

## “For God So Shaped Every Person in Love”

C Pentecost 1 – John 3:1-17

May 30, 2021; 10:00 am

Congregational UCC, Buena Vista, CO

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### **Born from Above**

**3** <sup>1-2</sup> There was a man of the Pharisee sect, Nicodemus, a prominent leader among the Jews. Late one night he visited Jesus and said, “Rabbi, we all know you’re a teacher straight from God. No one could do all the God-pointing, God-revealing acts you do if God weren’t in on it.”

**3** Jesus said, “You’re absolutely right. Take it from me: Unless a person is born from above, it’s not possible to see what I’m pointing to—to God’s kingdom.”

**4** “How can anyone,” said Nicodemus, “be born who has already been born and grown up? You can’t re-enter your mother’s womb and be born again. What are you saying with this ‘born-from-above’ talk?”

**5-6** Jesus said, “You’re not listening. Let me say it again. Unless a person submits to this original creation—the ‘wind-hovering-over-the-water’ creation, the invisible moving the visible, a baptism into a new life—it’s not possible to enter God’s kingdom. When you look at a baby, it’s just that: a body you can look at and touch. But the person who takes shape within is formed by something you can’t see and touch—the Spirit—and becomes a living spirit.

**7-8** “So don’t be so surprised when I tell you that you have to be ‘born from above’—out of this world, so to speak. You know well enough how the wind blows this way and that. You hear it rustling through the trees, but you have no idea where it comes from or where it’s headed next. That’s the way it is with everyone ‘born from above’ by the wind of God, the Spirit of God.”

**9** Nicodemus asked, “What do you mean by this? How does this happen?”

**10-12** Jesus said, “You’re a respected teacher of Israel and you don’t know these basics? Listen carefully. I’m speaking sober truth to you. I speak only of what I know by experience; I give witness only to what I have seen with my own eyes. There is nothing secondhand here, no hearsay. Yet instead of facing the evidence and accepting it, you procrastinate with questions. If I tell you things that are plain as the hand before your face and you don’t believe me, what use is there in telling you of things you can’t see, the things of God?”

**13-15** “No one has ever gone up into the presence of God except the One who came down from that Presence, the Son of Man. In the same way that Moses lifted the serpent in the desert so people could have something to see and then believe, it is necessary for the Son of Man to be lifted up—and everyone who looks up to him, trusting and expectant, will gain a real life, eternal life.

**16-18** “This is how much God loved the world: He gave his Son, his one and only Son. And this is why: so that no one need be destroyed; by believing in him, anyone can have a whole and lasting life. God didn’t go to all the trouble of sending his Son merely to point an accusing finger, telling the world how bad it was. He came to help, to put the world right again. Anyone who trusts in him is acquitted; anyone who refuses to trust him has long since been under the death sentence without knowing it. And why? Because of that person’s failure to believe in the one-of-a-kind Son of God when introduced to him.

### **UNDER COVER OF NIGHT SEEKING**

Ever come out, perhaps late at night, into the streets or the alleys or even the invisible streets of the internet, *seeking* something? Something you’re not sure *what?* Or *Whom?* Or *Why?*

But *something* is tugging at you that there is **more**. More to life—whether meaning or purpose; answers to the conundrums. Maybe your soul and mind were seeking for a *movement* to follow that would bring all those wondering and wandering streams together?

Welcome to Nic's life.

Nicodemus, respected teacher of Israel, faithful Pharisee, one of the “good church leaders” of the day—out on a Vision Quest. Out, away from home—did his family know he'd snuck out? Did his colleagues? Would they shun him if they did? Give him heck from daring to seek out that radical itinerant Teacher, the one they called Jesus of Nazareth? Yes, *that* guy! From that lowly little village to boot! Nothing good comes from Nazareth.

Ever search the streets or the scriptures, looking for answers to life's mysteries: “Who Am I?” Who am I created to be or by? Why am I here? What's my purpose on this earth?

Ever wonder if there's more to life or belief than you're experiencing? Or start to question what you've always believed, been taught—about faith, life, the way the world works?

### **HOW DO WE KNOW WHOM TO TRUST?**

I recently came across a religious leader expounding on a verse in the Gospel of Matthew. This, was I thought, a very welcoming and inclusive verse about Holy Hospitality:

*Matthew 10:42: And anyone who gives one of my most humble followers a cup of cool water, just because that person is my follower, will surely be rewarded.*

But this “expert teacher of the rules” whose “research” I was reading, was taking a very *different* look at this verse than you or I might have. He said we shouldn't be so quick to include *everyone* in the circle.

