

- Genesis 12:1-4a
- Romans 4:1-5, 13-17
- John 3:1-17
- Psalm 121

So I am a child of the '80s. I don't know. I can't remember, am I older than you Pastor Manisha? Or are we neck and neck?

I'm younger!

We'll compare after services. But I grew up in the '80s watching Monday Night Football with my dad. And I can always remember that every time there was going to be an extra points or a field goal, there would be this guy holding up a sign in the end zone that said John 3:16. Do you remember that guy? Are you old enough to remember that dude? So I looked him up, right? I looked him up online. And it turns out his name was Rollen Stewart. And after becoming a Born Again Christian, he became convinced that the rapture was coming. And so he made it his life's mission to travel the country, living out of his car, to hold up that sign at as many, countless sporting events as he could. He became known as the Rainbow Man because he had this giant rainbow wig. And he became something of like a cultural meme, right? He was on a Budweiser ad. He was parodied on Saturday Night Live.

Anyway, as he got older and presumably as Judgment Day got closer, his stunts to get on TV became more and more extreme. He is currently serving three life sentences for armed assault and kidnapping. And while Wikipedia doesn't say which church he went to, I'm going to go out on a limb and say he probably wasn't an Episcopalian. But I do want to thank Rainbow Man for nevertheless teaching me my first Bible verse, which, as it turns out, according to many, according to Martin Luther, even, is the gospel in a nutshell, for God so loved the world that he sent his only son, so that everyone who believes in Him would have eternal life.

Well, with all due respect to Rainbow Man and Martin Luther and anyone else who might agree, I'm just not a big fan of John 3:16. At least I didn't used to be. And not so much the passage itself, but really the way that it's been so often presented in public discourse, because just a bare reading of it out of context can make it sound as though Christianity is all about belief. And what's more, that God's love is somehow conditioned on having the right ones.

As someone who did not grow up going to church, I can tell you that far from being the good news in a nutshell, John 3:16 was in a nutshell everything that kept me away from the church because I think that even as a non-Christian, as I was at the time, somehow we instinctively know that God's love could never be conditional. And if our goal is to build a more compassionate, more just, and more loving world then merely having the right beliefs really doesn't get us very far.

After all, we can believe all the right things, can't we? And never have to lift a finger. We can believe in the Bible. We can believe every line in the creed. We can believe in the virgin birth and all the miracle stories. In fact, like Rainbow Man, you can even believe in the rapture, yet still be as self-centered and self-absorbed as the next person.

We can believe that Jesus died for our sins. We can believe that Jesus rose from the dead, and we can still be mean. The way of Jesus, as I see it in the Gospels really isn't about mere belief. It's about our transformation. It's about a new way of living and letting go of your old ways. It's about a new way of life.

Recall the story of the rich young man. You remember that one? He's the fellow who comes to Jesus and he believes in God just fine. But he comes to Jesus because he still feels as if something is missing. Jesus tells him, you're right, what you need to do is to let go of all those possessions, let go of all those worldly attachments you love so much. And follow Me.

And do you remember His response? He walks away. Not because he didn't believe. He walks away because he doesn't want to change. He walks away because he wants to stay in control and continue to do life on his terms and on his terms alone. He wants the veneer of being religious without the risk. And I think the reward.

And this is what Jesus is trying to tell Nicodemus, who, like the rich young man, believes in God. He's a Pharisee after all. Yet despite all his expertise in the Bible, he too seems to think that maybe something's missing. So he comes to Jesus in secret and Jesus gives him essentially the same advice. If you want to live the resurrected life, you need to first die to your old one and be reborn into a new life by doing what the rich young man could not, to let go of your control and let the spirit of God take hold of your life.

So, like the wind, it would sweep you off your feet, blowing you to places that only God knows and that we could never have planned. It reminds me of that old joke. Have you ever heard this one? If you want to tell God a really good joke - and by the way, that's not an easy thing to do. You know, he's heard them all, but this one gets him every time. If you ever want to tell God a really good joke, just tell him about your plans.

