

John 3:1-17
Pastor Melissa Carmack
March 16th, 2014, First Lutheran Church of Aitkin, MN

Children's Message

One of my favorite Bible verses begins, "For God so loved the world." I was thinking about that verse and wondering -- just how great is God's love and how could we measure it? This morning I brought several things that we often use in measuring other things. I thought they might help us measure God's love.

Sometimes we use a measuring cup to measure things. If I were making some cookies, I would use a measuring cup to make sure that I put in exactly the right amount of flour, sugar, and milk. I wonder if we might use a measuring cup to measure God's love? The Bible says, "The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want....my cup runneth over." (Psalm 23:1,5) Well, if our cup runs over with God's love, I don't guess we could use a measuring cup to measure it.

If we were building something, we might use a tape measure to measure the length, width, and height of different things. I wonder if we might use a tape measure to measure God's love? The Bible tells us that God's love is higher than the heavens. (Psalm 108:4) If God's love is higher than the heavens, I don't think we could use a tape measure to measure it, could we?

We use a watch to measure time. There will probably be some people here this morning who will use their watch to measure how long the pastor's sermon lasts. I wonder if we could use a watch to measure how long God's love will last. The Bible tells us that God's love is from everlasting to everlasting. (Psalm 103:17) Wow! If God's love is from everlasting to everlasting, I don't guess we could measure it with a watch.

"For God so loved the world, that he gave His one and only Son that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life." How do you measure a love like that? We can't measure it -- we don't need to -- but we do need to experience it.

My prayer for you today is, "That you may understand how wide, how long, how high, and how deep his love really is. May you experience it, though it is so great you will never fully understand it." (Ephesians 3:18-19)

Heavenly Father, we thank you for your love -- a love so great that you gave your one and only Son so that we could have eternal life. Amen.

(found on sermons4kids.com)

Adult Sermon:

If any character from the Bible can be regarded as representative of twenty-first century church members, it might be Nicodemus. A successful and self-confident man, he plays a leadership role in his community. He is spiritually open and curious, yet also rational. He approaches Jesus directly and tries to figure out Jesus' actions and social network. He is committed and curious enough that he makes an appointment to talk with Jesus face to face.

So after work one day, Nicodemus waits until it is dark and he goes out to find Jesus, to tell him that he does believe that Jesus has been sent from God... and he believes this because of the signs that Jesus has showed them – the miracles that he has performed – Nicodemus knows that there is no way that Jesus could have raised someone from the dead, or turned water into wine, or fed thousands the way that he did apart from the presence of God.

Yes, he is confronting Jesus and confessing to him, "I believe in you! I believe you are the promised Messiah whom has been sent to us from God!". And while we rejoice with Nicodemus that he has "come to his senses", we also can't help but to notice that Nicodemus does all of this late at night...when no one is around... because, well, his reputation is also on the line. He doesn't want to cause any controversy with other people in his town...or his co-workers who most likely do not feel the same way about Jesus that Nicodemus does.

Afterall, he was a Pharisee... a respected religious leader for the Jews in the community. And Nicodemus is not ready to declare his faith in the light of day...or not quite ready to face what it means to be a Christian in front of his family, friends, and the other Pharisees. Perhaps he is even worried about offending people with his beliefs. Hmm...Sounds familiar??

When I travel by plane, I try to get into my seat and put my head phones into my ears as soon as possible to avoid small talk with the stranger sitting next to me. That sounds harsh, I know, but I know how that conversation is going to go...because it goes the same way every time. The first question always seems to be, "are you from here? Or are you visiting?" and after a few moments of talking about origins and destinations, and your purpose for being on this plane, without a doubt, the second question that always comes up when engaging in small talk on an airplane is... (guesses??) – yep - what do you do for a living?

And at that moment, I always have an inner struggle as to how I should answer that question.

