

FOUR GLIMPSES INTO THE LIFE OF JESUS  
4. "Love: The Greatest Love Story for All of Us"

John 3:14-21

Fifth Sunday in Lent, March 22, 2015

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This is the fourth and final sermon in the Lenten sermon series, "Glimpses into the life of Jesus." The underlying premise is that many Christians believe the story of Jesus is true but have never internalized that story and have not experienced Jesus. Knowledge about Jesus is good, but experiencing Jesus is essential to understanding him and his life, ministry, death and resurrection. Hopefully this four part series has given you an opportunity to reflect on the experiences you have in common with Jesus and to come to know how Jesus is transforming you.

We started with the baptism story of Jesus and asked how was your baptism story like his? Where did your baptism occur, who was there, what do you remember about it or what have you been told? When you were baptized you were affirmed totally by God just as Jesus was. Then we moved on to Jesus telling his disciples that they must "deny themselves and take up their cross and follow him." I asked when have you had to give up something for Jesus and how did that help you to experience Jesus? Two weeks ago we looked at an angry Jesus when he cleansed the temple in Jerusalem and drove out the money changers. I asked when have you been angry and how does it make you feel? What experiences with anger do you have that compares to Jesus' anger, God loves you through your anger just as God loved Jesus when he was angry. That is my question for you this Lent: How can we experience Jesus?

Years ago Ginny and I were driving through the mountains of Colorado. As we were winding carefully along a narrow, circuitous road, before Interstate 70 was completed, we came around one of the curves in the road I looked up and saw painted on a rock, large white letters: PREPARE TO MEET THY GOD—READ JOHN 3:16.

Fortunately, I already knew John 3:16; but I shuddered at the thought of some motorist madly thumbing through the Bible trying to find John 3:16 when he should have been watching the road! Right after I saw the painted rock, the next hairpin curve took me to the very edge of a cliff before the road wound on around the mountain. That sign was put there knowing the cliff was just around the corner. Prepare to meet thy God—because who knows? Perhaps around the next curve your tire will blow, or the brakes will give way, or a rock will come crashing down and you will, in fact, be face to face with God. Are you prepared for that? Read John 3:16.

How do we experience the love of God? We say with our lips "God so loved the world that he gave" ... and what did he give? He gave his only Son, he gave us the gift of love, he taught and teaches us how to love when we look upon Jesus. Love is one of the ways we talk about experiencing God in our lives. We sing about it when we sing, "He (God) has got the whole world in his hands ... he's got you and me sister in his hands" ... and on and on it goes. He literally holds the whole world in his hands.

We might ask the question where did the world come from? One of the answers has to be, the only answer that works for me, is a hand of love behind the order I see. The intricate creation of a delicate flower, the rhythm of the seasons, the seeds within the seed of a fruit all speak to me of the love of God caring for the world he made. But the ordered world around us gives no personal knowledge of God. In fact the impersonal aspects of many natural events like sudden death, hurricanes, tornadoes serve only to make the hiddenness of God more pronounced.

Then, God created humankind. We have a personality with a conscience by which we can figure out right from wrong and act upon it. We can make ourselves heroes or fools. We have the capacity for abstract thought.

We have the capacity to respond to the love of God, but many never do. God may be nearer than breathing, and closer than hands and feet, but pride and wanting to be in control keeps us from responding to the love of God. We just can't do it ourselves, on our own.

Then ... in due time, out of Israel God raised up Jesus. Jesus gathered followers and disciples around him and said some astounding things like: "If you see me you have seen the Father. God and me are One." If you want to experience the love of God, look at Jesus and how he lived his life.

Our scripture of the morning brings Jesus alive to us in a very personal way. It tells a story. One of the best stories we will ever hear. The text that is printed there is the bulletin is at the heart of the story. Let's say it together ... "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."

The characters in the story, every story has to have at least 2 characters, right? The characters are Jesus and Nicodemus. You would have liked Nicodemus he is like you and me in a lot of ways. He was well educated and would fit right in with our Athens community. He was honest and humble. He was looking for something that was missing in his life. So, when he heard about Jesus he decided to go and investigate. He slipped in the back when Jesus was doing one of his public sermons, he waited until the others had left and then he came up to Jesus and said, "I hear that you are pretty good!" He went on to say, "Anyone who does these works (that you have been doing) must be from God." He thought he was making a good first impression.

Jesus looked at him and translated the words to: "I know there is something missing in your life." Some people say it this way, "It feels like a big hole right in the center of my chest." That's what Val Kilmer said as the Doc Holiday character to Wyatt Earp in the *Tombstone* movie about one of the cowboys who seemed to love killing people. Why can't he stop," Wyatt wanted to know. Doc said, "It's like he has a big hole in the center of his chest and he doesn't know how to make it stop hurting." They are empty inside, they chase after the wind and they fight themselves ... you just want to pray for them to fill the emptiness.

