

**SermonBytes – Opening our minds**  
**John 3:1-17**

**March 12, 2017**  
Rev. Bill McAuslan, Crossroads United Church

Herbert O Driscoll, an Anglican bishop, once described The Gospel of John by saying

Imagine if you will, an old man. And by old we need to remember that John does not get round to writing things down for over 60 years. Anyway he sits, and remembers life with Jesus, and tells those who will listen - like him, followers of the way - about what it was to walk and talk with Jesus. But like storytellers everywhere, the story begins around a question :What was Jesus like? What did he say? What did he do? But the questions are ones that fit the context of the lives of the listeners. What does that mean for us? The stories come in fits and starts. Sometimes they are clear and straight to the point. And other times, rising and falling like the tides.

The Jesus story in John's hands is an illustration for the path of faith - if you will, a teaching tool for the early church, as it struggles with questions of persecution, Identity and the challenge of assimilation.

The story of Nicodemus is no different. Nicodemus is part of the Jewish management council of Jerusalem – the Sanhedrin. He is also a Pharisee so he is what is known in his day as a man of faith - not staid and stodgy but a reformer. One who wants to bring the Jewish faith into the 1st century. His quest for new understanding leads him to come and see Jesus. As John says, he comes in the dark, which means he has not yet seen the light as to the true nature of Jesus. So he literally is in the dark and yet his very name speaks of hope. He is Nike – Victory .... Demus ... of the People.

His first question is one of context. He asks Jesus " How am I born again? Do I enter back into my mother's womb?"

We, looking back, may understand Jesus' response: "You have to be born again with water and the Holy Spirit". As a description of layers of understanding on the Christian journey. However John's readers would have experienced a different context. For as John writes, his church is debating over Baptism as the rite of initiation into the Christian community. As such, Baptism was and is the river into which one dips or plunges to receive the Holy Spirit. John admonishes them that this is just the beginning.

It seems Nicodemus' presentation of the idea of God was too restricted, and too narrow. And so being born again has something to do with unfurling the sails to catch the wind of the spirit and inhaling the breath of God.

Although Jesus can be powerfully present to those who choose to be in relationship with Him, to be born again is more than to have the warm feel of Jesus' nearness. God refuses to be tied up in a nice package named Jesus. Jesus did not come to be another box for God.

Rather, He came as a door opened to the world through which we can pass with new eyes and a new heart. John's gospel is full of images that try to describe for us this new connectivity with the presence of God.

The bread of life that feeds the world.

The light of the world that breaks the darkness.

The water of life that refreshes unto life everlasting.

The true vine which forever connects us to the heart of God.

The way – the path of faith by which we walk.

Over and over again John offers new descriptive, and new possibilities of our connection to the Eternal. John wants us to find the way of the spirit, the door to a broader view of the world, a wider compassion, the path to a more all-encompassing justice, and the life of faith that leads to a loving and merciful heart and mind.

For God so loved the world that God gave the only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. 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.  
[from John 3]

God loves the world. Κόσμος (cosmos) is the Greek word we translate here as "world". I remember a number of years ago reading a book that said that while the "cosmos" can sometimes mean the whole world, here in John 3 it is limited to God's chosen. That might be comforting for those who feel that they are in control of the born again boat to heaven. But there is no rationale behind such a statement. No, God loves the world. That's the whole world. In John's day— that world included Roman soldiers, "sinners," pagans, Pharisees, and people who went to the temple regularly.

In fact in other parts of the gospel message the cosmos is used to describe the world that is against God and Jesus. And so the world encompasses even the enemy. Today we meet real people from all over God's world and when we're really lucky, we either get to travel and meet some of those people, or we find they come closer to us:

- Syrian refugees resettling in our cities
- Latino immigrants in our schools
- People of faith in other religions
- Secular people
- People of races different from yours/mine
- Speakers of other languages
- Openly LGBTQ persons

God loves the world.

The whole world.

So much that God gave well - God gave everything. John keeps trying to expand our understanding of just how big the Love of God is.

“St Augustine once felt that he was coming close to knowing the mind of God. He would later laugh at the notion as he described a dream of walking along the beach and seeing a little boy digging a hole in the sand and running back and forth from the ocean to fill the hole with water. Curious, Augustine asks the boy, ‘What are you doing?’ The little boy replies, ‘I’m putting the ocean in this hole.’ Augustine says, ‘Little boy, you can’t do it, the ocean is too big to put in that little hole.’ The boy who is really an angel responds,

“And so Augustine is your mind too small to contain the vastness of God.”

But open your heart, and open your mind. Let the breath of the spirit touch you and as you do your heart will be opened. You will experience the light and you will walk a little closer to God.