

May 26, 2024 Sermon “Re-born, Reclaiming Jesus”

Texts: Romans 8:12-17; **John 3:1-17**

John 15:13—a verse that encapsulates the essence of selfless love and sacrifice. It serves as a guiding light, reminding us of the depths to which one can go for the sake of others, as we honor those who have given their all on this Memorial Day.

Jesus says, “This is my commandment that you love one another as I have loved you. Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends.”

First and foremost, we must acknowledge the immense cost of the sacrifices made by military personnel who have laid down their lives in service to their country. Their selflessness and bravery shine as beacons of inspiration.

The sacrifices these courageous individuals make come at a heavy price—a price that is felt deeply by their families and loved ones left behind. The pain and grief experienced by these families is immeasurable. The void left by losing a loved one is a burden carried throughout their lives.

Yet, amidst the heart-wrenching nature of these sacrifices, there is found solace and inspiration in the profound love that is displayed through them. We hear stories of heroes who put the well-being of others above their own, faced danger with unwavering courage, and made the ultimate sacrifice to protect the freedoms we hold dear.

We can remember the names and stories of those who have fallen and honor their memory and the depth of their love by cherishing the freedoms they fought to preserve. Though their loss is deeply felt, their sacrifices serve as a testament to the power of love and the indomitable spirit of those who choose to serve.

Jesus describes a love that surpasses all others, characterized by selflessness, sacrifice, and unparalleled depth. This greatest love finds its ultimate embodiment in the sacrifice of Jesus on the cross.

The sacrifice of Jesus serves as the pinnacle of love, as He willingly laid down His life for the salvation of humanity. In His selfless act, He demonstrated a love that knows no bounds, a love that transcends human understanding. Jesus’ sacrifice exemplifies the essence of laying down one’s life for others, paving the way for reconciliation, forgiveness, and eternal life.

Life can be so full of doubts and hurts, losses and complexity that the Kingdom of God remains invisible. There is something about this Kingdom of God that we want

to know more. In our text this morning, Nicodemus even as a VIP with a big theological reputation – we learn here that he was a Pharisee – a serious devotee of God and God’s laws – and he was a “leader of the Jews” and “a teacher” was learning something about this Kingdom of God. He had heard enough about Jesus that he wanted to meet him, but he could not risk his whole reputation and meet him in the day. Nicodemus planned this night-time visit. Better to be safe than sorry, he thought, in his inquiry of Jesus about the Kingdom of God. But Nicodemus came to Jesus because Nicodemus knew that Jesus knew about the Kingdom of God.

A little background can help us here. There is some symbolism in Nicodemus that John wants us to understand. It is the difference between night and day, light and darkness. John focuses on Nicodemus’ spiritual darkness. In John 9:4, we read, “We must work the works of him who sent me, while it is day; night is coming when no one can work.” While it is day refers to the time when Jesus is here in his earthly ministry, for he is “the light of the world.” To walk in the day means to walk in the light that Jesus gives, and to walk at night means to walk apart from Jesus. John illustrates that Nicodemus is walking in darkness, but comes to understand the light.

“Rabbi, 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.” And Jesus answered – “no one can see the Kingdom of God without being born from above.” Ah ha! . . . So that gets our attention in these days!

That was all very well, Nicodemus said, but just how were you supposed to pull a thing like that off? How especially were you supposed to pull it off if you were pushing sixty-five? How do you get RE-BORN when it was a challenge just to get out of bed in the morning? He even got a little sarcastic. Could one “enter a second time into the mother's womb?” he asked (John 3:4), when it was all one could do to get in and out of the car, to get up and down from the recliner, without someone helping?

“Then, a gust of wind happened to whistle down the chimney at that point, making the dying embers burst into flame; and Jesus said being born again was like THAT. It wasn't something you did. The wind did it. The Spirit did it. It was something that happened, for God's sake.” “How can this be?” Nicodemus asked (John 3:9), and that's when Jesus really got going.

Jesus said, “I'm telling you - God's so in love with this world that he's sent me down, so if you don't believe your own eyes, then maybe you'll believe mine, maybe you'll believe me, maybe you won't come sneaking around scared half to death in the dark anymore, but will come to, come clean, come to life.”