In short, Jesus is telling him you've done enough studying of scriptures. It's now time to live them. And how does Nicodemus respond? Well, he doesn't walk away, but he doesn't hide the skepticism, does he? And I suspect not because he doesn't understand the metaphor, but because he doesn't want to hear it.

Our unwillingness to let go of our old lives and our old attachments and our old ways of doing things is at the heart of Nicodemus's reservations and at the core of the rich young man's rejection. Their problem isn't belief. It's that being men of power and privilege, they're coming to realize that trusting in God will mean letting go of their control. And that is a scary thing.

So what do we make of John 3:16? Well, it turns out if you look at the original Greek word that translates as belief, a more accurate translation might be the word fidelity; that to which

we give our heart, that to which we place our whole life into, that to which we place all of our faith and our trust. And if you think of that word fidelity, what does that bring to mind? What does the word infidelity bring to mind? Marriage, right? And what is marriage all about if it isn't about giving oneself in love soulfully to another person, that we might become one? And that is a very scary thing.

I remember on the eve of my own wedding, the Supreme Court had just made its historic decision. And Joe and I had been on the evening news because we were the first in line for our marriage license and we were making plans for a huge wedding at the cathedral, a big public affair. Seven or 800 people. We never really got a full count. We were lining up our Thriller flash mob, scheduling the Venetian stilt walkers, the Italian folks dancers were coming. A local community theater was bringing over set decorations because, you know, the cathedral is just not fabulous enough on its own. This was going to be a serious party.

But in the midst of all of that excitement and enthusiasm and planning, I remember sitting in my office on the day that the marriage license arrived, and when I opened it, I suddenly found myself having a little bit of a panic attack. A few years earlier, I had gone through a difficult breakup that was both very emotional but also very scary as it almost cost me my home. So as I stared at this marriage license, it suddenly hit me that this was becoming real.

And with marriage being legal, that meant that everything I owned, everything I had, would suddenly become subject to California's community property laws. Everything I had, everything I owned would all be at risk if this didn't work out. And Joe, I think you're hearing this story for the first time. So hang in there.

So I took my mini panic attack next door to the dean's office. And I remember her telling me, Chris, take a breath. It's supposed to be a little scary. Marriage, like any of our committed relationships in life, is a spiritual exercise, a spiritual practice of giving up our willfulness and trying on what it feels like to let go and to give ourselves away fully to someone else. It's like a mini experiment of what it's like to actually follow in the way of Jesus who gave himself away for us all.

And so if it sounded like a scary thing, she says it's supposed to be because it's in giving ourselves away that we find a life worth living. As a former family law attorney, though, I couldn't help but think of some past clients who had hired me to draft prenuptial agreements. In both those cases, they were hoping to carve out a part of their life to keep it separate, to keep it siloed. Usually it was their property, their real estate, their retirement accounts and so on. They wanted the veneer of marriage. They wanted to claim the title, wear the ring. But they didn't want to risk giving themselves fully away.

Do we ever do that with God? Do we want to be in relationship with God, but only on our terms? Do we carve out parts of our lives and keep them separate from our faith? Do we have a pre-nup with God? I think if we're honest, we all do. Including me. And I think Lent is a good time to pull it out and take a look at it. What do we try to keep separate? Our time, our possessions? What do we have on our list that we want to keep control of? Our money?

If you're still looking for something to give up for during Lent, then I think that list is a good place to start. And then see if giving up some of those things. Let's see if that doesn't bring you closer to God. Let's see if that doesn't give your heart more fully to God. Let's see if in the process you might feel more fully alive.

For the record, I've since made my peace with John 3:16. I no longer hear it is threatening people with hell if they don't believe. But I hear it now as about a God who so loves us, who loves us so much that he wants us to experience the risen life today. I hear it as a God who loves us so much that he wants to save us from an empty life of chasing everything else, but the one thing that truly fulfills. I hear it now as about a God who loves us so much that he invites us to be reborn again and again into his arms, and we're putting our trust in Him, He will keep us safe and He will watch over us from this time forth forevermore.

Amen.

[End of Recording]