

“For God so loved the world”

John 3:16

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February 13, 2022

Thanks a lot Nicodemus. Because of you we had to endure years and years of the person who became known as the “John 3:16 Guy.” He would dress up with a rainbow Afro wig, get right where television cameras could not miss him, and hold up his sign, which simply said, “John 3:16.” He got his start in the National Basketball Association finals in 1977, and then became a staple of Super Bowls and other sporting events. He really was an odd duck, and if you learn about his life by googling “The John 3:16 Guy” you will find out how odd he was. Thanks a lot Nicodemus. Because of you we have the John 3:16 guy.

Nicodemus, this could have all been avoided if you had just been a little quicker on the uptake. Jesus doesn't say the words of John 3:16 until after you fumbled his invitation to be born again. Instead of accepting Jesus at his word, you had to ask, “How can someone be born again?” So Jesus teed the ball up again. But even after Jesus explained what he meant by being born again, born from above, born of the Spirit, you were still in the dark. So you asked, “How can this be?” And then, and only then, did Jesus go into detail about what it means to be born again, and how that birth that comes through the Spirit is a gift only Jesus can give, because only Jesus comes from above, from heaven. And to make sure by this point you could understand the salvation he was offering, then Jesus reminded you how Moses lifted up the snake in the wilderness, and how everyone who looked at the snake was saved, and how in the same way, everyone who looks at Jesus when he is lifted up will be saved, will have eternal life. Nicodemus, if the light had shined into the darkness of your understanding just a bit earlier, Jesus would never have said the words of John 3:16 and we would have all been spared the sight of that crazy guy with his crazy wig holding his sign up and drawing media attention to the verse “John 3:16.” Thanks a lot Nicodemus.

Actually, although the John 3:16 guy had his issues, I always thought it was a welcome sight to see the sign, right in the middle of the

end zone of the Super Bowl or the finish line of the Indy 500 or the centerfield bleachers of the World Series with that plain and simple lettering, saying only this: “John 3:16”. If the bulb had burned a little brighter in Nicodemus, if the darkness in which he dwelled had been illuminated just a bit earlier, Jesus might never have said, “For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have everlasting light.” When you look at it from that perspective, I don’t think I would be alone in saying, “Thanks a lot Nicodemus.” If you had immediately grasped what Jesus was talking about, we might never have had John 3:16. And what a loss it would be. Can you imagine what our life would be like if we did not have that verse to cling to? So I for one am really glad Nicodemus did not get it right away, that his spiritual light bulb was a little dim, that his powers of perception were puny, and that he stumbled in the darkness and doubt of unbelief long enough for Jesus to say those words that have meant so much to so many, those words we know as John 3:16.

Thanks Nicodemus. Without you Adrienne might never have gotten out of her car and come to church. Adrienne was one of our dearest friends. She started attending a class that invited people to bring their doubts and questions and explore what it means to have faith in God. She had a lot of doubts. She had a lot of questions. She had a lot of disappointments. Church had been a place of judgment, a place of guilt. After several weeks of attending the class, of asking her questions and not being rejected, several weeks of expressing her doubts and not being judged, she got up the courage to come to church. She got up the courage to attend the worship service. Even as she drove into the church parking lot one Sunday morning, she really wasn’t sure if she was going to walk through the doors. She had a lot of baggage from all those bad experiences in her past.

Well, she parked the car. She opened the door. She stepped onto the asphalt. She took several steps. And as she puts it, “She got cold feet.” She turned around. Just then a woman spotted her and came over to talk, to invite her to walk with her into church, and this woman welcomed her. That woman brought Adrienne into the house of God. And thanks to Nicodemus, when Adrienne got herself into church,

Adrienne heard about the God who loved the world so much he sent his one and only Son so that whoever believes in him would not perish but have eternal life.”

There’s more. Thanks to Nicodemus our friend Adrienne got involved in a renewal ministry, a ministry that sponsored weekend retreats where people would come...with their doubts, with their fears, with their sadness, with their sorrow. Adrienne loved those retreats. She would welcome people. She would listen to people. She would comfort people. She would nurture people. She would encourage people. And thanks to Nicodemus, Adrienne would tell other people those words from John 3:16, about the God who loved the world so much, so much, so much that he sent his one and only Son. I think back to one of those spiritual retreats, a retreat where Adrienne had been elected as the leader, and as she was standing before a crowd of 100 people, and as with tears falling from her eyes she was telling about her relationship with God and the healing and wholeness she had found in Jesus Christ, I think back on that night, a night when the darkness had disappeared and the light was shining, a night when it was clear to all of us the great joy and blessing of being born again, of being born from above, of being born of the Spirit, I think back on that night, I think back on our dear friend Adrienne, on the joy she found in Jesus, and I say to myself, “Thanks a lot Nicodemus.”

