the deeper feeling that is behind it? So I decided to pay attention to my strange and visceral anger around how "Gospel" is sometimes portrayed. Here are some of the elements that brought me here.

Years ago a friend, who had been raised Anglican, but by then was an atheist, told me that she had stopped going to church: "I got tired of being told I was a sinner. I'm not that bad." That's what made her walk away, this idea that God leads with telling you how miserable you are. I got it, it's one of my theological pet-peeves.

Next came the sermon from the Royal Wedding, by American Episcopal Bishop Michael Curry.<sup>2</sup> Bishop Curry gave an excellent sermon. He used the platform of millions of people listening to speak about the power of God's love, about how God's love can transform the world. It was gospel to me as I heard it. It invited millions of people to imagine what would happen in our world if loving like God loves were our guiding principle, if we harnessed the power of God's love to change the world. When I heard it, I recognized it as "The Gospel."

I also recognized the gospel when a week later I saw Bishop Curry take part in a march on Washington called "Reclaiming Jesus"<sup>3</sup> Simply put, it is an American ecumenical initiative calling out the political climate in the US and reaffirming things like each human being made in the image of God, that there is no oppression in the body of Christ, that "how we treat the hungry, the thirsty, the naked, the stranger, the sick, and the prisoner is how we treat Christ" and so on.

That sermon did not make me angry, it gave me hope. The frustration started when I looked at some the bored, amused and condescending faces in the crowd at the wedding. My frustration gained momentum when I read a critique that someone posted online. An article by someone who ridiculed and belittled Bishop Curry's

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.npr.org/sections/thetwo-way/2018/05/20/612798691/bishop-michael-currys-royal-wedding-sermon-full-text-of-the-power-of-love>

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.reclaimingjesus.org/>

sermon, saying that it missed some “key lyrics of the gospel song” because it had not specifically mentioned sin and salvation.<sup>4</sup>

A world led by love, if that is not salvation, I don’t know what is. But this person couldn’t hear it. It’s like Bishop Curry was speaking a different language; in a sense he was. I started to understand some of Jesus’ frustration when he talked metaphorically about people having eyes and not seeing, having ears and not hearing (Mark 8.18)

And to top it off, this week, at a funeral in a different church context, I was part of the mourners who were subjected to an altar call. It was not a positive experience for me, I felt manipulated. It was a strange response to grief to tell people that they were sinners and they were going to hell if they don’t accept Jesus. It bothered me deeply.

What’s so sad is that at that same service there was this beautiful contemporary song with the lyrics: Oh, the overwhelming, never-ending, reckless love of God.<sup>5</sup> We sang that and then were pounded with conditions and with violence that God presumably requires before we can have God’s love.

I realized why I was so angry, it is because I take deep offense at God’s overwhelming, never-ending, reckless love being presented as limited or conditional or as requiring violence to take effect. As our psalm said our God is merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast, steady, continuous, unbreaking, unconditional, love.

I think that the heartfelt worry of people like the one who wrote that article against Bishop Curry is that love sounds too easy. But let me tell you love is not easy. It’s the hardest thing. Praying a formula is easy and that’s why it’s so tempting. Loving, like God loves is much, much harder. (*As our minstrel says, Love is a burden, it can bring you to your knees – Diem Lafortune*)

Finally, in preparation for this sermon I also watched some excellent evangelistic sermons by Willard Metzger<sup>6</sup> (General Secretary of Mennonite Church Canada) and a movie called *Come Sunday*. It is the story of a Pentecostal preacher, Carlton Pearson who has a revelation and gets out of that cycle of thinking he is responsible for saving everyone by persuading them that they are sinners. He is excommunicated, loses his mega-church, etc. He has a wonderful question in that movie. “Why do we resist the idea of God’s unconditional love? Is it because we might have to love in the same way?”

Yeah, it is! That is absolutely what it is.

