

Sermon Notes – March 14, 2021
“Up Close and Personal With Jesus”
 (John 3:14-21)

This morning I want to talk a little bit about three different relationships that are important to us. The older I get, the more I learn that those relationships are important.

I want to start with the first one being the relationship we have with those closest to us. It may be your spouse, your children, your parent, your brother or sister, your grandparent, but I want you to think about that -- how great and wonderful it is to be loved and to love someone. There's a story told about the late U.S. President Teddy Roosevelt. He had written a letter to his sister about his wife, Edith. (This was during the time that he was running for the Presidential election.) In the letter, he said this: “As I was walking up the White House steps, Edith came to the door to meet me. All of a sudden I realized no matter what the outcome of this election or how much I wanted the approval of this administration, whether that was gratified or not, it didn't matter. All I knew was my happiness was assured -- for my life with Edith and my children constitutes my happiness.” We all want to love and be loved, don't we? I wonder who in your life have you not told that you love them lately? You know sometimes people get married and they show their love all the time, but they forget to say the words, “I love you” every once in a while. Sometimes parents forget to tell their kids or kids forget to tell their parents. A few years ago, my niece said to my brother (her dad), “Daddy, why don't you ever say, ‘I love you’?” He said, “Honey, don't I show you? I buy you this, I do that, I fix this for you. Don't I show you?” She said, “Yes, Daddy. But every once in a while, I need to hear the words, ‘I love you’.” *Sometimes we need to tell people, “I love you.”*

There's another relationship that's important in God's eyes and to us, and that is our relationship to our greater human family, the family of God. Jesus summed up the Great Commandments as: “Love God with all your heart, mind, soul, and strength” and “Love your neighbor as yourself.” Who is our neighbor? ... Not just our family and friends, not just the neighbor across the street or beside us, but our human family. I want to give you an illustration of what I think Jesus meant by that -

about loving your neighbor. Back in 1983, there was a Christian Pastor named Fuad Bakman who served a church in Beirut, Lebanon. He was there when the Arabs and the Israelis were fighting. At his church he knew that the rumor was that Israel was planning a prolonged siege upon Beirut, and they knew if that happened that some of Beirut would be closed down. They would have a hard time getting supplies, food, and everything they needed into their area. So the church there decided they were going to collect canned food, as much as they could - they were going to hoard it. You remember how when we first started this pandemic that everybody was hoarding food, paper products, cleaning products, etc.? They were hoarding canned foods for their survival. One day the governing body of the church decided that they had to make a decision on how they were going to distribute that food. Who was it going to receive it first? Well, they came up with two proposals in their Consistory. The first proposal was that they give it first to the church members, second to their other Christian friends and neighbors, and last to their Arab neighbors. Their second proposal was to give it first to their Arab (Muslim) neighbors, second to their surrounding Christian friends, and what was left over to their church members as they needed it. Well, we gripe in our church Consistory now if we meet an hour or two hours; we get frustrated. Can you imagine having a board meeting for six hours? They argued for six hours how they were going to distribute that food. Finally, one elderly lady -- who was an Elder in the church, who was very quiet, but when she spoke, she spoke volumes - said, "If we don't show the love of Christ in this place, who will?" If we don't show the love of Christ in this place at this time, who will? Guess what they decided? ... Proposal #2 - "We'll give to our Muslim neighbors first, then to other Christians around us, then we'll take the rest for ourselves." I have to be honest and tell you that I am not sure how many churches would do that or how many people, but I do think Jesus wants us to care about others and not just ourselves. We need to grow in loving, caring, and serving others - not just our family, our closest friends, and our church.

Then I want to tell you about the most important relationship - and that's the one we have with Jesus Christ. In our gospel story today, there was a man named Nicodemus who came to Jesus. Nicodemus was a Jew; he was a Pharisee; he was a member of the Sanhedrin, which was the

