

“To God Be the Glory”

Psalms 95; John 3:1-15

March 12, 2023

It’s embarrassing to admit this but I think you’re already getting aware of this – I wasn’t a particularly great kid to my parents growing up. In fact, I think you could say that I was a proverbial “handful,” especially in my adolescent years. I was always doing something that my parents rightfully would’ve been against had they known. Beyond that, I wasn’t as respectful as I could’ve been. I remember one occasion arguing with my mom very loudly. Truth be told, in the fog of years between then and now, I don’t remember what it was we were locking horns over but I can assure you one thing – it was entirely me being an idiot. I know that based on life experience if not actual memory. On and on we went until I went to the ultimate space. “Mom, I wish you were dead,” much to my present-day chagrin. Here I was telling the woman that brought me into the world, that fed me and kissed my boo-boos and tucked me in at night as a child. And here I was, in my utter lack of respect, telling her I wished she wasn’t with us. It was a terrible, awful, good-for-nothing thing to say. But I remember my mom’s words in return. When I think back on it now, it was an amazing act of grace. My mother looked right at me and said words that have stuck with me to this day – she said, “I love you whether you like it or not!” I can’t even imagine the poise my mom had that day. After all, here was a kid making your life a living heck and she still had the wherewithal not to continue to the fight any longer, even after my shameful words.

“I love you, whether you like it or not.” I remember that incident as a way of bridging us into this morning’s Gospel lesson. It’s a familiar one, to be sure, containing the most known, most quoted, most Gossypily verse found in the entire Gospel. John 3:16 – *“For God so loved the world that He Gave His only son....”* But this verse comes in a context and we should take the time to dive into that in order to see not only how these words fit into the passage, but into the entirety of Christian belief, as well.

A great deal has happened by this third chapter of the Gospel of John. Jesus has been made known through John the Baptist – *“Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world.”* And He’s begun His earthly ministry. And begin with a bang, to be sure. First, Jesus appears at a wedding in which the hosts have made a terrible mistake – they’ve misjudged how much wine was required for the wedding feast. It’s there that Jesus performs the first of His Sign-Act miracles in the Gospel of John – He turns water into wine. Filling large stone jars with water, Jesus transforms it into wine and not just wine, the best wine of all.

If that wasn’t going to give Jesus enough attention, what He does next is sure to enflame the passions of a great many Jerusalemites at the time. Having had enough, Jesus walks into the Temple and sees moneychangers and merchants all over the Temple courtyard. Fashioning a cord out of whips, Jesus drives off all the ungodly commerce that was going on right in God’s own house. As we all know, if there’s anything that gets people riled up faster than losing money, I don’t know what it is. So, at this point, Jesus is a well-known guy. But it isn’t just that. It’s that He’s now known as a trouble-maker. He’s gone into a situation and called into question the status quo, never a good idea for anyone looking to stay under the radar, so to speak. Chief among the groups of people now concerned with Jesus are a group known as the Pharisees.

Now look, the Pharisees come across as the bad guys in the Gospels and that’s because they were part of a group of people who were trying to have Jesus killed for doing things like Clearing the Temple. But the reality of the situation on the ground in first century Jerusalem is that the Pharisees were considered the most pious of the pious. They were the guys that you knew followed God’s laws with the utmost sincerity and diligence. As such, they were leaders within their communities. They were the guys you trusted. But they were already concerned with Jesus and His ministry and would only become more so as the Gospel of John progresses.

