

Cliché or Cross?
John 3:14-21

Welcome to the fourth Sunday of Lent and to this season where we've been invited again and again into holy conversations, with the text, with each other, and with God. I hope as you've been navigating this season of reflection, confession, repentance...that you've found opportunities for a holy conversation or two, and that you've taken the risk of sharing the truth about your life.

Speaking of conversations, today's assigned text reads almost like a cliché to me. Webster's defines cliché as "a stereotyped expression, a commonplace phrase," and it seems to me that the use of clichés is a perfect way to take any conversation from deep and holy straight to shallow and meaningless. So, I'd hate to call our text today cliché, but...it's John 3:16.

That little verse is probably the most famous passage in the whole Bible. Okay, if not the most famous, then at least in the top five of the most well known. Even if you're not so familiar with the Bible, if you've ever been to an NFL football game or even watched one on TV, you've probably heard of John 3:16 because you can see it on big posters at every game, and I'll bet a whole group of you can say it from memory. Join me, if you like: "For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten son, that whosoever believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life."

I'll tell you a little secret about preachers. Okay, at least about this preacher. We hate being assigned texts like this, you know the familiar ones that everyone knows, which come with longstanding meaning and which carry significant baggage. We don't like this particular challenge so much because it puts us right between a rock and a hard place. On the one hand, we could preach a text like John 3:16 in the way that the passage is commonly interpreted and in the spirit of placards at football games and religious warnings about hell, almost cliché. On the other hand, we could dig deeper and look harder, past what has become almost a meaningless recitation. But if we do that, we might uncover what appears to be an uncomfortable and inconvenient teaching of Jesus. And who wants to preach something like that?

And there's the conundrum: which way to go? Go easy and transactional, or hard and transformational? Cliché or cross, you might say? Neither one is that attractive from where I stand, I have to tell you.

Let's look a little more closely at our text this morning; if you'd like to have a reference point, you can turn in your pew Bibles to page..... We're only in the third chapter of John's gospel, and already Jesus had about had it with the people with whom he was supposed to be sharing the good news. It all started out on such a high note, if you recall:

Once he'd gathered all his disciples together Jesus went public with his message of hope—at a wedding. And it was at that wedding at Cana that he turned water into the finest wine, impressing all the guests (and even his mother), and what do you know? His popularity suddenly soared.

Of course I don't know for sure, but I don't think it was what Jesus expected. He started out with such enthusiasm, ready to share the transforming power of the gospel message, and suddenly he found himself being treated like the traveling sideshow in a circus, a cliché, you might say. People flocked to him desperate to be recipients of any miracle he would perform and Jesus quickly got tired of that. John's gospel reports, "Many believed on his name because they saw the signs that he was doing."

But Jesus . . . Jesus was dubious about their belief; he knew they were so anxious to follow because they wanted him to keep performing—to keep them in unlimited bread and really good wine. And so it was that the tension between what Jesus was trying to communicate and what was really getting communicated grew more and more distinct. One evening, after a long day of overturning moneychangers' tables in the temple Jesus heard a furtive knock on his door. Our text goes on to tell us the story of Nicodemus and Jesus.

Now, you don't have to be a New Testament Greek scholar to know that something's fishy here in chapter 3. First of all, John tells us that Nicodemus was a Pharisee. Jesus had just had a very public argument with the Pharisees in the middle of the temple, so we know enough to know it would be highly unusual for a Pharisee to come to see Jesus on his own.

And John goes on to tell us that Nicodemus, who was a leader of the Pharisees, came to Jesus under the cover of darkness—sneaking around after his colleagues had turned in for the evening, desperate not to be caught. And then we hear what's on his mind—why on earth a leader of the Pharisees would secretly go to talk with someone publicly recognized as a threat to the Pharisees' leadership: Nicodemus stammers out the thing that's been weighing on his mind . . . *we know you're a teacher and we*

know you have come from God because we've seen all these miracles you've been performing . . . but, who are you really and what do you mean to do with us?

Nicodemus understood the preacher's dilemma: cliché or cross?, and he, like this preacher, had a strong suspicion that the easy, clear cut way, just might not be the way of Jesus.

