

“Seize The Love!”

Prologue: I discovered this week that the fourth Sunday in Lent has traditionally been a time in the church for “Refreshment,” a break in the Lenten fast. The scriptures the last three Sundays have spoken of sin and our need for repentance and honesty. Today’s Gospel lesson from John speaks to us of God’s love ... a Divine love that does not condemn. This is a very important lesson, because far too often we concentrate too much on judgment and condemnation ... judging ourselves ... judging other ... coming to faith because we live in fear that we are going to hell, rather than coming to faith because we are loved. What is there about us that would rather be condemned by God than saved? Why does the declaration, “God so loved the world” remain somewhat incomprehensible to us? Jesus’ encounter with Nicodemus is Jesus encountering us with this negative faith attitude. Hear now the Gospel of John, chapter 3, verses 1 through 17: (read the lesson)

Maybe ... almost twenty years ago, there was a popular movie called, “Dead Poet’s Society.” It was a story about one teacher’s influence and relationship with boys in a private boarding school. The teacher’s name was Keeting, and Keeting’s whole endeavor was to help his students gain a greater appreciation for literature. His method was strange, because, to an extent, he taught from a “stream of consciousness.” In one early scene in the movie, Mr. Keeting takes his class out in the foyer to examine the pictures of former students, who have long since died. He firmly, but sensitively, explains the one great fact of life: all people die, including themselves. Because of that very fact, Mr. Keeting gives them a quick Latin lesson. He tells them to lean their ears very close to the pictures of the former students and listen to what they say. As the students do so, Mr. Keeting whispers, as if from the grave, “Carpe diem! Carpe diem!,” which means “Seize the day. Seize the day!”

The message that Mr. Keeting attempted to teach his students is similar to the message that Jesus is conveying to Nicodemus. Simply put ... the moment of life is at hand. The past is gone, and tomorrow is always a question. But the now is now! “Carpe diem!” Seize the day. Take hold of the opportunity at hand ... make the best out of it ... use it for the good of your soul. Jesus’ rallying cry was “Repent! For the kingdom of God is at hand!” Like Mr. Keeting’s students and Jesus’ confrontation with Nicodemus, we, too, need to be smacked upside the head! For far too often we move through life like zombies ... as if the circuit breakers to our brain waves are off. Our society is full of “duh people” ... people who respond to life with, “Duh! I don’t know!” Playing dumb is a response used as an excuse for not making a commitment or taking responsibility for one’s behavior. Playing dumb demonstrates profound laziness! People need to be called on this attitude and not allowed to get away with it, which is what Jesus in John’s Gospel attempts to do. Jesus cries out: “Wake up! Life is short, and God is offering an opportunity of a lifetime. So seize the day! Grasp the gospel of good news, which is about your salvation.”

Yes, God speaks to us all the time. We just don’t listen. We don’t take the time to hear or see! We don’t pay attention. We are too concerned about the past, which we can not change. We are too worried about the future’s outcome, which we can not totally determine. However, we can be alive in the present. God may be speaking to us, in order to show us the way. But we may be so worried about something that we are too removed from the present to hear. Sometimes our response to God is: “Duh! I don’t know God! This salvation thing is pretty complicated. Duh! I got a lot of questions!” Nicodemus had a lot of questions. He comes to Jesus one night and respectfully recognized him as a Rabbi, “a teacher come from God.” This sets off a stream of thought within Jesus, which was interrupted a couple of times by Nicodemus as he sought clarification.

At first reading, the thoughts of Jesus seem disconnected, even rambling. Jesus speaks of new birth, being born again, or being born from above; even Moses is mentioned. Jesus speaks of a God who loves the world and gives His Son so that believers may have eternal life. His words are top-of-the-head, a stream of consciousness, but they do originate in his heart and in his soul. Actually, the gospel message is presented in this way throughout John. It is an exuberant flood of thought, not a formal, organized presentation. Now the consciousness of Nicodemus is like that of a Pharisee: moral uprightness; keeping of the laws and commandments. Nicodemus is respectable, but confining and rather lifeless. Jesus did not rake Nicodemus across the coals as he did with other Pharisees on other occasions, denouncing their hypocrisy and deadness.