I mention Pharisees because it’s a Pharisee that moves things along for us in the Gospel of John. The Gospel introduces us to Nicodemus, one of those Pharisees that I’ve been talking about. Now look, Nicodemus coming to see Jesus after the cleansing of the Temple is an odd choice for him, to be sure. After all, to come to Jesus was, in a way, fraternizing with the enemy, in a manner of speaking. But to those who are called, to those whose names are inscribed in the Book of Life, Jesus is so winsome as to draw you to Him no matter whether you like it or not. And so, Nicodemus comes. But notice, he does so under the cover of night. This is an obvious nod to the fact that he’s trying to hide what he’s doing. And make no mistake about it, this would’ve been a scandalous betrayal. It would be like a die-hard North Carolina basketball fan heading to a Duke

University victory party after the Tar Heels had just lost to the Blue Devils. This would've been a shocking decision. And, if anything is sure to be true, it's that here in America, we like making our own decisions. For good reasons sometimes, we Americans dislike being told what to do. After all, what is freedom if it isn't the opportunity to live our lives in exactly the manner we determine?

Nicodemus makes a choice here. A dangerous one for his standing amongst his peers. He decides that he needs to learn more about this Jesus Christ and he's willing to take a chance to find out more. I wonder – are we always as willing?

Right now, for example, if you're like most Americans, 88 percent based on a recent poll, you've got a Bible in your home. Do you know where it is, I wonder? And if you do know where it is, under how many layers of dust do you think it now presently sits? I kid because I care.

The point being that, every day, we get to make choices in our blessed American freedom. Each day, a new 24 hours greets us as does a world filled with God's provision as well as God's Holy Spirit. What we do with it seems, at times, entirely up to us. But is it?

Jesus tells Nicodemus that *“Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God.”* Now this is an especially ripe image for us to consider – being born again. In Presbyterian circles, this type of language has long since been muted and, I might add, for no good reason. It is, after all, very Biblical. But now consider this. Many people think that somehow the burden of being born again somehow falls squarely on their shoulders. As in, “I've got to be born again in order to be saved. So now, what do I do?”

But now let me ask you a question. What exactly did you do the first time? Did you somehow request to be born? Were you somehow able to talk with God, prior to your birth, and tell Him, “I want to be born to so and so in so and so North Carolina?” I kid but of course you didn't. You had about as much choice in the matter the first time as you do the second time. What the Bible teaches us is that those who are saved, are saved through the gracious and loving actions of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ and there simply is NO OTHER REASON. We may look at the good we do and the ways we serve the Lord somehow renders us worthy for the glories of the coming Kingdom. In our arrogance and our lack of Biblical knowledge, we ASSUME that somehow we are the bringers about of our own destiny. And while it sure feels like that on occasion, the Bible assures us it isn't. That we were called by God is the reason for everything. To quote an old hymn, “Twas grace that made us fear and grace our fears relieved.”

What the Bible tells us is this. We were chosen. Despite our shortcomings, despite our ongoing sin, we were going to be loved. Predestination is God's way of saying, “I love you, whether you like it or not.” For it is the overpowering choice of God that confronts us in our daily lives as we lift high the Cross and follow Jesus Christ. Predestination is a topic that is always bound to draw attention but first, let's hear what the Bible seems to say on the matter: **Ephesians 1:4-5:** *“Even as He chose us in Him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before Him. In love He predestined us for adoption to Himself as sons through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of His will”*; **Romans 8:28-30:** *“And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to His purpose. For those whom He foreknew He also predestined to be conformed to the image of His Son, in order that He might be the firstborn among many brothers. And those whom He predestined He also called, and those whom He called He also justified, and those whom He justified He also glorified”*; **John 6:44:** *“No one can come to Me unless the Father who sent Me draws him. And I will raise him up on the last day”*; **John 15:16:** *“You did not choose Me, but I chose you and appointed you that you should go and bear fruit and that your fruit should abide, so that whatever you ask the Father in My name, He may give it to you.”* Over and over and over again, the Bible teaches us that it was God who acted to save us, not the other way around.

Nicodemus comes under the cover of night the first time but we know that the real reason he came was the he was chosen by Jesus Christ. We see that at the end of the Gospel of John, Nicodemus is with the group of Jesus followers so that it's stuck. Whoever God chooses, comes. Predestination also keeps us away from the greatest killer of our faith – pride. If it were somehow our doing, we would become haughty, hateful even. Why? Because when we think that our salvation is our own doing, we can become pretty uninterested in the unsaved people around us which is antithetical to what the Bible is actually telling us to do.