He said:

“These verses are a wonderful assurance that God looks out for us through others' hospitality and generosity, and even blesses them for doing so!”

(Okay, so far, so good. But then, he continued....)

Our God is an infinitely good God who cares for unbelievers, but holds a *special place in His heart* for those whom He calls His children. **Untrue** is the popular saying, “**we are all God's children,**” for God *definitely* provides *more abundant* grace to those who *are* in fact His children through Christ—and these verses **prove** it.”

Pause. Yup! That's what he said. Apparently I've been preaching a false gospel for all these years! “**Untrue** is the popular saying, “**we are all God's children!**”

I guess I'm in trouble now. I guess this teacher would say God is pretty *conditional*, when I've always thought God was just the opposite!

He explained, “If you help me, if you are hospitable to me, and if you take care of me—*because* you know I am a

follower of Christ—the Bible says that God will bless you, and reward you."

He admits that "it may sound somewhat *arrogant* to claim," but THAT is what this passage teaches us!

Hmmm.. Do you believe that? That "*some* are more beloved by God" than others? That some are more equal than others? That God plays favorites with his children? Scripture passages can *sure* be interpreted in different ways; draw completely differing conclusions and end up drawing humanity into more unity in the midst of diversity OR further down the path of division.

How we study and interpret Scripture matters! Oh, yes it does!

Today's scripture passage is the perfect example of a very well-known passage that has been interpreted in different ways down through the ages, for good or for bad. Who doesn't know John 3:16? Or, hasn't at least seen it on a big banner at a football game or waving on a street corner?!

<sup>16</sup> For God so loved the world that he gave his only Begotten, Son, that whosoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life."

We thought we knew what it meant, right? But, what if we've taken it to mean something far narrower than what Jesus and the writer of John intended, like this "expert teacher" I just quoted? Or, were a little clueless about what really mattered, like Nicodemus?

As we embark in this season of Pentecost, seeing with new eyes and listening with open ears to the winds and movements of the Spirit, what does walking in Courageous Community mean for us today? How might we bravely reconsider, together, "what we've always thought" things meant?

How might we look with Christ's eyes and heart to bravely counter language and interpretation that is *not* inclusive and life-giving for all? To explore what it means that "God so loved the WHOLE world," *not* just a certain brand of Christians in the world. Not just the "in group", the believers as defined by a very narrow box that some believers have dreamed up!

Being "Born from above" as Nicodemus was seeking from Jesus, means giving birth again and again to the movement of the Spirit within us. Looking at others through the eyes of Christ, and listening with the ears of the divine.

It also means looking at *ourselves* with loving hearts, as we listen to the Holy Spirit live and move and breathe within us, and among *all* the creatures of the earth as we meander through the trails of life together.

### **STORIES of BELOVING**

Thankfully there is abundant countering of the ideas expressed by the "teacher of the rules" above. Many people of faith are proclaiming and living-out alternative values to: "God loves *my* way of being faithful more than *your* way!"

A couple eye-opening and heartwarming testimonies came across my radar this week of just that.

### FEELING EQUAL

“My name is Ibby and I am a deaf man. I have been deaf ever since an accident when I was two years old. Every day on the way to work I drop by Starbucks and order my usual- a caramel Frappuccino.

I can't communicate like normal people, so I have the order written on my phone and I show it to the cashier every day. They all mostly know my order by heart now so I rarely have to show it to them anymore.

Today I was met by the cashier with this sign. Her name was Krystal Payne and after she handed me the sign she started signing to me, asking what my order would be today? We chatted in sign language for about 2 minutes and I learned that she had spent *hours* watching YouTube videos *just* so that she could take my order the way she does for everybody else. I haven't felt so **equal** in all of my life.”

### TEACHER REFLECTS

During both of Meggan Coltrain's pregnancies, she joined online communities to seek parenting advice, share her thoughts and learn from other mums.

And the uncertainty she found was overwhelming: mums were constantly worried about their baby's progress. Why weren't they crawling, why weren't they waving and pointing like the other babies?

Their stress and worry to "keep up" hit home for Meggan. She wanted to reassure mums that no matter their baby's intellectual development, what really matters is whether they are **loved**. Whether they have quality time. And whether they know **kindness**.

