What Disciples Do

Make Faith Public

OT 26C-22

Isaiah 65: 17-25

John 3: 16-17

**Prayer for Illumination**

**Isaiah 65: 17-25**

For I am about to create new heavens and a new earth; the former things shall not be remembered or come to mind. But be glad and rejoice forever in what I am creating; for I am about to create Jerusalem as a joy, and its people as a delight. I will rejoice in Jerusalem, and delight in my people; no more shall the sound of weeping be heard in it, or the cry of distress. No more shall there be in it an infant that lives but a few days, or an old person who does not live out a lifetime; for one who dies at a hundred years will be considered a youth, and one who falls short of a hundred will be considered accursed. They shall build houses and inhabit them; they shall plant vineyards and eat their fruit. They shall not build and another inhabit; they shall not plant and another eat; for like the days of a tree shall the days of my people be, and my chosen shall long enjoy the work of their hands. They shall not labor in vain, or bear children for calamity; for they shall be offspring blessed by the Lord— and their descendants as well. Before they call I will answer, while they are yet speaking I will hear. The wolf and the lamb shall feed together, the lion shall eat straw like the ox; but the serpent—its food shall be dust! They shall not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain, says the Lord.

**John 3: 16-17**

**John 3: 1-22**

Now there was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews. He came to Jesus by night and said to him, “Rabbi, 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, “Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above.”

Nicodemus said to him, “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, “Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit. 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, ‘You must be born from above.’ The wind 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 can these things be?”

Jesus answered him, “Are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things?

“Very truly, I tell you, we speak of what we know and testify to what we have seen; yet you do not receive our testimony. If I have told you about earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe 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 be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.

“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.

“Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him. Those who believe in him are not condemned; but those who do not believe are condemned already, because they have not believed in the name of the only Son of God. And this is the judgment, 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.”

What Disciples Do

Make Faith Public

When it comes to faith and worldview… it’s sorta like the chicken and the egg.

Does your faith shape the way you see and relate to the world?

Or does the way you see and rel

ate to the world shape your faith?

And a related question puts it, perhaps, a bit more bluntly.

Do your politics inform your faith?

Or does your faith inform your politics?

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I suspect that, for most of us… most of the time… the answer is both—to greater or lesser degrees.

We can’t help but come to faith with the worldly perspectives we hold. We’ve each been shaped by our unique histories and experiences, which can’t help but shape the way we approach our relationship with God.

Just as we all have various assumptions and expectations—conscious and unconscious—that boundary our thinking and limit what we see and think is possible.

This is why the Pharisee Nicodemus was so confused in our Gospel lesson this morning when Jesus told him about the kingdom of God. Nicodemus was approaching his relationship with Jesus based entirely on his own personal experiences and assumptions. So when Jesus told him, “no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above,” Nicodemus was lost amid his literal understanding of Jesus’ words.

“What are you talking about, Jesus? No one can be born a second time.”

But Jesus insisted, “You’re not getting it, Nicodemus. No one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit.”

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And as far as we know… Nicodemus never did get it. Just as we so often struggle to get it.

In fact, to this day, I think Jesus’ words here in John continue to be some of the most misunderstood in all of Scripture.

Which is saying something. Because John 3:16 just may be the most famous verse in the New Testament.

Some of you may remember back 80’s and 90’s… when watching baseball and football games… you would occasionally see fans in the crowds holding up signs that read, simply “John 3:16.”

And you’ll still see 3 : 16 on the occasional bumper sticker or roadside billboard.

It’s why there are still many today—especially many in the evangelical movement of the church—who think of John 3:16 as a Cliff Notes version of the Gospel. As if most of Christian discipleship could be understood by reading 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 may have eternal life.”

Unfortunately… such an application of this verse has, in my strong opinion, done more harm than good to our faith tradition… and our understanding of discipleship.

For when we rip this singular verse from the rest of its context in John… and read it literally… it reads as if Jesus is saying that he became incarnate simply to get people into heaven when they die. And that the key to getting into heaven is simply believing… or mentally agreeing… that Jesus came from God.

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But there’s a bitter, sad irony to this use of John 3:16. As Jesus’ words to Nicodemus make clear, he wasn’t speaking literally. Just as Jesus didn’t literally intend Nicodemus to crawl back into a mother’s womb and be born a second time… neither was Jesus trying to boil faith down to something as simple as “believing” in him in order to get into heaven.

Part of the confusion stems from the way we interpret words like “believe” and “eternal life.”

When you and I hear “believe”… our modern English ears think of mentally accepting something as “real” or “true.” But throughout John’s Gospel… the term “belief” isn’t used to simply mean mentally agreeing with a point. For John… to “believe” in something was to trust it so deeply that you based your whole life upon it. For John, mental acquiescence is a far, far cry from deep and abiding belief.

And while most English ears hear the term “eternal life” and connect it to the next life… what happens when we die… amid the rich symbolism of John’s gospel, the term “eternal life” was never intended to be limited to the afterlife. Rather, for John, “eternal life” transcends both space and time. It means both heaven and earth. It’s eternal. It’s every time… everywhere.

So a better reading of John 3:16 is probably be something like… “God so loved the world that he gave his only son… so that everyone who builds their life around him and the ways he revealed might experience life in all its fullness—both here and there… both now and then.”

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But really… even these interpretive disagreements are small potatoes compared to my main problem with the way the church has used and abused this verse over the years. You wanna know my big beef with John 3:16? Here it is. We cannot—we absolutely cannot—understand verse 16 without also understanding the verses that follow. Especially verse 17.