“What impressed Nicodemus even more than the speech was the quickening of his own breathing and the pounding of his own heart. He hadn't felt like that since his first kiss, since the time his first child was born.” (see F. Beuchner, Peculiar Treasures and day1.org)

Born from above, born of water and spirit, born again – RE-BORN! It is a powerful and pertinent process for people of faith. RE-BORN. It is realizing that God . . . and love . . . and life . . . and the Kingdom are very close, always present, and our lives are meant to reflect it.

So often, like Nicodemus, we get so covered up with how we are seeing things that we cannot see Jesus, cannot be open to the Spirit, cannot sense God anywhere nearby. So often, like Nicodemus, we are so busy asking questions – or so burdened by our issues - that we do not see Jesus standing right in front of us, don't see God's care all around us.

Don't get me wrong – I like questions, we need serious questions. But if we are not careful, we miss what is right in front of us – God's presence, God's promises, God's life for us and for all.

Jesus said, "Nicodemus, you don't need God IN your life.... You don't need God to come INTO your life. That's backwards. You need to **come into God's life.**" God doesn't come into your life. It works the other way. God offers us God's own life as a gift and beckons us to enter it, live in it. *You* need to be *in* the life of God. This is the truth for all of us. In fact, Nicodemus, you need to realize that your life is only in God and then, live accordingly. (see T. Long, sermon on Day1.org)

RE-BORN. It is not literal. It is about the transformative power of God at work in us, all around us, regardless of what is happening in the world or with our hearts. RE-BORN. Jesus is trying to help Nicodemus, and all of us, know that no matter what happens in the world, or with our lives, the life of God is NOT far away. The life of God has come near to you. Indeed, the life of God is sitting right next to you, speaking to you now. The passionate love of God that makes up the divine life has spilled out into the world in Jesus. God so loved the world that God has given God's only Son . . . not to condemn the world but to save it . . . to assure us that nothing can ever separate us from God.

When Nicodemus began to allow himself to be RE-BORN - of the wind, of the Spirit - things changed for him. In the chapters which follow, we read that Nicodemus, who had at first come to Jesus in the darkness of night, later spoke up for Jesus, publicly questioning those in authority who would judge Jesus. Then after Jesus' death on the cross when all the disciples had fled, Joseph of Arimethea and Nicodemus came forward to prepare Jesus' body for burial. Nicodemus was no longer intimidated or afraid. Nicodemus had come to realize that he was RE-BORN, not by his own doing, but by the love of God who birthed him anew and gave him a life of boldness to walk in the light.

And that is certainly what God wants and expects from us.

When love is the way, then no child will go to bed hungry in this world ever again. When love is the way, we will let justice roll down like a mighty stream and

righteousness like an ever-flowing brook. When love is the way, poverty will become history. When love is the way, the earth will be a sanctuary. When love is the way, we will lay down our swords and shields, down by the riverside, to study war no more. When love is the way, there's plenty good room - plenty good room - for all of God's children. "Because when love is the way, we actually treat each other, well... like we are actually family. When love is the way, we know that God is the source of us all, and we are brothers and sisters, children of God.

RE-BORN - into the love of God . . . for loving others.

We are called to respond as we reflect on the greatest love demonstrated by Jesus and the sacrifices of our fallen heroes. Let us not simply admire their acts of love but let their examples inspire us to embody that same selflessness, compassion, and willingness to sacrifice in our own lives. Their sacrifices should motivate us to live lives of gratitude, service, and love, carrying their legacy forward with honor and reverence. Let's create a culture of appreciation and recognition for their sacrifices, ensuring they feel valued and cared for.

As we respond to the call, we honor the memory of those who have given their lives and carried their legacy forward. Their sacrifices remind us of the immense power and impact of selflessness. By embodying their spirit, we contribute to a world that cherishes peace, upholds justice, and values the worth of every individual.

May we be a congregation that actively responds to the call, making a difference in the lives of others and embodying the love and sacrifice that we remember on this Memorial Day. We need to experience the life that we can have when we enter God's life.

In conclusion, let us take a moment to reflect on the key points we have explored in this sermon. We began by acknowledging the immense cost of sacrifice and recognizing the pain and grief experienced by families who have lost their loved ones in service to their country. We then delved into the concept of the greatest love, exemplified by Jesus' sacrifice on the cross and mirrored by the brave men and women who laid down their lives for others. Lastly, we discussed Nicodemus, and his realization that walking in the light of Jesus, he is walking in love.

RE-BORN.

As the apostle Paul reminds us, if we live according to the flesh we will die; but if we live according to the Spirit we will live. May it be so. Amen