

John is very binary: yes or no, truth or false. But sometimes, he says more than he knows, as in John's story about Nicodemus and Jesus.

Listen:

<sup>1</sup> Now there was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews. <sup>2</sup> 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 unless God is with that person." <sup>3</sup> Jesus answered him, "Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above." <sup>4</sup> 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?" <sup>5</sup> Jesus answered, "Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit. <sup>6</sup> What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit. <sup>7</sup> Do not be astonished that I said to you, 'You must be born from above.' <sup>8</sup> 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." <sup>9</sup> Nicodemus said to him, "How can these things be?" <sup>10</sup> Jesus answered him, "Are you the teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things?"

<sup>11</sup> "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. <sup>12</sup> If I have told you about earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you about heavenly things? <sup>13</sup> No one has ascended into heaven except the one who descended from heaven, the Son of Man. <sup>14</sup> And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, <sup>15</sup> that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.

<sup>16</sup> "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.

<sup>17</sup> **"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.**

<sup>18</sup> 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. <sup>19</sup> 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. <sup>20</sup> For all who do evil hate the light and do

not come to the light, so that their deeds may not be exposed. <sup>21</sup> 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.”

The Word of God

## The Word of Life

Signs with John 3:16 can be found at sporting arenas and stadiums placed by dedicated people hoping to say a good word for Jesus and maybe make a difference in someone's life.

John 3:16 may be the most well-known verse in Scripture 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.”

But the whole of Scripture, as it testifies to the living, loving God, is more than any verse. At its heart, Scripture is about God's wondrous, relentless love for all creation and you and me.

When I was in seminary, a young woman, Bev, had just returned with her husband from an evangelistic event. I think it was called Key '73. In a heated discussion concerning authentic Christianity, she blurted out, “It should just be John 3:16 YES OR NO.” This is how to tell if someone is a true Christian. For her, this one verse was the litmus test of orthodoxy and faithfulness. This would tell if someone was a true Christian.

What I believed then I still believe now that Matthew 25:40 is another crucial verse **40:** “The King will reply, ‘Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me.’”

Or maybe 1 John 4:16

And so we know and rely on the **love God** has for us. **God is love.** Whoever lives in **love** lives in **God**, and **God** in them.

Many great verses in scripture tell us about God, and we must rely on the Holy Spirit to open them to us.

But still, fifty years later, I find myself challenged by Bev's comment. Oh, not in the way she would imagine, but still challenged. The question goes like this: how does it look that you, a Presbyterian Pastor, are so involved with The Interfaith Community? Or, more bluntly, do you believe one religion is as good as the next?

First, as Dan McDowell, former pastor of First Baptist Church, once said when challenged, “My faith is strong enough to pray with anyone.” He said this as a response to being challenged for participating in some interfaith activity.

Second, I just received the high honor of being invited to a breaking of the fast this Friday at the Islamic Center.

But it goes well beyond that. I believe that all people are created in God’s image and, regardless of their faith or lack thereof, are worthy of respect. And even more than that, I believe that as a Christian, I can learn from other faiths.

When I gather with the Interfaith Community, I do so with an open heart and mind. I see people trying to live good and faithful lives according to their conscience, which gives me hope for our world. It is not my job to judge their faithfulness. And I can do this following Jesus, who taught me to love God and love my neighbor, even if that neighbor doesn’t believe like me!

Well, then, does that mean you do not talk about Jesus? And do you ignore your differences? Not at all, just the opposite. In my life and study, I have found one of the greatest forms of bigotry is refraining from honest, respectful, civil discussions about faith when the subject comes up. People can speak respectfully about their beliefs and positions, and failure to do so shows a lack of respect.

As I saw on Facebook the other day, “Being taught to avoid talking about politics and religion has led to a lack of understanding of politics and religion.” “What we should have been taught was how to have a civil conversation about a difficult topic.” If we had been so taught, we might not be so divided as a nation.

We had a powerful gathering of the Interfaith Community last Tuesday, one of the best I have had the joy to be a part of. We discussed the role of music in our faith traditions, and I think we learned a lot from each other and did so without watering down our faiths.

So, maybe the real question is, to use Bev’s challenge, do you believe that Jesus is the only way for people to have eternal life?

Here is my answer in a few sentences: I believe that what God did through Jesus on the Cross and through the resurrection revealed that God will go to any length necessary to bring everyone home, and if that is God’s intent, then it will happen. I firmly believe God created us, loves us, and will bring us home no matter our path. For it is not about our worthiness; it is all about God’s love. It’s not who we are and what we do but who God is.

Specifically, my father was not a Christian, but I do not doubt that whatever heaven is like, he will be there.

When I say this, people ask, but what about Hitler? Will God bring him home after all the evil he sparked? Well, if it were up to me, the clear answer is **no, no way**. But then, fortunately, I am not God. For once, you say someone like Hitler doesn't get in, then what about the people who followed him, and what about people who championed slavery and those who followed them? And you can ask, what about those who don't stand against injustice? What about them? What about people who support the opposing candidate? And before you know it, we have eliminated a lot of people that God loves, maybe even ourselves.

And what about me when I shy away from taking a stand for justice or some unpopular but, to me, righteous cause?

I rest on the fact that God's loving will is to bring everyone home, so each week when we pray, "Thy will be done," I am praying for just such an action by God. Only God knows the end of our stories, like in the story we heard today. Nicodemus didn't get what Jesus was talking about, but in the end, it is Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea who show up to bury Jesus when all the disciples have fled.

I believe in a loving God who wants everyone to come home and will not rest until it happens because love knows no other way. We might want to zap people, but God does not. Indeed, one of my favorite Bible verses is **John 3:17**: "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." I would like to see that posted at a few sporting events, and it might make people stop and think.

So then, what does it matter if one is a Christian? For me, it makes all the difference in the world. But I also know Jesus is the only way for me. One of my favorite hymns has a line: "Jesus Christ, how much I love you." This line expresses that Jesus is my faith's heart, soul, and core. He has shaped and formed my life in times of trouble and joy. He has placed me in a community that means the world to me.

I know that God's love will not be defeated even by the cross, which was the worst that humanity could do. That gives us the faith and hope to face all life offers. Jesus on the cross reminds us that humanity is also you, and I tried to destroy the message of Jesus that God loves us no matter what. And when we sing were you there when they crucified my lord the answer is **yes, yes, we were**.

But despite that, we couldn't stop God's all-powerful love for us, and God got in the last word, resurrection.

The 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm has a verse we need to remember and another more accurate translation. We know it this way:

Surely, goodness and mercy shall follow me  
all the days of my life.

**Here is a better translation:**

Yes, goodness and faithful love  
**will pursue me** all the days of my life.

God's love and grace pursue us! They actively seek us out. God won't quit on us!

So, while John 3:16 is so well known, we would do well to remember John 3:17:  
"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.

And God's will, will be done.