

How We “Use” Jesus
John 3:1-17
Colebrook Congregational Church
March 12, 2017 / Second Sunday of Lent

Today's selection comes from a very different type of Gospel. The Gospel of John is the more theological gospel, and the writer is not really concerned with the drama we see in Mark's Gospel, or the carefully crafted storytelling of Matthew and Luke. John is not concerned with chronology, geography, or even the Jewish context of Jesus' life. All that matters to John is the theology, the spirituality, and the divine aspect of Jesus.

Where Mark's Gospel is a frenzied rush toward the crucifixion, describing Jesus' ministry as lasting only six months; John is slow and ponderous, full of heavy Greek rhetoric & style, describing Jesus wandering around for about three years. John does not seem to know or care about where things are, what they look like, or how far apart they are. John has Jesus in one place, and suddenly He is a hundred miles away. John speaks of customs and public buildings that were well-known to any Jew at that time, yet they are described inaccurately.

From these differences and quirks, we can tell that this Gospel was the last one to be written, in the mid-second century. We can see that John is writing for an exclusively Greek audience that is unfamiliar with Holy Land in a place nowhere near it. And from its tone we can see that it was written shortly after the final split between Christianity & Judaism, where the pain of rejection and separation was still fresh.

Today's selection is part of a three chapter block where Jesus is revealing Himself in Judea, Galilee, and Samaria. That's the mountainous area in present-day northern Israel and much of the West Bank, between the Mediterranean Sea and Jordan River...so, pretty much the entire Holy Land. An example of how John has Jesus going places irregardless of where they are. Jesus is going everywhere in three chapters.

The third chapter begins with Nicodemus, a Pharisee and a member of the Sanhedrin. Now, the Pharisees were like a political party, a social organization, and a religious faction all rolled into one. They were constant challengers to Jesus, even though they shared many similar beliefs. And they later became the Rabbis of present-day Judaism. And the Sanhedrin was the ruling assembly over religious matters.

Nicodemus only appears in John's Gospel, and this is the first of his three encounters with Jesus.

Their exchange follows a pattern that is used over and over again in John's Gospel, where a key word is used that can be taken either literally or spiritually, then someone mistakenly thinks Jesus is using the literal meaning, so Jesus corrects them with the spiritual meaning, there may be more misunderstanding, and then Jesus shifts into giving a Discourse.

So here, Nicodemus has assumed that Jesus meant a literal second birth and is confused as to how one would accomplish that feat; But Jesus is actually talking about the spiritual second birth of Baptism, marking the initiation of someone to the Kingdom of God. Jesus tries to clarify for Nicodemus, but he still doesn't get it.

As Jesus continues with Nicodemus, He pivots to His Discourse about how to enter the Kingdom of God that continues to the end of the chapter, while Nicodemus fades into the background.

This selection contains a very famous verse: John 3:16. This reference can be seen on signs in the audience of sporting events, concerts, or anywhere there are large groups of people. It has been called the "Gospel in Miniature." The whole Gospel summed up into a single sentence. A lot of attention has been given to this verse throughout history.

But what about the next verse? While most of us must have heard John 3:16 enough to recognize or even recite it to some extent, what about what Jesus says next? Can anyone recite that on the fly? While 3:16 is considered the most important verse of the Gospels and the New Testament, I feel that the next verse is a very close second.

3:17 is a reminder to the generations of Believers that Follow as to the nature of Jesus' Mission, that should be kept at heart in all of our actions, interactions, and behaviors. Jesus is our Messiah. Our Teacher. And Our Example to Follow.

3:17 says, "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."

Jesus was not sent to condemn. So, if Jesus is the standard to which we have chosen to live our lives, then how can we do what He would not.

We have so many examples of this throughout all the Gospels:

Jesus is constantly eating with sinners, using camaraderie, not condemnation to convince them to change their lives. He did that so often, His enemies criticized Him and called Him a glutton.

Next week's scripture is about the Samaritan woman at the well. She was not a respectable woman, shunned for her sins by the town, but Jesus did not judge or condemn her, He treated her with respect, and made a follower out of her, who then in turn convinced many others to Follow Him.

And even while He was being crucified, Jesus did not condemn His executioners, He forgave them.

Unfortunately, not everyone has followed Jesus' example and have misused Jesus to condemn others. History is full of Crusades and Inquisitions and pogroms and witch hunts, all using Jesus as justification for their condemnations.

While today is much better than those dark days of intolerance, it is so much harder for those who Follow Jesus and do not condemn to be noticed. That behavior is not always seen as newsworthy when there are so many examples of condemnation with their promise of conflict and ratings or sales. The bad drowns out the good.