Of all the quote-unquote deadly sins, none is considered to be more deleterious to our faith than pride. Proverbs, a Biblical book worthy of our daily time, goes to great lengths to portray pride in the worst light:

Proverbs 11:12: “*When pride comes, then comes disgrace, but with the humble is wisdom*”; **Proverbs 29:23:** “*One's pride will bring him low, but he who is lowly in spirit will obtain honor*”; **Proverbs 8:13:** “*The fear of the Lord is hatred of evil. Pride and arrogance and the way of evil and perverted speech I hate.*” Believe me, there’s more but I didn’t want to spend 5 minutes reading all the admonitions against pride out of Proverbs. The rest of the Bible treats it as it is – toxic to our faith.

For history has shown us that whenever we think that somehow we are the authors of our own salvation, we become pretty awful people. Take for example the same Pharisees of whom Nicodemus was a card-carrying member. Consider the ways that Pharisees treated those they thought were somehow heretics. Remember Paul was out arresting Christians before his conversion as a Pharisee. Also, recollect Stephen, the very first Deacon. He’s stoned to death for proclaiming the Risen Lord. Remember, this was a group of people who thought that because of their efforts, they were somehow more favored by God than others. This is the dynamic that kills evangelism and our compassion. After all, when we think that we’re somehow favored by God because of what we’re doing, then the very first thing that goes out the door is our desire to share the Gospel with everyone, even those people who aren’t acting like Christians at the present moment. Our humility evaporates.

Sometimes I think it helps to remember that our target demographic is people that don’t know Jesus. And, in not knowing Jesus, they’re likely to not be following His ways when we meet them. That’s understandable, they don’t know Jesus yet, after all. But when we think we’ve made the right decision when it comes to Jesus and others have not, we become awfully awful to the people we think haven’t chosen well. But, again, remember, that’s our target demographic. Those are the very people we’re hopeful to meet and then share Jesus with them. But when we’re caught up in our pride and our arrogance, we are definitely not following the Lord, Jesus Christ.

I remember the day of my baptism as though it was yesterday. I wasn’t a child when it happened. In fact, I was 30 years old when I was baptized. On that day, I remember, I had to memorize the Apostles Creed because it was said during the baptism service. But more than that, I remember how good I felt afterwards. Like I’d really accomplished something. It was then I met a coterie of grey-headed women at Sharon Presbyterian Church I’d never met before, each sporting a big grin. When I got to talking with them, I began to understand why. You see, these women were in my mom’s Presbyterian Women’s Circle. They wanted me to know that they’d been praying for this day to happen for over a decade. It was then that it dawned on me. If I truly believe the Bible, I needed to see that my coming to Christ wasn’t my own doing. In fact, those women might’ve had a greater role than I did with their intercessory prayers. That any of us come to Christ is a function of the one who came to save us – Jesus Christ.

Being born again is the gracious action of a gracious God for a chosen group of people. But, don’t worry, the marker for entry isn’t that high. In fact, you know it’s true if a couple of things are true. “*If you believe in your heart and confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord, you will be saved.*” That’s what Paul says in Romans. That it isn’t our actions that tell us whether or not we’re saved, it’s what’s in our hearts.

Do you believe and confess that Jesus Christ is Lord? If so then you can know that, somehow, somehow, new birth has happened. And, if the new birth has happened, then hear these words from Paul in Galatians – “*I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself for me.*” When the grace of God fully comes into our lives, it is irresistible.

To return to the opening of this sermon, I want us to see that, “*For God so loved the world that He gave His only Son...*” is just another way of saying, “I love you, whether you like it or not.” I didn’t get a choice that day whether or not my mom loved me. Heck, I was doing things that should’ve driven her away. But she chose to love me nevertheless. God has done the same thing for us. We know that because of the sacrifice Jesus Christ made on the Cross and Calvary as well as His Resurrection from it.

In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.