You see, over the years, when I simply say that I'm in ministry or that I'm a pastor, it opens a can of worms...and I never know if they are going to be dirty worms that I don't want to deal with, or gummy worms that are sweet. I've gotten into debates...I've gotten rude comments...I've had people say, "oh" and then not say another word to me for the entire flight, and I've had people throw questions at me about religion and faith and the world that we live in that I have no idea how to answer. Sure, this has sometimes led to meaningful conversations, but it's also lead to defeat. And me getting bombarded with condescending comments such as, I don't know how you can do that for a living. Or "I can't believe you have to have a Master's

Degree to do that". Or my favorite yet, "I don't know how you can believe in all of that stuff". Believe me, seatmate, I sometimes don't know that answer myself. But I just keep believing, and God somehow, in some way, takes over.

So a few times, over the years, in order to try to avoid the inevitable conversation about faith and religion – or to even try to have it go in a different direction that it typically goes, I've answered this question of "what do you do for a living" with "I work with people...I work for a non-profit organization...I work in the communities helping others...I write and speak publically...I work with children, youth, and families. But over the years, I've realized that's my cop-out answer. That's my Nicodemous way...that is me not ready to face what it means to be a Christian in front of a total stranger on an airplane, when I darn well know in my heart that these are the people that may need to hear about the Love of Christ or the acceptance of the church that they can experience too if they just give it a shot.

But I forget. I forget the words that Jesus speaks to Nicodemus in our Gospel Story today. I forget that Jesus says, "You must be born of water and Spirit...you must be born through the waters of Baptism and of the Holy Spirit, and the wind of that Holy Spirit blows. Where. It. Chooses."

The wind of that Holy Spirit blows where it chooses. We don't choose when or how God works through us...God chooses us to be His people. God works through us in ways that we may have never imagined....in ways that we never could have dreamed of...God works through us when we don't know any of the "religious answers" or when we haven't even memorized the Lord's prayer, or when we are sitting next to a complete stranger on an airplane, or when we are going through a divorce, or when we don't have any energy to go anywhere...or when we question or doubt or are scared of what we are or are not capable of saying or doing. God chooses us and made us and puts the Spirit of God into our lives.

When Jesus tells Nicodemus that he needs to be born again by water and Spirit, he is asking Nicodemus to let God work in his life. And even though Nicodemus doesn't seem to get what the heck Jesus was really saying to him at that moment, something stuck with him, for it was Nicodemus who went to bat for Jesus when the temple leaders first rose up in opposition to Jesus. He reminded them of the Torah, which stipulated that you shouldn't judge another person without first giving him a proper hearing. (John. 7:50-53) On that, they backed down.

That's not all. In the end, the day Jesus died on the Cross, there were two men there to receive his lifeless body. One was Joseph of Arimathea (air-a-ma-they-a), who provided the tomb in which Jesus was buried. The other was...??? Nicodemus. He brought a hundred pounds of costly myrrh and aloes to prepare Jesus' body for burial. (John 19:38-40)

Nicodemus was there for Jesus when it counted...with a love and devotion for all to see. Jesus gives us the same invitation that he gave to Nicodemus. And this invitation invites us to open our imaginations and reconsider our relationship with God, which is the central focus of this text. Jesus invites Nicodemus, as he invites each of us, to come into the light of day and become

full participants in the abundant life he offers. Jesus knows that neither Nicodemus nor contemporary believers can do this on their own. It is God who will give birth in water and Spirit. As a gift to us, this is given.

The Spirit -- which Jesus will later define as his own Spirit -- accompanies and empowers us to face a future that we may feel is uncertain but has been secured by the death and resurrection of Jesus. And when we understand this, the anxiety that many of us feel of being inadequately prepared -- can be transformed into excitement, because it means that we are free -- we don't have to do things the way they've always been done. We can experiment, take risks, and fail (you can't experiment without failing). We can learn, and grow in ways we'd never imagined. Because the Spirit of Christ will blow us in directions we hadn't imagined -- that is, if we let go and Let God take over.

As Kid president says, "I want to be on the road to Awesome!". May the Spirit of God guide you on this road.

Amen.