When you look at the third chapter of the book of John, and especially John 3:16, as it has commonly been interpreted, Christian faith is as simple as can be, isn't it? Faith becomes a clear-cut story that goes something like this (paraphrased from a version by my friend Russ Dean):

Once upon a time Jesus had been sitting around in heaven resting, because it was hard work helping God create all those dinosaurs and stuff. Jesus was killing time until his next mission, that is, until God sent him down to straighten things out, because human beings had made a real mess of the world. Jesus was miraculously born, then wandered around Galilee for about 30 years waiting until it was time for the cross. Which is the only reason he came to begin with.

God sent him here, to die, because that's the only way you can go to heaven, which is, of course, the only point of life.

Those are the rules, you see, God made them up. God loves you so much that someone has to die in order for you to be saved. That's the rule. And don't ask why God didn't just change the rule, since God is in charge of everything, especially the rules, because we're not supposed to ask.

That's just the way it is.

So, Jesus did his part, as required by the rule, but you still have to do your part, which is to believe the right things about Jesus and pray the right

prayer, then, well... you're going to hell when you die, and it's going to be a long, miserable eternity. And that's the way it is. Because God loves you so very much.

Okay, I am being facetious...and I don't mean to be disrespectful, as even this preacher, this believer, has a soft place in her heart for John 3:16. I just suspect that this little verse in this chapter is more than transactional, more than cliché. I suspect the message Jesus was trying to communicate to Nicodemus was more transformational.

To look deeper at the meaning of this text, to go past cliché, we have to recall that Jesus was whispering under the cover of darkness to a religious professional who had learned his whole life that faith was akin to following the rules—transactional. But Jesus was talking about something bigger, deeper, more all encompassing...something much more difficult. Jesus was talking about setting all of our preconceived rules and boundaries, transactions and delineations, all of those rubrics that have become dangerous cliché, to the side.

Jesus wanted to set them to the side and instead talk about something much more radical: God's deep and all encompassing love for the whole world, a radical love to which Jesus invited us and for which he died.

What would it mean if we set aside the rules we've created, the ways in which we've neatly judged others and ourselves in and out, and instead took Jesus up on his invitation to believe, to practice a kind of radical love that is the preamble to the biggest cliché of our faith: FOR GOD SO LOVED THE WORLD?

That, I would venture to say, would be most inconvenient, because we modern humans don't even think that way.

When we hear the word "believe," we always think of two things. First, we always believe...THAT. When we post-enlightenment overly educated professionals talk about believing, we're talking about assenting to a set of facts, something that we can factually discuss and "get our brains around." I'm sure you learned the scientific method as I did in junior high school. We're products of that human shift that happened during the Enlightenment, so we default to factual proof on every matter. Second, when we talk about believing, we assume it involves some uncertainty...the idea that our rational minds can only take us so far, and then we have to do some kind of suspension of logic and just jump.

But when Jesus and Nicodemus were having that deep middle of the night discussion and talking about believing, they were thinking of something completely different than we are. For them the act of believing was always directed toward a person—that is, "I believe in You." Believing was not an intellectual exercise, but rather a relational engagement. Second, instead of understanding belief to be a suspension of logic, like we do, belief as Jesus meant it here and in the practice of the early Christians meant, "to hold dear." Believe, then, meant something like the English word, "BELOVE," "to give one's heart to."¹

Not transactional, not cliché. It's much harder and deeper than that. It's rather transformational, and it might lead to a cross. Dangerous love of God for the whole world, and Jesus' audacious invitation to you and me to

¹ <http://www.patheos.com/blogs/marcusborg/2013/11/what-is-a-christian/>

give our hearts over to the most radical way of being human on this earth that ever, ever was.

Marcus Borg, gifted theologian who died just a few weeks ago, has helped so many of us make this differentiation. He wrote: “The Christian life is not about pleasing God the finger-shaker and judge. It is not about believing now or being good now for the sake of heaven later. It is about entering a relationship in the present that begins to change everything now.”²

It’s so much easier to slap some paint onto a piece of poster board and drag it to the football game, to keep a checklist of what you have to agree to if you want to make it in in the end.

It’s so much harder to live as if you know that God loves you, and the rest of the whole entire world, too, and to join in with God in the difficult, transformational work of healing this broken world.

It’s such a conundrum, and not just for the preacher.

Transactional or transformational?

Cliché or cross?

What will you choose?

² Marcus Borg, *The God We Never Knew*