

John 3:1-17

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.

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The Greek word for “world” – *cosmos* – in John’s Gospel refers to an entity that is hostile to God: John 15:18-19 ‘If the world hates you, be aware that it hated me before it hated you. If you belonged to the world, the world would love you as its own. Because you do not belong to the world, the world hates you.

“God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.” This passage indicates God’s intention to love, save, and bless the *whole* world.

This more expansive sense of Gods' love – to save the whole world - is timely given the recent threats made against our Jewish brothers and sisters whose cemeteries have been desecrated and community centers threatened, and amid the increased animosity directed toward our Muslim brothers and sisters in the years since 9-11 and more recently.

Slide: Here we see American troops from the 183rd Engineer Combat Battalion viewing corpses stacked behind the crematorium during an inspection tour of the Bu-chen-wald concentration camp. **(NOTE: Harry Zander) --- note other pics – VP Mike Pence helped clean up one of these cemeteries and a group of Muslims raised thousands of dollars to help repair the grave stones. Love in action.)**

If God's love is for all, then we who have experienced that love in Christ are called to see persons of other faiths (and no faith) through the lens of that profound and surprising love.

Recently I came across the text of a 1790 letter from George Washington addressed to a Jewish synagogue in Rhode Island.

The address reads:

To the Hebrew Congregation in Newport, Rhode Island

[Newport, R.I., 18 August 1790]

Gentlemen.

While I receive, with much satisfaction, your Address replete with expressions of affection and esteem; I rejoice in the opportunity of assuring you, that I shall always retain a grateful remembrance of the cordial welcome I experienced in my visit to Newport, from all classes of Citizens.

The reflection on the days of difficulty and danger which are past is rendered the more sweet, from a consciousness that they are succeeded by days of uncommon prosperity and security. If we have wisdom to make the best use of the advantages with which we are now favored, we cannot fail, under the just administration of a good Government, to become a great and a happy people.

*The Citizens of the United States of America have a right to applaud themselves for having given to mankind examples of an enlarged and liberal policy: a policy worthy of imitation. **All** possess alike liberty of conscience and immunities of citizenship. It is now no more that toleration is spoken of, as if it was by the indulgence of one class of people. It is for all. For happily the Government of the United States, which gives bigotry no sanction and persecution no assistance, requires only that they who live under its protection should demean themselves as good citizens, in giving toleration for all people.*

May the Children of the Stock of Abraham, who dwell in this land, continue to merit and enjoy the good will of the other Inhabitants; while everyone shall sit in safety under his own vine and figtree, and there shall be none to make them afraid. May the father of all mercies scatter light and not darkness in our paths. George Washington

What a grand vision for this nation during its first years - that ours will be a government and people that “gives bigotry no sanction and persecution no assistance.” It is a vision, that corresponds well with Jesus’ words: “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.”

In attempting to find common ground between people of various nationalities, Jesus gives us the parable of The Good Samaritan:

"Most Christians know the parable found in Luke 10:25-37. A lawyer, who was an expert in Jewish religious law, asked Jesus, “What must I do to inherit eternal life?” Instead of answering his question, Jesus asked him what the law prescribes, and the man replied, “Thou shall love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy strength, and with all thy mind; and thy neighbor as thyself.”

Jesus agreed, saying, “Correct. Do this and you will live.” But the lawyer, hoping to trick Jesus, asked another question which was much debated in those days. Referring to the second commandment to love our neighbor, the man asked, “And who is my neighbor?”

He wanted Jesus to tell him who was within the circle of being a neighbor, who was outside the circle, whom he should love, and whom he could ignore or even condemn. He was an expert at drawing lines between those people who were acceptable and those who were not.

It was then, in his response, that Jesus told the story about a Jewish man who was travelling from Jerusalem to Jericho. Thieves came upon him and stripped him naked and then beat and robbed him and left him for dead by the side of the road.

First, a priest saw the man and passed by, ignoring him, and then a Levite did the same. Both of these men were experts in the law and the commandments. They were good people. But then a Samaritan came upon him, took pity on him, attended to his wounds, and clothed him. Afterwards, he took him to an inn and paid the innkeeper to give him whatever he needed for healing.

The Jews and the Samaritans hated each other. The Samaritans were thought to be the remnant of the lost northern tribe of Israel, but their beliefs were significantly different from the orthodox Jews of the day. Samaritans were considered unclean, irreligious, and heretical. They were “too different” to be considered neighbors by most Jews. The

historian Josephus, who wrote during biblical times, tells us there were many clashes and battles between the Jews and Samaritans during the time of Jesus.

As he finished the story, Jesus asked the lawyer, "Who was a neighbor to the robbed and beaten man?" The lawyer could only answer, "The one who showed mercy on him." Because of his hatred, he couldn't even bring himself to say, "The Samaritan."

Here is the point: Notice how Jesus changed the lawyer's question from "Who is my neighbor?" to "Who behaved like a neighbor?"

He challenged him, and, thereby, he challenges us to behave like caring neighbors toward those who are different from us, not just those we know to be on our side. In doing so, as Jesus said, we fulfill all of the law and the prophets.

Civil discussion of important issues, in recent years, has become more difficult to achieve. Those on each side believe they are morally right, as well as politically superior, and they see the other side in more negative terms, if not in morally evil.

In these circumstances, calm and reasoned group discussion of an issue is less likely. Each side makes negative assertions about the other side, questions their motives, and uses inflammatory images to characterize the other's position."

Just as the enmity between the Samaritans and the Jews was a critically important issue in Jesus' day, so are there many contentious issues in our society; therefore Jesus' question applies to us too: "Who was a neighbor to the robbed and beaten man?" The answer is, "The one who showed mercy on him."

Are we behaving like neighbors toward those with whom we disagree?

Love breaks down division. Hatred fuels division.

Again, from today's Gospel: "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."