

FOURTH SUNDAY IN LENT

“God So Loved the World”

John 3:14-21

There once was a man named Nicodemus. Now, Nicodemus was a religious man – in fact, you might say he was one of the most religious men you’d ever want to meet. But his religion lacked something. Oh, it had its traditions and its ceremonies, its rules and its regulations – it had everything that a religion is supposed to have except for one very important thing – it didn’t have “love.” You see, Nicodemus’ religion was a religion of form but not substance.

Now Nicodemus had heard of Jesus. He had heard that this Jesus had said and done some pretty remarkable things in the name of God and he thought that he sounded like a religious man too, so he wanted to meet him. And that’s exactly what he did. One night, in the cover of darkness, he came to Jesus and said, “Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God. For no one could perform the miraculous signs you are doing if God were not with him.” This was Nicodemus’ way of saying, “I know you’ve got something special to offer, Jesus, and I’d like to find out what it is.”

And so Jesus obliged him. “You can’t find what you’re looking for,” Jesus said, “unless you’re born again.” “Born again?” Nicodemus replied. “How can a person be born again?” “You have to be born again of God,” Jesus said. “Only then will you find what you’re looking for.” And with that, Nicodemus was speechless.

You know, as it was for Nicodemus so many years ago so it is today. Unless one is born again of God, one will never find what they are really looking for in life. No matter how religious a person may be – no matter how zealous they may be in upholding their religion’s traditions and ceremonies – no matter how much they try to keep the rules and regulations of their religion – religion without “love” is, in the end, just like Nicodemus’ religion -- form without substance.

I’m reminded of a man I met several years ago who was, or who at least had been, a religious man. He told me of the many years he had spent in church and how he had done it all – from going to Sunday school as a child to serving as a congregational officer as an adult. He had done it all, he said, but then he quit. He quit, he said, because he felt something was missing. “Are you any happier now that you’ve quit being religious?” I asked him. “Not really,” he replied, “I’m still looking for what I’m missing.”

And I’m sure this man is not alone. There are many who are still looking for what they’re missing. Some of them probably went to church for a time and maybe even belonged to a church but then quit. Some others have never gone to church. And still others may even now belong to a church but still feel unhappy and unfulfilled. And,

frankly, that's understandable. For if belonging to an institution and following certain rules and regulations is what belonging to a church is all about, I'd quit too.

But thanks be to God that that's not what it's all about. It's not about belonging to an institution – it's about belonging to God. And it's not about following certain rules and regulations – it's about following Jesus and applying His word to life. But for that to happen one must be, in Jesus' own words, “born again” – born of water and the Spirit – born again through Christ.

And just how is one born again? Nicodemus said that it was impossible for a man to enter his mother's womb a second time – and so it is. And that shows how impossible it is to be born again – without God. Try as one might to be born again – that is, to change oneself from the inside out – to change one's attitude from self-centeredness and self-righteousness to an attitude of total dependency on Christ and His righteousness is something only God can make happen. For just as a man is not born through any effort of his own but rather is the result of the love of his parents, so also a man is not reborn through any religious effort of his own but rather as the result of the love of God.

That love of God is seen most clearly in the person and work of His Son, Jesus Christ. In fact, Jesus is the love of God incarnate, come for the very purpose of being the means by which all people might be “born again.” “God so loved the world that He gave His only-begotten Son that whosoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.”

For just as the Israelites were dying in the wilderness as the result of the bite of poisonous snakes and God directed Moses to lift up a bronze serpent on a pole so that all who looked upon this sign of God's love for a dying people might, by faith, be saved, so also God has lifted up His Son on the pole of the cross so that all those who are dying from the poisonous bite of sin might look upon him as the sign of God's love, and by faith, be saved. Faith in Jesus as one's personal Lord and Savior is not only the means by which we are saved, he is the means by which we are literally “born again” to eternal life.

You see, that's the love that Nicodemus' religion lacked. And as he was invited to receive God's love through Christ, so millions of others down through the ages have been as well and millions have responded in faith and, in that, have been “born again.” But there are still those who are looking – those both inside and outside the church – the religious and the irreligious -- who still need to hear the Good News of God's love for a sin-sick and dying world in the person and work of Jesus Christ.

May the love of God which has given us a new birth in Christ move us to share that love with others, especially the lengths to which that love has gone, during this Lenten season and always. In Jesus' name. Amen.