

“The Most Famous Conversation in the Bible”- John 3:1-17

You know this story well because you know within this story is a most famous verse, verse 16. It seems that most people even those who do not attend church know this verse. You used to see it at sporting events. The camera would pan the stands and there would be the words, “John 3:16” for the entire world to see held up by someone. So we’re going to spend some time this summer looking at this verse: John 3:16. Over the next few weeks we are going to break the verse down by seeing four things: God’s love, God’s giving, our believing, and our living. Before we do that, this morning we’re going to look at the story behind the verse and then over the next few weeks what the verse means for us today.

Jesus attracted a lot of different people: educated, uneducated, rich, poor, locals, and foreigners. Crowds of people from all walks of life were attracted to Jesus and they followed him. Some out of great need, some just curious, some came for entertainment. He also attracted religious leaders like Nicodemus in our story. Nicodemus was a Pharisee who spent his days discussing God, pleasing God, appeasing God. They debated, pondered, tried to solve puzzles all about God. It was Nicodemus’ job to know what God’ says about a lot of things in life.

Nicodemus had spent a lot of time watching Jesus. He had seen Jesus fearlessly turn upside down centuries of religious tradition. Jesus was not like any other religious leader Nicodemus had ever seen. So Nicodemus wanted to have a conversation with Jesus. He wanted to know more about this man who was so different and taught different things. So Nicodemus comes at night. Perhaps to avoid the crowds Jesus had around him during the day His colleagues can’t know of the meeting. They wouldn’t understand. So he comes and initiates the most famous conversation in the Bible.

Nicodemus starts with what he knows. He had done his homework and Jesus’ work impresses him. We listen for Jesus to acknowledge Nicodemus with words like “I have also heard of you too Nicodemus.” If there was the expectation of hospitable chitchat it didn’t happen. Jesus simply issues this proclamation, “Unless one is born again, he cannot see the Kingdom of God.” Jesus stands on one side of the line of faith and Nicodemus stands on the other side. Jesus pulls

no punches about their differences. Nicodemus lives in the land of good efforts, sincere gestures, and hard work. Give God your best and God will do the rest.

Jesus's has a response. Your best won't do. Your works don't work. Your finest efforts don't mean squat. Unless you are born again, you can't see or understand what God is up to. Nicodemus hesitates on behalf of all of us. "Born again?" How can one be born when he is old? You must be kidding. Put life in reverse. Wouldn't we like to? Try-over! Be born again as a baby and do life better the second time. Wouldn't we like a second chance? Do things different the second time around? So what does it mean to be born again? It does not mean making a replica. It is not a second generation attempt. It is not a well-meaning imitation. What it really means is that God the original creator recreates his creation. God does the work of restoring us to him. He makes us all over again. He restores us to what we were when he made us the first time. It is nothing we do or can do. He makes us all over again on the inside.

This concept completely floors Nicodemus. How can this be? Jesus gives him what has been described as the Hope diamond of the Bible. "For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have everlasting life." A twenty six-word of hope: beginning with God, ending with life. It is brief enough to write on a napkin or memorize in a moment. If you know nothing of the Bible start with this verse. If you know everything in the Bible, come back to this verse. We all need the reminder. The heart of the human problem is the heart of the human. John 3:16 is God's treatment for the problem. He loves. He gave. We believe. We live. You can believe or dismiss these words. You can embrace or reject them, but if you are serious about Jesus you must include them.

Martin Luther the great theologian of the sixteenth century who brought the forefather of all of the Protestant denominations was dying. He was struggling with severe headaches that left him debilitated and bedfast. He was offered a medication to relieve the discomfort. He declined and explained, "My best prescription for head and heart is that God so loved the world that He gave His only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish, but have everlasting

life.” This is the best prescription for head and heart. Who couldn’t benefit from a dose of these words?

As things turned out Nicodemus took these words to heart. When Jesus was crucified, Nicodemus showed up with Joseph of Arimathea. The two oversaw Jesus’ burial. Their lives were changed forever. When word hit the streets that Jesus was out of the tomb and back on his feet, Nicodemus must have smiled and thought back to his late-night chat. “Born again, eh? Who would have thought Jesus would start with himself.

Over some weeks this summer we are going to look at these words of hope to understand fully what these words really mean for us. I hope you can join us as we troll this very familiar verse and see it in a fresh and new way. The most famous conversation in the Bible changed Nicodemus forever and it changes us forever.