I cannot fully tell you how much it pains me when I see video or photos of a crowd carrying signs that say, “Jesus Hates...” whatever group they don't like. It is a complete anathema to our Faith to accept any statement that starts with claiming that Jesus hates anyone. It completely goes against everything Jesus represents. It creates alienation instead of community. That is not how Followers are supposed to use Jesus.

I had the misfortune of seeing this sort of thing and how it can affect people first hand during my last year of divinity school.

New Haven's City Council was having hearings on some housing-related issue, and it looked like it was going to take an anti-discriminatory stance. In response to this, a hate group announced that they were going to hold a protest on a corner of the New Haven Green, bordering the University. Then, the student organizations started to plan counter-demonstrations.

At that time, I was part of the student government, as a Graduate & Professional School Senator representing third year divinity students. Senators from the Drama School & Art School presented a Resolution to make a statement of support for the City Council. As it was being read aloud, I noticed that the Senator reading it kept looking at the Divinity School delegation. When the Presiding Senator opened it up to the floor, our entire delegation raised our hands, and I noticed that the Senator who had read the Resolution aloud reacted like she had been slapped or something.

I found out later why she kept looking at us and why she reacted the way she did. From her experience, she had only ever seen Christians using Jesus to condemn her and others. So when she wrote a Resolution supporting an inclusive decision, she assumed that the Christians of the Divinity School Delegation would oppose and condemn it.

She expected us to fight her on this issue, so she was not prepared for us to not only support her position, but to ask her to re-write the resolution taking a stronger stand.

And after dealing with that, the Senate worked with the other organizations in the University and New Haven on how to deal with the hate group. We did not want to risk becoming like them with our response, so we all settled on denying the hate group of an audience for their condemnations.

If you've never seen the New Haven Green, it's usually busy and full of people. On the day the hate group came to condemn in the name of Jesus, they did so in a virtual vacuum. Residents and Students alike avoided walking near that corner of the Green. Cars did not drive by them. News outlets did not cover them. There was no one for them to shout at or condemn. It was truly an eerie sight to behold.

God so Loved the world, God sent Jesus to us; and Jesus was sent not to condemn, but to save. Jesus is who we Trust and Follow, and look to for an example in our lives. So we ask: What Would Jesus Do? How do we use Jesus in our lives? John 3:17 answers us with a negative phrase: Not condemn. But we can flip it into a positive statement, and find an answer that is never wrong with Jesus: Love.

Please join me in the Spirit of Prayer

O God, You birth us all anew and give us all new life by the power of Your Spirit. We ask that You help us on our journey; to accept not only earthly things but heavenly things, to lift up Your Son and be lifted up ourselves, and to let Your Spirit move us beyond our understanding. Amen.

INTERCESSORY PRAYER

[PAUSE]

O God who welcomes all in love, to You we pray for the good of Your church, our community, and the concerns of those in need. We lift up our hearts in faith to You, the one who hears all prayers and holds close all of Creation.

We give you thanks for all the blessings and gifts you have given us, for those you have led into our lives and for moving us into the lives of others. And we thank you for using us as instruments of your divine love for us all.

We pray for the forgiveness of sins known and unknown, for falling short of how we should be towards ourselves, towards our fellow humans, and to all of Your Creation. May we be reassured of Your forgiveness, as we try to do better and make amends as we move forward.

We pray for everyone who needs Your help. For those who are unwell or wounded in mind, body, or spirit. We pray to be of assistance if we can, and for all those who have dedicated their lives to helping others. We pray to bring comfort to the lonely, shelter to the exposed and vulnerable, and nourishment to the hungry. May you fortify us to better serve you through our service to our neighbors.

We pray for Your guidance in all that we do, to live up to the standard Jesus set for us. We pray for the strength to Follow the Path of Jesus. We pray for calmness and serenity in a chaotic world. We pray that we recognize your messengers and those You send to help us and redirect us for who they are, and that we show the wisdom to heed them.

We especially pray for:
April Stone

Gracious God, we offer these prayers and all those of our hearts up to you, in Jesus' name, Amen.

Psalm 121

I lift up my eyes to the hills-- from where will my help come? My help comes from the LORD, who made heaven and earth. He will not let your foot be moved; he who keeps you will not slumber. He who keeps Israel will neither slumber nor sleep. The LORD is your keeper; the LORD is your shade at your right hand. The sun shall not strike you by day, nor the moon by night. The LORD will keep you from all evil; he will keep your life. The LORD will keep your going out and your coming in from this time on and forevermore.

John 3:1-17

Now there was a Pharisee named 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.' 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." Nicodemus said to him, "How can these things be?" Jesus answered him, "Are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things? "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. If I have told you about earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you about heavenly things? No one has ascended into heaven except the one who descended from heaven, the Son of Man. And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.

"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. "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.