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<sup>4</sup> <http://www.contextwithlornadueck.com/2018/05/25/second-thoughts-about-that-royal-wedding-sermon/>

<sup>5</sup> <https://youtu.be/Sc6SSHuZvQE>

<sup>6</sup> I refer to an evangelistic sermon series by Willard Metzger at the Rehoboth Ethiopian congregation in 2015: <https://youtu.be/Llv9FFPNZas>, <https://youtu.be/b5g9Y918Sy4>, [https://youtu.be/ZPV\\_0JbYG1E](https://youtu.be/ZPV_0JbYG1E)

I have this image from some videos online of how they make resin tables out of old reclaimed wood. They'll take old wood and they'll place it side by side and then they'll pour out this liquid that fills in all the gaps. They'll polish it up and it makes it beautiful. That's how I understand God's love. It comes in and fills those gaps and brings out the beauty of things that may not have seemed beautiful before, but that beauty was always there.

So here's what I want to leave with you, the "Gospel" according to Michele, for today:

We humans were created to know and love God, with the image of God in us and the breath of the Spirit enlivening us. The Eternal God is merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in unwavering love. All the ways we fall short of how we were created to be, all our shortcomings, have absolutely no bearing on God's love, none. They are infinitely removed, as far as the east is from the west. Obliterated by God's love.

God so loved (so loves!) the world – creation, us, you, me – that God came to us in a human body as Jesus, a healer, a teacher, a peacemaker, a friend, to show us the way of the Spirit, to face the powers of evil without revenge, to live out love even to the point of death and to conquer death with that same power of love. Whoever turns their trust towards God is met with this overwhelming love coming back in their direction and changing their lives to the core. In this wake will follow release to the captives, recovery of sight to the blind, freedom to the oppressed, and justice.

There is only one requirement from us, in the words of Jesus: Love God back with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and love your neighbour and love yourselves.' Like Bishop Curry said, that kind of love-power will change the world. And that is Good News.

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### **John 3:1-21**

Now there was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a RELIGIOUS leader in the Jewish council.

He came to Jesus by night [NOTICE THE NARRATOR SETTING UP THE LIGHT AND DARK THEME] and said to him,

'Rabbi, [TEACHER] 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.'

Jesus answered him, 'YOU'RE RIGHT, IT TAKES ONE TO KNOW ONE, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above.'

Nicodemus said to him, 'OK, NOW YOU'VE LOST ME. How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother's womb and be born?'

Jesus answered, 'YOU'RE RIGHT, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water – THAT IS THE REGULAR BIRTH and Spirit THAT IS LIKE DURING CREATION WHEN GOD BREATHES GOD'S SPIRIT INTO OUR HUMAN DUST. What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit. Do not be astonished that I said to you, "[WE ALL NEED TO be born from above." The wind [THE BREATH] 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.'

Nicodemus said to him, 'How DOES THAT WORK, how can these things be?'

Jesus answered him, 'HEY, Are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things? IT'S COMPLICATED.

'I tell you, my followers and I are TALKING ABOUT what we know and testify to what we have seen, OUR LIVED EXPERIENCE OF GOD'S SPIRIT; yet you do not receive our testimony. If I have told you about earthly things and you do not believe, how can you COMPREHEND if I tell you about heavenly things? No one has ascended into heaven except the one who descended from heaven, the Son of Man. And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man, THE HUMAN ONE [THAT'S WHAT I CALL MYSELF] be lifted up, that whoever IS FAITHFUL IN FOLLOWING HIM may LIVE A KIND OF LIFE THAT IS eternal.

'For God so loved the world AS TO GIVE THE ONLY BEGOTTEN ONE, so that everyone who PUTS THEIR TRUST 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 RESCUED through him. Those who ARE FAITHFUL TO HIM are not condemned; but those who do not believe are PRETTY MUCH LIVING A DYING LIFE already, because they have not believed in the name of the only Son of God. And this is the judgement, that the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil. For all who do evil hate the light and do not come to the light, so that their deeds may not be exposed. But those who do what is true come to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that their deeds have been done in God.'