

**Sermon for March 5, 2023 by The Rev. Lydia Gajdel**  
**Second Sunday in Lent Year A**  
**St. Paul and the Redeemer Episcopal Church – Chicago, Illinois**

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In the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Mother of us all.

When I read the scripture for this week, my mind was immediately flooded with the dulcet tones of Keith Urban. Around 2016, Keith came out with one of the catchiest and stupidest country songs of our generation. The lyrics, sung by an Australian let us remember, extoll the virtues of Americana.

I'm a Texaco star, I'm a Gibson guitar

But my favorite lyric has to be: I learned everything I needed to know from John Cougar, John Deere, John 3:16. This lyric is funny to me on many levels, first and foremost because I love the idea of learning everything I need to know about life from John Cougar Mellencamp and a tractor. But it is also interesting because how many of us have taken the time and intentionality to actually learn something from John 3:16?

It is a ubiquitous bible verse. Found by verse citation alone on gigantic bumper sticks, the front of Evangelical self-help books, and tattooed on the bodies of Christians Jesus himself may not recognize. We have plucked this verse from any sort of contextual identity and used it as a catchall signifier of a very specific kind of faith in Jesus Christ.

But today we are invited to recontextualize this Christian pop-cultural phenomenon. Put it back in its rightful place, nestled in the complexity of Nicodemus's struggle to understand, struggle to feel the faith he intellectually knows.

When we find Jesus today, Nicodemus has come to him by night. A Jewish scholar and religious leader, he can't just be hanging out with Jesus whenever he wants. He has a

reputation to protect. So Nicodemus appears under the shadow of the night asking big questions and naming big truths. He doesn't hold back as his first statement to Jesus is, "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." And in the true form of our savior, Jesus immediately has pushback. Great that you understand it in your brain, but I don't think you are actually feel it. Which starts us down the rabbit hole of being "born again." "Jesus answered him, 'Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above.'" Later on he tells Nicodemus, "... no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and spirit..." There you have it. Jesus reminding us that faith is not just knowing something to be true in our minds. It is about who we are at our core.

The concept of being "born again" entered Christian discourse most prominently with the Anabaptists during the Reformation. Their emphasis being on personal conversion and radical turning towards God. Over the centuries to come, revivalists took on the concept, popularizing the idea of God working in one's life after they have made the decision to repent of one's sins. Twentieth century Evangelicalism took it one step further, going beyond mere forgiveness to a regeneration of one's selfhood by the Holy Spirit.

And this verse is where they get it from. But it is contestable that Jesus is telling us that the way into heaven is to find yourself up at the front during an altar call on Sunday morning. I wholeheartedly agree with Evangelicals that we are being told by our scripture this morning that we are and should be changed to our core by our faith, but I wonder if Jesus isn't talking about something more subtle, more constant.

With these words, Jesus is attempting to teach a deeply confused Nicodemus what it means to be a person of faith. On one hand, it is an indictment of the intellectualization of our God. Knowing God only through rational thought. On the other, we hear an invitation to be molded, shaped by our relationship with God and God's work within us.

A key feature to the human condition is change. Sometimes it is drastic. The world comes crashing down and we are forced to reshape our understanding of it in order to survive. But most of the time it is a slow burn. A realization that we need different things now than we did five, ten, twenty years ago. A joy that we never knew existed bursting out of our being. A moment where we look in the mirror and think, my younger self would be proud of me. We change. It is an unavoidable part of who we are.

But that change doesn't happen in a vacuum. My childhood friend's mom used to say, "I care who your friends are because I care who you are." The world around us influences who we become, nurtures parts of ourselves we cannot even see, allows space for potential to take shape.

To be a person of faith is to be changed by God. While I may have pushback against the Evangelical ideal of being "born again," I am absolutely on board with what Jesus is saying today. No one can see the kingdom of God without being changed by it. We do not profess a faith of stagnancy, but of constant perfecting. God is constantly at work in us. We are

constantly being regenerated by the Holy Spirit, born anew in Christ's love with every encounter.

That's what love does. It shows us what's possible and invites us into a life of abundance. We are so loved by our God and we can see that love every day in who God is shaping us to be and inviting us to share that love with others. Being a person of faith means allowing and inviting God to shape us, explosively and in the most granular of details.

Which brings us back to where we started. John 3:16. "For God so loved the world, he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life." Jesus is teaching us why he is here in the first place. Teaching us that his presence, this manifestation of God's love, will change us. And this change that brings us closer to God, deepening our relationship with God and one another, is the change that will bring us to eternal life.

I hate to say it, but I think Keith Urban was sort of onto something. I don't understand the tractor part, but I think he's right about John 3:16. It is a pretty good reminder. God loves us so much that God came among us to mold our very being and invite us into expansive existence with God.

Amen.