

The Courage to Love
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Sunday, March 5, 2023

Scripture References:

***John 3:1-7:** Now there was a Pharisee name Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews. 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.” Jesus answered him, “very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above.” 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?” Jesus answered, “very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and spirit. What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit. Do not be astonished that I said to you, You must be born from above.” (NRSV)*

***John 3:16:** “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.” (NRSV)*

***1 John 3:16 – 18:** “We know love by this, that he laid down his life for us – and we ought to lay down our lives for one another. How does God’s love abide in anyone who has the world’s goods and sees a brother or sister in need and yet refuses help? Little children, let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action.” (NRSV)*

***1 John 4:18:** There is no fear in love, for perfect love casts out fear; for fear has to do with punishment, and whoever fears has not reached perfection on love.” (NRSV)*

Summary:

Throughout our lives as believers, from the time we started in Sunday School, BTU and in Sunday worship services, we have been taught the scripture found in John 3:16: “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 maybe we’ve heard this scripture so much that we have taken it for granted; maybe we have missed how powerful this scripture truly is. Dr. Warnock warned us in today’s message that, often, the familiarity with this scripture can cause us to miss its importance. This scripture tells us just how much God truly loves us, and how powerful God’s love for us truly is. This scripture helps us to appreciate that God is so obsessed with us that He refuses to live without us, despite our brokenness or whether we are right or wrong. This scripture tells us that God didn’t just simply love us, but that God’s love for us was so unique that it caused Him to lay down the life of His only Son for us. God’s love for us was so powerful that He was willing to give His all for us – His only for us – the One He loved for us.

The scripture is set in a scandalous scene involving Nicodemus, a highly trained member of the religious establishment, and doctor of the Law and a Pharisee, who comes to Jesus in secret by night, where no one would know of his interest and belief in Jesus as the Son of God. The dichotomy between Jesus and Nicodemus couldn’t be more blatant in that Nicodemus is a well-trained established member of the religious community and Jesus is a poor preacher from

Nazareth, of which it is declared, “*Can any good thing come from Nazareth?*” (John 1:46). And although Nicodemus could not shake his interest and obsession with Jesus, he still could not find the courage to love Jesus enough to confess Him before men. Nicodemus, like many in our current day religious establishments, was well educated in his theology and his religious and God talk. He knew what religion said about God, but he lacked the courage to have a genuine relationship with God. And unfortunately, Nicodemus failed to find the courage to love God, as commanded, with all his heart, his soul, and his mind. Although he had enough courage to defend Jesus at his trial (John 7:50-51), and enough courage to come to Jesus’ grave with a secret disciple of Jesus’ named Joseph of Arimathea (John 19: 38), he still lacked the courage to confess Jesus before the Jews and all men as the Son of God. Pastor Warnock, challenged us to make sure that we are authentic in our relationship with God by having the courage to love God, confess Jesus as our Lord and the Son of God before all men, and to love others. There is a difference between knowing about God and having a relationship with God and we are challenged to know this difference and to have the courage to have a relationship versus just a religious knowledge of God. We are challenged to have the courage to love.

Sermon Points

1. God SO loved us... beyond our ability to comprehend. It takes courage to love because it makes you vulnerable. Love will cost you something. If you’re not ready to give, you’re not ready to love.
2. We are called to love God – Do you love God? You can have religion and not love God. There is a difference between knowing ABOUT God (who He is) and actually KNOWING God (having a relationship with Him).
3. We are commanded to love one another (I John 3:16). The opposite of love is not hate but fear. Hating is like drinking poison and waiting for the OTHER person to die!
“There is no fear in love, perfect love drives out fear...” (I John 4:18)

Discussion Questions

1. As you reflect over your life, please share a moment when the uniqueness of God’s love (*God so loved*) has been demonstrated in your life during a time of difficulty and uncertainty.
2. Why do you think it takes courage to love God and your fellow man the way that Jesus commanded – with all your heart, soul and mind?
3. John tells us that “*perfect love casted out all fears.*” Reflect on the social climate of our current day - how can the perfect love taught by Jesus help us better understand the fears of those in society that practice hate toward the African American community, the Jewish community, Muslim community, and the Asian community?

4. Have you ever experienced a Nicodemus moment in your walk with God, where you were ashamed or for some reason did not fully confess your belief and love for God to your co-workers, certain members of your family or certain acquaintances? Why?
5. What does love in action look like in an urban-based ministry such as Ebenezer's? How are we called to put God's love into action for our fellow brothers and sisters in need?