Several years ago, during the month of November, we had a memorial service at church. A young man living in Florida had died tragically of a drug overdose. Because of family connections the parents wanted to have the memorial service in Westerly and to have the son buried at River Bend Cemetery. They were not members and really had no connection to our church, but that doesn’t matter. Families need places to mark life’s significant events and we were glad to host that service. I will also tell you it was one of the most heartbreaking experiences of my life as the young man’s mom sat in the front row and cried and cried at the death of her beloved son. When the special music began and the vocalists sang “Amazing Grace,” my mind had wandered into the deep and dark valley that parents walk when a child dies. As the

words, “When we’ve been there ten thousand years...” fell on my ears I could not raise my head.

About a month after the memorial service, in the middle of December a letter arrived at church. It was from the young man’s mother. The letter was addressed to the whole church, as it should be. She began, “In early November, my husband and I went through the heartache of having to bury our only child. He was only 28 years old. After years of struggle, he was finally taken from us by the insidious disease of addiction. He tried so hard, over and over, for many years, to overcome this malady of the body, mind and spirit. The morning of his death, his phone records show he was trying to contact a treatment center. The center he was calling did not do intakes on weekends. Within hours of those calls, he made his last, fatal mistake. The reason we wanted to write you this letter is to provide an expression of gratitude that our shock and grief prohibited us from doing around the time of his funeral service in your beautiful church...When our son died we were forced to make decisions we didn’t dare allow ourselves to even think about prior to that day. We needed to decide how and where to put our son to rest. Here we were, sitting in a Florida hospital, far away from our home in New York. It occurred to me instantly that we would bring him home to Rhode Island, to Westerly, where my husband and I grew up, met each other, and got married. It was very clear to us that Westerly would always be our ‘Home.’ Our son loved visiting there. It meant visiting family and being surrounded by love...

On the day of the service, you helped us through each step. As I met friends and family upon arrival, I will never forget seeing two women I didn’t recognize personally. They approached me and told me they were church members and that the community had been praying for us. I was so moved and grateful for their loving gesture of attendance. It personified the feeling inside the walls of your church and will forever be a comfort to us.” She ends with some beautiful words of thanks and the assurance that we will be in their heart and prayers forever. As I think back on that letter, one of the most poignant, touching and heartfelt letters I have ever received, something comes to my mind. And the same thing runs through my mind again when I remember how that year, on

Christmas Eve, the aunt and uncle of the young man who died quietly walked through the doors of our church, signed their names in our guestbook, and said, "It felt right to come and worship here tonight." What ran through my mind are the words I have already said several times today. "Thanks Nicodemus." A verse like John 3:16 doesn't just show up in the end zone of professional football games, or the bleachers in centerfield at a World Series game, or at the finish line of the Indy 500. A verse like John 3:16 is somehow written into the fabric of the life of this church, and every church where Jesus Christ is Lord. The comfort people experience, the welcome, the acceptance, the compassion, it's as if John 3:16 is written across the foreheads of each member and the doorframes of our houses. Thanks to Nicodemus we are a community that shares with the world in a hundred different ways the good news that God loves this world...so much...that he sent his one and only Son.

There was a kid in our junior high youth group, in 1980. He's not in junior high anymore. But when he was, he was a tough nut to crack. He came to Sunday school, but no matter how many ways I tried to get him interested and no matter how many invitations I gave and no matter how much I begged and pleaded, I couldn't get him to come to youth fellowship. So he was always out on fringe. I never felt like we really connected with him.