ruling authority of Judaism. He was a member of a seventy-men board. They made all kinds of decisions that affected Jews, and that board was made up of Scribes, Pharisees, and Priests. Nicodemus happened to be one of those wealthy, esteemed Pharisees who was a member of that group. He was well-respected Rabbi and teacher; he knew the Old Testament; he knew the Talmud and all those things. He went to the synagogue; he prayed three times; he was circumcised; he was born in a Jewish family; he had all the right credentials. But, he came to see Jesus one night; he was seeking to know more about Jesus. He had questions about this Jesus. (Now, we don't know from the story if this was his first time encountering Jesus or whether he had encountered him before. It is believed by some scholars that he had met Jesus before -- maybe when John the Baptist was preaching repentance and baptized Jesus in the Jordan River; maybe he heard the voice of God say, "This is my Son whom I have chosen.") We don't really know, but we do know that Jesus was very poignant in his discussions with Nicodemus. Did you notice? Nicodemus says, "Listen, Lord. We know who you are. We know that you couldn't do any of this stuff (these signs) without the power of God." Jesus pushes that aside; he gets to the point and says, "Listen, Nicodemus. You can't enter the kingdom of heaven unless you are born again." (Nicodemus listens to him literally and Jesus is speaking figuratively.) Nicodemus says, "You mean I got to be born in my mother again? How can I do that? I'm a grown man." Jesus says, "Nicodemus, you don't get it. It's a spiritual thing. It happens from above. It's kind of like the wind, Nicodemus. The wind blows where it will, it comes and goes. You can't see it, but you can see and feel the effects from the wind - when it blows something over, blows shingles off, or blows a tree limb down. You can see and feel the effects of it. ***So, the spirit of God is like that - you can't see it, but you can see and feel the effects of it because you see people's attitudes change, their speech change, their behaviors change. You've got to have a personal relationship with Jesus, Nicodemus.***" You see, Nicodemus and all Jews thought if they were born in a Jewish family, went to the synagogue, prayed, and did all the right things, it made them a Christian and they had a right relationship with God. Jesus said, "No. You need a personal relationship with Jesus Christ

- one where you believe in Him. You put your faith and trust in Him. You have confidence that He can change you - He can save you.”

We don't know at the end of that story if Nicodemus ever accepted or rejected Jesus' message. But, we do know that later on in the gospel, that it was Nicodemus who went with Joseph of Arimathea (who was a believer of Jesus) to get Jesus off the cross, put him in the tomb, and bury him. Most scholars believe at some point that Nicodemus became a believer. ***There are times that we can think all that we do in the church makes us a Christian, but Jesus said that it's the relationship you have with him that matters - that personal relationship where you believe in him and know that he can change your life.***

Years ago, I had a 73-year-old lady in the Baptist Church that called the Pastor and I and asked, “Would you come to my house and talk to me?” She had grown-up in the Methodist Church. She had moved from Alabama to North Carolina to be close to her daughter and her son-in-law, who was a doctor. She called us to the house. We went to see her and she said, “You know all my life, on and off, I have gone to church. I've gone to the Methodist Church, and I've tried other churches. I know a lot about God and I've read the Bible, but I've just now professed faith in Jesus Christ for the first time in my life. I know Him in my heart; I don't just know about Him... I know Him as my Lord and Savior.” She asked if she could be baptized, and we did baptize her later that month.

I want to share another story with you today -

Dr. Fred Craddock (former Methodist Pastor and Professor at Emory University) tells the story of his father, who spent years of his life hiding from the God who was seeking him out: “When the pastor used to come from my mother's church to call on him, my father would say, ‘You don't care about me. I know what you churches want -- you want another pledge, another name, right? Another name, another pledge, isn't that the whole point of church? Get another name, another pledge.’”

My nervous mother would run to the kitchen, crying, for fear somebody's feelings would be hurt. When we had an evangelistic campaign the pastor would bring the evangelist, introduce him to my father and then say, ‘Sic him, get him! Sic him, get him!’ My father would always say the

same thing. ‘You don’t care about me! Another name, another pledge. Another name, another pledge! I know about churches.’

I guess I heard it a thousand times. One time he didn’t say it. He was at the Veteran’s Hospital. He was down to 74 pounds. They had taken out his voice box, put in a metal tube, and said, ‘Mr. Craddock, you should have come earlier. But this cancer is awfully far advanced. We’ll give radium, but we don’t know.’

I went in to see him. In every window there was potted plants and flowers. There was by his bed a stack of cards 10 or 15 inches deep. I looked at the cards sprinkled in the flowers. I read the cards beside his bed. And I want to tell you, every card, every potted plant from groups, Sunday School classes, women’s groups, youth groups, men’s bible class, of my mother’s church – every one of them. My father saw me reading them. He could not speak, but he took a Kleenex box and wrote something on the side from Shakespeare’s Hamlet... He wrote on the side, ‘In this harsh world, draw your breath in pain to tell my story.’ I said, ‘What is your story, Daddy?’ And he wrote, ‘I was wrong.’

It is not until you know God is seeking you in love, not in condemnation; it is not until that moment that the gospel becomes Good News for you.”

Karl Barth, the late great theologian said, “The gospel in miniature can be summarized in John 3:16. Jesus loves me, this I know, for the Bible tells me so.” I pray that we will tell somebody today that we love them – somebody close to you. I pray that we will grow in our relationship with others in the larger family of God. But, most of all, that we know where we stand in our relationship with Jesus Christ, personally. And that we will go about living in such a way, through our words and actions, that other people will see Christ in us. Jesus said, “Love God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength” and “Love your neighbor.” You see we can’t love our neighbors and our family like we should until we have that relationship with God. When we grow in love with Him, we grow in love with one another. And when we love one another, we’re loving Him. “For God so loved the world...” “Jesus loves me, this I know... for the Bible tells me so.” Amen.