

*Receiving God's Love*  
*John 3:1-17*

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Like so many, last Saturday morning I was glued to the television watching the royal wedding. I enjoy the pageantry of these events and the music. I love to see the images of the Cathedral filled with flowers and women wearing remarkable hats sitting in the pews. At the very opening of this wedding, the Archbishop read from 1 John 4:16: "God is love, and those who live in love live in God and God lives in them." That is exactly what our text is about this morning.

For many, the passage of John 3:1-17 is very familiar. It begins with the dialogue between Jesus and Nicodemus. Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews, states that he knows Jesus is of God because no one does the signs that Jesus does without being from God. Jesus answers by saying anyone who wants to know the kingdom of God needs to be born from above. Then, a rather amusing dialogue takes place while Nicodemus asks how someone can be born again from his mother's womb and Jesus answers that you have to be born from above by water and spirit. He then explains that the Spirit blows like the wind, we hear it but don't know when it is coming. Nicodemus is confused and Jesus says that if Nicodemus can't understand the earthly things Jesus teaches, he won't be able to understand the heavenly things.

Most familiar to many of us is the favorite verse John 3:16: "For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten son so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life." Many of us grew up memorizing this verse of scripture as a Sunday School assignment. Sadly, for many of us, the text was used as a threat that if we didn't believe in Jesus we would not experience eternal life. This sentence has also been used to argue that Christianity has exclusive rights to eternal life so people needed to convert. There is another way of understanding this passage, however.

Last winter during a Monday noon gathering of our Awakening the Spirit book group, Wayne Rollins, Greek scholar and teacher, shared with us some research that he'd done on the Greek word, Agape. Agape is one of the three words for love used in the New Testament. It means the continual out pouring of love toward others. Wayne explained that in John 3:16 the word for "love" is Agape. He also explained that the word for "believe" can also be translated as "know" - that we know a truth at the center of our being. Scripture teaches that

God is love or, God is Agape – the continual out pouring of love. So, John 3:16 can be understood as: God, Agape (out pouring of love), so loved, Agape, the world that he gave his only begotten son so that we might know him and have eternal life. It's an important distinction for us to understand. Instead of emphasizing believing in God in order to have eternal life, *the text actually emphasizes that God's out pouring of love shows us eternal life*. In other words, in the midst of daily life there is a perpetual out pouring of Holy love that shows us that because of the gift of God's love, *we literally walk in the story of eternal life*.

Sometimes people experience God's outpouring of love through mystical experiences. These experiences have been recorded over and over again throughout history.

The late New Testament scholar Marcus Borg wrote about experiencing a great encompassing light twice in his life time. The second time was on an airplane as he was flying home from Israel. He wrote that he was so moved by the encounter that dinner was served and cleared before the light left him – something like 30 minutes. These two mystical experiences formed the foundation for his thoughts and writings on Christianity.

More common is to experience the outpouring of God's love through the awe and wonder of creation.

The other day a woman who is now in her 80's told the story of visiting the Grand Canyon when she was younger. She and her friends walked to the rim of the canyon to watch the sunset. They were surprised to discover thousands of others had gathered there as well, some with their huge cameras. The canyon was echoing with the noise of thousands of people talking. But, as the sun set, a hushed silence fell over the crowd as they took in the awe and wonder of the vision before them. Then, as the last light of the ball of the sun sank behind the canyon ledge, the crowd burst into spontaneous applause. She was awed by beauty she had seen and moved by the collective joy it elicited. A sense of sacred presence permeated the air.

Still others experience the outpouring of Holy love through the love and care of others.

This past year a few of us read the book "Tattoos on the Heart" by Father Gregory Boyle. "G," as Father Boyle, is called by the people he serves in the poorest neighborhoods of L.A., tells the story of working with gang members and x-Cons for thirty years. Over the years, G has helped to create Homeboy Industries where X-Cons and former gang members find jobs, get counseling, go to school and have tattoos removed. He shares story after story of young people who are seeking to live a transformed life – stories that are both heartbreaking

and sometimes hysterically funny. In the forward of his book, he tells about a young man named Sharkey who was particularly difficult to deal with. At one point, G decided to switch his strategy with Sharkey by catching him doing the right thing rather than criticizing him for doing the wrong thing. So, G started telling Sharkey how heroic and courageous he was for trying to transform his past. One day, G told Sharkey he was a “giant among men.” Sharkey was taken aback by this and, after a moment of surprised silence, he said: “Damn, G ... I am going to tattoo that on my heart.” In that moment, both the giver and the receiver were transformed by the encompassing out pouring of God’s love.

This is the invitation from our scripture today - to tattoo the knowledge of God’s out pouring love onto our hearts so that we might know at the depth of our being that love is the window to eternal life.

May God be with us on the journey. Amen.

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