Nicodemus is asking Jesus, "Can you tell me how to fill the emptiness? I seem to have lost my faith."

One of our speakers at a conference I attended told this parable: Once there was a mean old rancher. He was a tough man, who didn't take "nothing off nobody." One of his cowhands rustled a cow. When they finally caught the cowhand, they dragged him before the old rancher. He looked down at the poor, frightened cowhand and said, "Hang 'em. It'll teach him a lesson."

Years went by. The old rancher finally died. It was his turn for judgment. When they took him before the throne of God, he thought of all the mean things he had done in his life, and he shook in his boots. God Almighty looked down at the mean old rancher and said, “Forgive ‘em. It’ll teach him a lesson.”

Do you know anything at all about that? I don’t mean cattle rustling. Do you know anything about how you find your faith? I think that is what Nicodemus was asking in language you and I can understand. “Sir, I know it looks like I have everything, but I cannot find the only thing I really need. Can you help me? Can you help me? Can you help me?”

Nicodemus was talking to Jesus. The one we call Son of God, the one person who embodied the perfect love of God to all humankind. How do you experience the love of God? By looking at the life of Jesus and saying there is the love of God made known to us. Jesus meets us in our hour of need, in our hour of doubt, in our time of loneliness and despair and says, “I understand young man, I understand grown up woman, I understand teenage daughter, I understand career minded young adult. I understand what is going on with you better than you understand you. Let me help! Let me fill that hole in the middle of your life.

F. Buechner in his book, The Clowns in the Belfry write, “A fat man drives by in his Chevy pickup with a cigarette in his mouth and on his rear bumper a sticker that reads, ‘Jesus Loves You.’ There is a shotgun slung across the back window. He is not a stranger, we’ve never seen him before and couldn’t care less if we never see him again. He is our brother, our father. He is our son. It is true that we have never seen him before and that we will never see him again—just that one quick glimpse as he goes by at twenty-five miles an hour because it is a school zone—but if we truly realize the truth of that, fully understand that this is the one and only time we will ever see him, we will treasure that moment.” (Frederick Buechner, The Clown in the Belfry, p. 153) For he is one of God’s creatures, and God loves him so much that we are called to love one another.

“The old woman with thick glasses who sits in front of us at the movies eating popcorn is our mother, our sister, our child grown old, and once we know that, once we see her for who she truly is, everything about her becomes precious—the skinny back of her neck, the way she puts her hand over her mouth when she laughs.

“These are not ordinary people any more than life is ordinary. Life is extraordinary, and the extraordinariness of it is what Jesus calls his love. We are all of us brothers and sisters. We are called by God to love each other the way Jesus says that God loves us. That is the Good News about God—the Gospel—which he came to proclaim.

“The fat man in the pickup has a son dying of AIDS. It was his wife who put the sticker on the bumper. The way he sees it, if you don’t believe in God anymore, it doesn’t matter whether Jesus loves you or not. If God allows to happen what happened to his son, then what is the point of believing in God?”

“The old woman has gone to the movies to help take her mind off the fact that she has cancer. Cancer is a sickness but it is not her only sickness. Her other sickness is the worse of the two. Sometimes she wakes up in the middle of the night and thinks about it—wishes she had somebody she could talk to about it or just somebody she could go to the movies with once in a while and share her popcorn with.” (IBID, pp. 154-56)

How do we experience the love of God? By looking and listening to Jesus. By seeing in Jesus how much God loved the world. That God was willing to give the life of his only son, your life and mine were bought with a price. Nicodemus looked into the eyes of Jesus and saw and heard again and again, “God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son,…”

It perhaps reminded him of the Hebrew Scriptures and the story you heard read earlier from Numbers 21. The people of God had been in the wilderness for some time and they were weary of the same food day in and day out, manna was losing its appeal. They complained and cursed Moses and God for bringing them to this place. God then sent poisonous snakes and now the people were afraid. Moses prayed to God for relief. God told Moses to put an image of a bronze snake on a pole and if someone was bitten and looked at the image on the pole they would live. Now, using that image Jesus says, “The son of man must be lifted up and everyone who believes in him will have eternal life.”

Nicodemus discovered what he already knew. From above, God had touched his life.

As part of your Lenten journey think this week of the times when you have felt the love of God in your life and write them down. How did that feel? Did you think it was real? When Jesus talks about the love of God do you feel a kinship to what he says?