

Saving Grace (John 3:16-21) **March 10, 2024**

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. 18 Those who believe in him are not condemned; but those who do not believe are condemned already, because they have not believed in the name of the only Son of God. 19 And this is the judgment, that the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil. 20 For all who do evil hate the light and do not come to the light, so that their deeds may not be exposed. 21 But those who do what is true come to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that their deeds have been done in God.”

There was once a sculptor who worked hard with a hammer and chisel on a large block of marble. A little child who was watching him saw nothing more than large and small pieces of stone falling away left and right. He had no idea what was happening. But when the boy returned to the studio a few weeks later, he saw, to his surprise, a large, powerful lion sitting in the place where the marble had stood. With great excitement, the boy ran to the sculptor and said, “Sir, tell me, how did you know there was a lion in the marble?”¹

I read this story from Henri Nouwen’s book. Nouwen invites us to be attentive to the work of God, our master sculptor, who sees and shapes the inner lion in our hearts. As God gradually chips away all that is not of God until the inner lion is revealed, we need to entrust ourselves to the hand of God, prayerfully listening to God’s Spirit within and among us. The chipping away process can hurt. It can be uncomfortable and sometimes painful. Lent is a time to entrust and expose ourselves to the plan and hand of God, our sculptor, remembering God’s self-giving love through Jesus Christ.

Knock, Knock! Nicodemus came to Jesus at night. He was “a man of the Pharisees,” “a ruler of the Jews,” and “a teacher of Israel.” Since Pharisees, Scribes, and many others who were in leadership positions were hostile to Jesus, Nicodemus wanted to visit Jesus at night without anyone knowing. After their long dialogue, Jesus said, “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.”

¹ Henri Nouwen, *Spiritual Direction*.

This is John 3:16, one of the most recited and best-loved scripture verses among Christians.

Everything arises out of God's love for the world. Let's see God's fourfold actions in 3:16:

1. God loved the world.
2. God gave us the only son.
3. God invited everyone to believe.
4. God promised eternal life.

Everything is given, but there is one thing we need to respond to. That is, believing in God's only son, who embodies God's saving grace. John's Gospel is clear that believing in Jesus is not an emotional or cognitive nod. It is about a change of life, moving from a sinful life to a God-pleasing life.

John's Gospel is not hesitant to say that God's love and care for the world has positive and negative effects. Just like how a feast may be the occasion for an upset stomach that comes from overeating, the coming of Jesus is a blessing for some people but alarming and disturbing for others who refuse to come to the light because they fear that their evil deeds would be exposed. In a way, those who remain in the darkness do not understand that they have long been under God's judgment without knowing it. That's why Jesus said, "Those who do not believe, those who remain in the darkness (sinful life), are condemned already."

Allowing God the sculptor to carve my whole being can hurt. Being vulnerable is annoying. Being exposed is painful. But, these struggles are a part of how we can respond to God's saving and healing grace. And that's the way we can experience authentic, God-given freedom.²

Nicodemus listened to Jesus carefully and attentively, and his life was completely changed. Nicodemus became a hidden disciple who lived with the Inner Lion in his heart. Later, when the Pharisees and the chief priest sent temple police to arrest Jesus, Nicodemus publicly defended Jesus (John 7:50-51).

Immediately after Jesus died on the cross, Nicodemus, together with Joseph of Arimathea, who was also Jesus' hidden disciple, anointed Jesus' body with spices, clothed it in fine linen, and placed Jesus' body in the tomb (John 19:39). In a

² *New Interpreter's Bible.*

situation where the sense of crisis was growing to the point where the other disciples were betraying and denying Jesus, Nicodemus, who secretly visited Jesus with fear, boldly defended Jesus and prepared his body for burial. Isn't it amazing how God the sculptor completely changed Nicodemus' life? Nicodemus became an example of those who truly come to the light through God's saving grace.

Don't we also want the lion within us to be revealed by the hand of God, the sculptor, and to be restored to the image God created? We need to attentively listen to the Spirit of God working in and through us, gradually chipping away unnecessary things until God reveals the lion in our hearts.

I invite you to place your hand (any hand) on your heart. We sometimes want to live a spiritual life, but do not know where or how to start. The truth is that God has already initiated spiritual life for us. God the sculptor is doing something right now in our hearts and lives. One of the most important aspects of a spiritual life for us is noticing God working actively in each of us and in our communities. God makes the spiritual life happen, not us. We are invited to participate in the spiritual life God initiates.³

Now I invite you to round your palms like a conch shell and gently place them on your ears. Spiritual life, according to Nouwen, is deeply involved in our "obedient listening." (You may put your hands down.) Obedience, in this case, does not mean following directions uncritically, swallowing questions or objections. Reminding us that the word obedience includes the Latin word, *audire*, which means "listening," Nouwen said (and I agree) that spiritual life is basically about listening with great attention to God, who cares, heals, challenges, guides, and forms us in our every moment. When we understand our spiritual life as obedient listening, our prayers become more about listening than speaking. And our worship and prayer have become an important part of spiritual discipline, the process constantly creating and expanding room for God to carve a lionhearted and Christ-resembling shape in us.⁴

In this Lenten season, I invite you and me to pay attention to the death and resurrection that constantly takes place within us. As Nouwen said, "Life is a continuing process of the death of the old and familiar and being reborn again into a new hope, a new trust and a new love." If we listen to God attentively and let go

³ Nouwen, *Spiritual Direction*.

⁴ *Ibid.*

of everything that prevents us from becoming spiritually mature, God will help us to see our inner lions that are continually being shaped and renewed by God's saving grace. May this amazing grace of God be experienced by all of us through Lent this year. Amen!