And then sometime around his senior year in high school, he started to come to youth group. He started to get to know the other young people. He started to take some leadership. When he graduated high school, I invited him to work with the teens at church, and he was a natural. He poured his heart out to the younger teens and they responded. He ended up going to seminary and becoming a pastor. Over that stretch of years, I had the privilege of listening to him speak to young people. Boy, he was on fire for the Lord. Without fail, whenever he would speak to the young people, he had a go-to illustration, one that had touched him at the core of his being, and one that he was always certain to share with young people. Without fail, at some point during his talk to the young people, he would say, "I asked Jesus how much he loved me, and he spread out his arms and said, 'This much.'" And then with tears in his eyes, my friend would finish that story. The story goes

like this, “I asked Jesus how much he loved me, and he spread out his arms and said, ‘This much.’ And then he died.” I can still see Roger, arms extended in remembrance of the sacrificial love of Jesus Christ and every time that beautiful image fills my mind, I say to myself, “Thanks Nicodemus.” My friend Roger knew that verse so closely connected to Nicodemus. My friend Roger knew John 3:16.

Today is the Super Bowl. I don’t know whether the guy is still around, and if he is still around, I don’t whether he will show up in the end zone with his rainbow wig holding his sign that says John 3:16. But I do know that I have seen that sign in more places than I can remember. That sign is in church parking lots when a scared and lonely woman has turned around and started to head for the exits. That sign called her back. That sign was here in this sanctuary when a grieving family buried their son who tragically lost his battle with addiction. That sign gave them hope and gave them comfort. That sign is with us when the waves are crashing into the sea and we are overwhelmed with the power and majesty of God, and that sign is with us when the night has turned pitch black, and grief and sorrow threaten to swallow us. That sign is with us when we hold a precious baby to our side and that sign is with us when we release a loved one to their mortal grave. That sign is with us when we rejoice, and that sign is with us when we weep. Thanks to a guy named Nicodemus, who was a little slow on the uptake, who couldn’t quite understand at that moment what it meant to be born again, that sign is with us, and will always be with us, and that sign that says, “John 3:16 tells us that no matter what else we know about God, we know this. God loves us. God loves this world. Thanks to Nicodemus, and that visit he made under cover of night, to see the man named Jesus, thanks to Nicodemus we know God loves this world.

And thanks to Nicodemus I had one of the most meaningful moments of my life as a Christian. We were on a tour of the Holy Land in the fall of 2011. We came to the place called the Garden Tomb. A woman met our group and served as our guide. She walked us up to a corner of the garden that overlooked a bare, rocky cliff. Cut into the sheer cliff was a haunting image. Some holes seemed to form eyes and a nose, as if a skull like face were staring at us.

She said some people think that very cliff is what the Bible calls Golgotha, the place of the skull. (John 19:17) That is where John tells us Jesus was crucified. The woman who was leading us through the Garden Tomb was named Ann. I think she was from Great Britain. She certainly had a wonderful accent. But as she spoke, it wasn't just her accent that mesmerized me. It was what she said. She looked at that place called Golgotha, and the reality that one day our Lord Jesus Christ died, either right there, or somewhere nearby, that reality filled her soul with a purpose and with a passion.

This sweet woman said she comes as a volunteer and spends three to four months walking people through the garden. It was obvious that she felt privileged to be able to share the story of Jesus with groups of people who visited the Holy Land. Looking at Golgotha, from the Garden that housed the tomb, she shared the story of a man named Nicodemus who came to Jesus by night, perhaps out of fear and not wanting others to know he was associating with Jesus. That visit she was describing is the visit we have been talking about this morning. Nicodemus comes to Jesus by night. As Ann continued talking, she said, "But by the end of the gospel, after Jesus has been to the pit, after Jesus has been to Golgotha, after Jesus has suffered and died, Nicodemus is there to help carry the body of Jesus to the tomb that Joseph of Arimathea has prepared."

With tears in her eyes, telling a story she had doubtless told hundreds of times before, but a story that never grows old and never loses its meaning, she reminded us that it was to Nicodemus, who came under cover of night, that Jesus said, "For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish but have everlasting life." What she wanted to be sure we each understood is that Jesus died at the place called the skull for a reason. Jesus died because God loves this world. Staring at a rock named Golgotha, with holes in the rock that gave the haunting expression of a face looking straight at me, a face that suffered and died for me, a face that suffered and died so that I would know the love of God, a face that longs to look in the eyes of every person and every heart and convey the amazing grace of God's love, staring that day at the place of the Skull,

with my heart overwhelmed at the love of God, I humbly whispered a word of thanks to Nicodemus. And more importantly, I whispered a word of thanks to God, to our God who loves the world so much he sent his one and only Son, so that whoever believes in him will not perish, but have eternal life.