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 may have eternal life.*

Verse 17 – *Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.*

So while a literal reading of only verse 16 reads as if Jesus came just to get individuals into heaven… verse 17 immediately comes along and makes clear that Jesus didn’t come to save individuals… Jesus came to save the world. To bring light and love and life to every person in every corner where darkness pervades.

And as verses 18-21 make clear, Jesus expects believers in the present day… those who claim to be his disciples… those who claim to know and feel and trust in his light… to go forth and reflect the light of his kingdom into every dark corner of this world.

Which means, dear friends, the call of disciples is not to *personal* salvation… but *communal* salvation. It’s a call to reflect the light of God’s kingdom into all of the world.

Not just our families. But our friends. Not just our friends… but our neighbors. Not just our neighbors… but with strangers. And not just with strangers… but even with enemies. And not just our enemies… but the ones who make it hard and uncomfortable and we’d really just rather ignore.

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And it’s not just the gospels that make this point. Our first lesson this morning tells the same story a different perspective. Here, we encounter the prophet Isaiah preaching to the Hebrews upon their return home. For generations, they’d been exiled in Babylon for decades… but upon the fall of Babylon, the Persians released them to return to their homeland… where they could resume the lives they once knew.

As they arrived home, God reiterated God’s promises to them… promises that revealed God’s mission in the world.

So listen again to the mission of God according to Isaiah:

For I am about to create new heavens and a new earth; the former things shall not be remembered or come to mind…  I will rejoice in Jerusalem, and delight in my people; no more shall the sound of weeping be heard in it, or the cry of distress. No more shall there be in it an infant that lives but a few days, or an old person who does not live out a lifetime; for one who dies at a hundred years will be considered a youth, and one who falls short of a hundred will be considered accursed. They shall build houses and inhabit them; they shall plant vineyards and eat their fruit… They shall not labor in vain, or bear children for calamity; for they shall be offspring blessed by the Lord— and their descendants as well. Before they call I will answer, while they are yet speaking I will hear. The wolf and the lamb shall feed together, the lion shall eat straw like the ox… They shall not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain, says the Lord.

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While a literal reading of John 3:16 may seem to say otherwise, the whole of Scripture makes plain, friends, God’s mission in the world has… from the very beginning… been *for the whole world*.

So while we all… to some degree another… approach faith amid our own personal assumptions and histories… While faith, in so many ways, begins with personal experiences… **the call of discipleship is *not* just personal. It’s public. It is very, very public.**

Not in the sense that we need to go scream from the rooftops and on street corners… but that we must do the work we’re called to do make the kingdom of God a present reality.

Not just for us or for some… but for all. Including… and in my reading of Scripture… especially… the least and the last… the poor and the marginalized… the excluded and the condemned.

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Now… does this mean disciples should all agree on every political issue of the day? Absolutely not.

Good and faithful Christians rightly debate and often disagree over the role of the government within society. Despite what we often tell ourselves in our own, limited echo chambers… neither Republicans or Democrats, Green Party members or Libertarians have a hold on discipleship.

Similarly… our faith can lead us to different perspectives… on abortion… and economic policy… and crime prevention… you name it.

But whatever your politics… As those called to be kingdom builders… the lens of the Gospel should shape the way we see the world… and the people within it. It should shape the way we approach the issues of our day… as we seek to navigate them… first and foremost… *faithfully*.

Which is why we cannot pretend as if the Church—and its members—are not directly called to explore the complex issues of our day… as we intentionally strive to tend to the least and the last… the hurting and the broken… as well as the societal ills that lead to such pain and brokenness.

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It’s why I’m so proud of the mission and outreach that continues to emanate from this special community of faith.

I’m grateful for the Mission Committee and the new Mission Action Teams.

* I was so excited to see so many people at last week’s Sunday Community Lunch informational meeting… seeking to explore how they can help feed the food insecure of our area.
* It’s why I’ve been so excited to see something as seemingly simple yet impactful as our Environmental Action Team’s new Facebook Group continue to grow… as people share ideas and questions about simple but effective ways of increasing our care for creation.
* It’s why it did my heart good to learn that over 40 people signed up to help our Peacemaking Action Team’s plans to facilitate refugee outreach.

And those are just three… specific… but impactful examples.

Today… we offer another. Listening groups led by the Snyder Committee. This committee was formed decades ago… and built around the hopes of the church and an initial, generous gift of Hank Snyder and his family. For many years the earnings of this fund have helped fund our church’s mission trips to Honduras… as well as other international ministries.

But today… thanks to the continued and remarkable generosity of the Snyder family’s bequests… as well as other members’ generations donations… the fund has grown to almost $800,000. And the Session—the church’s governing board—has asked the Snyder Committee to explore how we can faithfully use over half of this money in the next handful of years to make a real, lasting difference in the world around us. How can we use this fund, TPC, to grow God’s kingdom and reflect light into the darkness?

And the Snyder Committee wants to hear from you. So if you have a passion… an interest… If you have a call of God on your heart to invest your hands and feet in mission… Or if you just want to learn more… come to the meeting in the chapel after worship… or jump on the virtual meeting we’ll be holding at the same time.

And if you can’t get to that… No worries. And no pressure.

But dear friends… remember. While your faith is personal… it’s not *just* personal. While discipleship entails your own, individual relationship with God… it’s not just about you. Disciples are called to reflect the light of God’s kingdom into the world. The whole world. Especially those people and places who know the darkness of pain and grief and need and exclusion.

So how, dear friends, will you make your faith public? How will your life testify to the kingdom of God you continue to pursue? How will we, TPC, continue to participate in the mission of God in the world?

“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.

“Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world—the whole world—might be saved through him.”

Amen.