I assume that Jesus detected a sincere seeking on Nicodemus' part, and so he poured forth the entrance requirements to God's kingdom and in effect, invited Nicodemus to enter this new consciousness through a new birth: a consciousness of love and freedom, rather than of legalism and self-righteousness. Jesus acknowledges Nicodemus as a "seeker" and encourages him, as he encourages us to "seize the moment! Accept God's salvation plan! Accept that "God so loved the world that He gives His only Son so that every one who believes in him should not perish but have everlasting life." Seize the love! Seize the salvation! Now is the moment to believe and accept!

In the open-endedness of Nicodemus's conversation, he becomes more than a stand-in for the Pharisees of his day. Nicodemus becomes – I believe -- all of us. In the vast differences that can be conveyed by a change in the tone of voice, this story can match the quest of each one of us. For instance in verse 9 Nicodemus asks, "How can this be?" But we cannot hear how he says it or watch his body language. Is it wistful? Challenging? Scoffing? Eagerly excited? A case can be made for each of these tones and many others. You see, Jesus is not only addressing Nicodemus. Jesus is addressing every human being. When we read this lesson, we stand in the shoes of Nicodemus! We are the ones who have come seeking ... seeking answers ... seeking help ... seeking affirmation ... seeking healing ... seeking peace ... seeking wholeness. We look at the world; we look at our society; we look at Montgomery County; we look at our neighbors; we look at our family; and finally, we look at ourselves, and over and over we ask: "O God, how can this be?" How can our life be as it is? The answer to our seeking lies in seizing God's love as it is spoken of in John 3:16.

John 3:16 tells us that the *initiative* in all salvation lies with God. Sometimes Christianity is presented in such a way that it sounds as if God has to be pacified, as if God has to be persuaded to forgive. Sometimes people speak as if drawing a picture of a stern, angry, unforgiving God and a gentle, loving, forgiving Jesus. Sometimes people present the Christian message in such a way that it sounds as if Jesus did something which changed the attitude of God towards people from condemnation to forgiveness. But John 3:16 tells us that salvation of the human race began with God. God sent his son. God sent him because God loves the people He created. Everything in life begins with the love of God.

John 3:16 tells us that the mainspring of God's being is love. It is easy to think of God as looking at people in their disobedience and their rebellion saying, "I'll break them. I'll discipline them and punish them and scourge them until they come back." It is easy to think of God as seeking the allegiance of people in order to satisfy His own desire for power and for what we might call a "completely subjected universe." However, the tremendous thing about John 3:16 is that it shows us that God acts *not* for His own sake, but for ours ... *not* to satisfy His desire for power, *not* to bring a universe under His heel, but to satisfy His love. God is not like an absolute monarch who treats each person as a subject to be reduced to abject obedience. God is the Parent who cannot be happy until all His wandering children have come home. God does not smash people into submission. No! God yearns for us and "woos" us to Himself by unconditionally loving us.

The Reformer Martin Luther affirms this teaching by focusing in this phrase from today's lesson: "not to condemn the world." He writes, *These are astounding words. God has every reason to be angry and to wipe out the world as a rightful enemy, and yet there is no greater love than God and no more desperate scoundrel than the world. To love the world and wish it well is beyond me. If I were God I would give it hell-fire. But instead of consuming the world in anger, God loves the world with such unspeakable and overflowing love that he gave his Son. My powers are not adequate to reach to the bottom of this tremendous affirmation. This love is greater than the fire seen by Moses [in the burning bush], greater even than the fire of hell. Who will despair if God so loves the world?*

Yes, who will despair? For John 3:16 tells us of the width of God's love. It was the world that God so loved; not a nation; not "good people"; and not only the people who love Him. It is the world that God loves. All are included in this vast love of God: the unlovable and the unlovely; the lonely who have no one else to love them; the person who loves God and the person who never thinks of God; the person who rests in the love of God and the one who spurns it. Augustine expresses it well: "God loves each one of us, as if there is only one of us to love!" How gloriously said! God loves you, as if *you* are the only one to love. Seize God's love! Immerse yourself in it. Be changed by it. Allow yourself to be born again and again and again and again by being renewed by God's love! Take this good news as your Lenten "refreshment."