**The Greatest Love**

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John 3:1-17

Now there was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews.[2]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.' [3]Jesus answered him, 'Very truly, I tell you,
no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above.'
[4]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?' [5]Jesus
answered, 'Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God
without being born of water and Spirit. [6]What is born of the flesh is flesh, and
what is born of the Spirit is spirit. [7]Do not be astonished that I said to you,
"You must be born from above."* [8]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.' [9]Nicodemus said to
him, 'How can these things be?' [10]Jesus answered him, 'Are you a teacher of
Israel, and yet you do not understand these things? 11 '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. [12]If I have told you about earthly things and you do not
believe, how can you believe if I tell you about heavenly things? [13]No one
has ascended into heaven except the one who descended from heaven, the
Son of Man. [14]And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so
must the Son of Man be lifted up, [15]that whoever believes in him may have
eternal life. 16 '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. 17
'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.

## 1. A Movie "Lion"

Two months ago, Christine and I saw a movie called "Lion." The movie is based on a nonfiction book written by Saroo Brierley and Larry Buttrose called *A Long Way Home*. In the book, a 5-year-old Indian boy, Saroo, is tragically separated from his older brother Guddu at a train station. While searching for his brother, Saroo falls asleep on a train and arrives several days later in the faraway city of Calcutta. Saroo is taken to the police, is placed in an orphanage, and is later adopted by an Australian couple. Twenty years later, when Saroo moves to Melbourne for college, his friends suggest that he search for his hometown using Google Earth. He spends

days searching, until one evening when Saroo finds his home. Saroo returns to his village, is reunited with his birth mother, and learns that his mother has been waiting for him every day for over 20 years. In his journey, he found the great love of his mother and had the happiest moment with her.

**2. John 3:16**

Today, we celebrate the life of Tom Armstrong and give thanks to God that he is a part of our congregation. Tom's favorite Bible passage is John 3:16. As you may know, John 3:16 is one of the most popular and well-known verses in the Bible. "**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**." When I asked Tom why he likes this passage, he said that this verse tells us that God loves us. Martin Luther called John 3:16 "the heart of the Bible-the Gospel in miniature." One preacher said that "this verse describes the greatest love story ever to be told, better than Romeo and Juliet." "God" in this verse is the greatest lover. God's greatest act is that He "loved." The greatest number is "the world." The greatest sacrifice is "His only Son." The greatest invitation is "everyone." The greatest simplicity is "believes in him." The greatest gift is "everlasting life." This morning, may I ask a question to all of us? Have we ever experienced God's greatest love through Jesus?

**3. Nicodemus Visits Jesus**

Today's scripture tells us that there was a man who found God's greatest love through Jesus. His name was Nicodemus. One day Nicodemus visited Jesus in the middle of the night and said to Jesus, "**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**." Nicodemus was not an ordinary person in Jesus' time. As a Pharisee, Nicodemus was committed to his beliefs. As a member of the Jewish Sanhedrin, he held an important ruling post. And as a religious teacher, Nicodemus was a respected interpreter of God's law. He represented the very best in the nation. Why then does Nicodemus come to see Jesus at night?

Nicodemus didn't come to test Jesus about the Jewish law as many other Pharisees did. In fact, Nicodemus was impressed by what Jesus had done and was interested in knowing whether Jesus was the Messiah. It would have been so controversial to visit Jesus. So in order to avoid potential retribution or criticism from other Pharisees, he came to see Jesus in the

middle of the night. What we learn from the passage is that his meeting with Jesus changed Nicodemus' life.

**4. Born from Above**

Let's take a deeper look into what happened to Nicodemus after the encounter with Jesus. Verse 3 says, "**Jesus answered him, 'Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above**." Why did Jesus say this to Nicodemus? Nicodemus didn't talk about God's kingdom, and yet Jesus brings up the idea of seeing a kingdom. What does Jesus mean by "**see the kingdom of God?**" Seeing the kingdom of God refers to seeing with the perspective that the whole world is in God's absolute control. What then does Jesus mean when he talks about being "**born from above**?" In verse 3, Jesus says, "**no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above**." And in response to Nicodemus' follow up question, Jesus says in verse 5, "**Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit**."

There are different interpretations about the term "water." Commentators say that water represents physical birth, water baptism, the word of God, or the Spirit. For me, the symbols of water and water baptism are used to signify repentance. Repentance means "a change of mind, view, and purpose." So, when we look at these statements, Jesus is telling Nicodemus that no one can see God's absolute authority without seeing things from God's perspective. And a life centered in God and a godly perspective comes through the transformation that we experience in repentance and the Holy Spirit. So, repentance is deciding to live our lives the way that God wants instead of the way we want. After his meeting with Jesus, Nicodemus begins to live his life according to God's purpose and is able to see God's kingdom.

**5. The Greatest Love & Belief**

Why then is John 3:16 mentioned to Nicodemus? And what is the meaning of the verse? We need to remember that right before Jesus talks about John 3:16, Jesus refers to the Israelites in Numbers 21:4-9. When the Israelites traveled from Mount Hor along the route to the Red Sea, they complained against God and against Moses. In response, the Lord sent poisonous snakes among them. The snakes bit the people and many Israelites died. When Moses prayed for the people, God said to Moses, **"Make a poisonous serpent, and set it on a pole; and everyone who is bitten shall look at it and live**" (Num. 21: 8). And Num. 21:9 says anyone

who looked at the serpent of bronze lived. In John's gospel, Jesus reminds Nicodemus of this amazing healing story.

John 3:14 & 15 then says, **"just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, [15]that whoever believes in him may have eternal life."** Jesus uses the reference of the bronze serpent in the wilderness to explain the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus. Those who believe that Jesus has died and risen for them would have eternal life, just as the Israelites who had trusted God's healing power were saved. Eternal life here does not mean the life that continues eternally after death. Rather it means the life that is lived in intimate relationship with the Lord right now. So, eternal life is not about the quantity, but rather the quality of life.

John 3:16 concludes that God has sent His only son because God so loved everyone. When we love someone, we want to give the best gift. What is the best gift that we have received from God? I think all of us would agree that our spouse and our children are the best gifts that we have received from God. Our children are the most precious gifts that we have. John 3:16 tells us that God gave us His one and only son Jesus. If we do not receive the greatest love of God and His best gift, we can't have abundant lives.

**6. Conclusion**

If Saroo in the movie "Lion" did not go back to his hometown in India, he may have never known how much his biological mother loved and was waiting for him. If Nicodemus had never visited to meet Jesus, he may have never known that God loved him so much and that God's love was coming through Jesus. John's gospel tells us that Nicodemus believed in Jesus as the Messiah and experienced life-changing transformation and the greatest love of God through Christ Jesus.

**7. Application**

Jesus is the best gift from God for Tom and for all of us. Tom told me that he can't think of a moment of his life without Jesus and the church. Tom went to church since he was a baby. I've admired Tom for his love for his children, grandchildren and for his wife Nancy. He says that his reunion with Nancy is God's grace and love. As God's beloved son, Tom does not want to miss Sunday worship. For Tom, worship is a time when God reminds him of God's love through Jesus. I am grateful to Tom for his faithfulness to the Lord. Have you ever met Christ? Have you ever accepted God's greatest

love Jesus as your Savior and the Lord? If not, I would like to invite you to accept him today. If you want to accept him now, please come forward while we pray. If you do not feel comfortable coming forward, I can help you to accept him after the worship service. Today is the day we need to accept Jesus. God sent his Son into the world not to condemn us, but to save all of us. Amen.