In a powerful post, which received hundreds of likes and comments, Meggan, who reflected on her experienced as a teacher, writes:

“When I look around my classroom I couldn't tell you who crawled first, who walked before age one or spoke in sentences by 15 months. I can't tell you if their parents breastfed or bottle fed. No clue if they still wear pull-ups at night, because I'm sure many do!

I don't know if they potty trained at 18 months or 4 years old. I don't know if their mom ever left them to cry it out for a few minutes or if they strapped them to their bodies 24/7.

You know what I can tell when I look at my kids? I can tell which families value kindness and manners in their home. I can tell when a child feels loved and secure at home (and at school which sadly isn't always everyone's school experience!)

I know who has pizza and movie Friday nights and which mum reads in different voices for bedtimes. I see how kids handle scary situations like thunderstorms. I can see who has a solid routine at home and who has chores and responsibilities. I can

hear how you speak to your children by how they speak to others.

When I look at my little friends I don't see their **milestones**, I see who they are: their heart, their actions, their inner voice, their struggles and triumphs, and I see you; and all the love you pour into them.

We are always supposed to talk about **testing** and **benchmarks** and **data** during parent teacher conferences and I had a mum once look at me and say 'I don't worry about all the reading and math, she will get there. I want to know...how is she, as a **person**? Is she kind? Does she include others?"

### **For God so Shaped Every Person in Love**

For God so loved the world, that God created and shaped every person in love.

Our prayer, as we began today, by Thom Shuman, brings us back to what matters—who we are at our core.

“You, O God, could create a small group around you who are perfect, but you choose the fragile, the forgotten, the voiceless, the overwhelmed to be your household in this life.

You *could* come with a long list of rules, Child of the Holy One, but you choose to focus on relationships. You see the refugee, not as a threat, but as a sister; you see the bullied, not as weak, but filled with courage; you see the suffering, not with pity, but those who can teach grace to all.

You *could* teach us words of judgment, Wise Heart of the Holy, but you write songs of grace and hope, so we can learn them from the broken; you write poems of laughter, so we can hear them in children playing in the bathtub; you craft visions of wonder and joy, so we can see them as each day becomes sacred by your love.

You make every moment sacred, you create every day to be Sabbath, **you shape every person in your love**, God in Community, Holy in One

### **GOD SHAPES EVERY PERSON IN LOVE**

You are God-shaped. I am God-shaped. Shaped by God in love—starting from being knit together in your mother's womb. And the longing inside you—what stirs in the wee hours of the night or morning, and sends you looking for something—you know not what, or maybe Whom—is God-shaped too.

On contemporary Christian songwriter nailed it in a catchy way: “God-Shaped Hole”

There's a God-shaped hole in all of us  
And the restless soul is searching  
There's a God-shaped hole in all of us  
And it's a void only He can fill.

Thanks be to God, our Maker and Source, for this indescribable gift. God imagined us, created us, and brought us forth into life, in teamwork with our mothers and joined by our fathers, and God didn't stop there. The Holy One continued and will continue

to shape us in love, all the days of our lives, on this temporal plane and beyond.

We *are*, every single one of us, beloved, created children of God. We *are*, every single one of us, part of the whole wide world that Jesus laid down his life for. No matter who or what try to put *limits* on God's love for whole world and make our belonging in that love conditional.

There is no test, no rubric, no measuring stick or chart. No benchmarks to be met; no goals to be set with God. We are born anew—over and over—all throughout our lives—as love *continues* to shape, mold and guide us.

No matter who you are or where you are on life's journey, you are welcome. No matter where you are on the sliding scale, or what milestones you've checked off, you belong.

I love how our sister church, UCC Parker Hilltop with Pastor Tracey, describes itself and signs off its notes and sermons with a tagline:

At UCC Parker Hilltop: We exist as a church because we believe the Good News of Jesus Christ: that God's unconditional love, through the power of the Holy Spirit, gives meaning and purpose to our lives. Come as you are, for you are enough.

That. That reminder that we need, several times a day. ***Come as you are, for you are enough.***

So, come to the Table. Bring your God-shaped longing to the Table of Grace. Pull up a chair. Add a chair for a friend or stranger. Set another place, for every person is shaped, by God, in love. Every soul is welcome. No limit on capacity. No conditions, whatsoever! Come one, come all, for you are enough. Amen.