

## **Christ = the Sign of God's Unconditional Love for Us!** **John 3:1-17**

### **Don't understand the sign of God**

I am a relatively young person at Asbury UMC but I also feel that the world has been changing faster and becoming more and more complicated. Especially, city life seems to be much more complicated than living in a rural area. When I first moved to Boston, I had to struggle with street signs like this. [ppt] I once received an expensive parking ticket because I failed to understand the street parking sign. Can anyone interpret what this sign really says? Most of the time, we do not misinterpret street signs because they are plain and clear. But we often misinterpret or don't understand signs from God.

There is a story. "A rabbi and a priest got into a really bad car accident. Both cars were totaled, but luckily no one was hurt.

After they crawled out of their cars, the rabbi said, "So you're a priest. I'm a rabbi. Just look at our cars. They are destroyed. Fortunately, we aren't hurt. This must be a sign from God that we should meet and be friends and live together in peace the rest of our days."

The priest replies, "I agree with you completely. This must be a sign from God."

The rabbi continues, "And look at this. Here's another miracle. My car is completely ruined but this bottle of wine didn't break. It's a sign that God wants us to drink this wine and celebrate our good fortune." Then he hands the bottle to the priest. The priest agrees, takes a few big swigs, and hands the bottle back to the rabbi.

The rabbi takes the bottle, immediately puts the cap back on, and hands it back to the priest. The priest asks, "Aren't you having any?" The rabbi replies, "No...I think I'll wait for the police."

Did the priest correctly interpret God's signs? Not at all. Were there any signs from God in this story? We, Christians, believe that God speaks to us today through signs and wonders as God did yesterday. But we have to admit that perceiving and reading God's signs is not always an easy task. Signs can easily be misunderstood.

### **How to Read God's Signs**

Nicodemus was a highly respected teacher and leader of Jews in his time but he misunderstood God's signs. He had heard about Jesus casting out evil spirits and his miraculous healing of the sick. In today's passage, Nicodemus comes praising Jesus, "Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God; for no one could do these signs that you do apart from the presence of God." (3:2) He knew that what Jesus had done were not merely miracles, but signs, although he failed to understand them correctly.

Signs are pointers that 'stand for' something else. If I raise my finger and point to our beautiful stained glass behind the altar, what do you see? My finger or the stained glass that my finger points to? The stained glass. If someone only sees my finger instead of the stained glass, and says, "oh, Yohan. You have a beautiful fingernail. Which nail salon did you go to?"... it would be a complete misunderstanding of my intention and sign. (By the way, I have never been to any nail salon)

Jesus' actions are signs. They are pointers to God's mysterious and redemptive work. David Lose, a pastor scholar, says, "Only those who can look beyond the material referent of the sign (flesh) will perceive and participate in God's redemptive work (Spirit)."<sup>1</sup> But Nicodemus

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<sup>1</sup> [https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary\\_id=903](https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=903)

failed to see what Jesus's signs stood for so he only saw a man, Jesus and perceived him as a great teacher. Jesus wasn't simply a teacher but the one who reveals God's essential character of love for the whole world (3:16). Jesus' proclamation and ministry points to God and God's intention for us.

### **We often fail to read Jesus as the sign for God's love**

When we read Jesus, his ministry and teaching as signs, we need to see what his whole life stands for. His life as a sign, stands for God's unconditional love for the whole of creation. Unfortunately, many Christians have failed to see what Jesus stands for and have made Jesus a point of exclusion and discrimination. For instance, in simplest logic, some say, if you believe Jesus, you will be saved, if not, you are doomed. "Jesus = Heaven, No-Jesus = Hell." Many Christians have unconsciously developed this kind of the exclusive attitude toward people of other religions and cultures since religious values and cultures are not completely separable. The fear and hatred toward Muslims, anti-Semitism, Anti-Middle Eastern sentiment, xenophobia...all these deadly diseases have been widely spread in the church. John chapter 3:16 is often used as a biblical reference to justify this exclusive attitude, claiming that "Only those who believe in Jesus would be saved." What those people have missed is what Jesus really stands for, which is God's unconditional love for all people.

John 3:16 describes God's love for the whole creation. In verse 16, Jesus says, "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life." God's love for the world is bigger than parent's love for their children. A parent will do anything to protect their children. Right? We would even sacrifice ourselves for our children, but it is impossible for us to sacrifice our children for those whom we do not know, particularly, if they are worthless criminals or sinners. But God gave his only Son and Christ died for us while we were yet sinners (Romans 5:8). I believe this is the only way to describe God's unfathomable love for all people. Jesus Christ and his life as a sign, stands for God's unconditional love for all people.

### **All people are holy unconditionally because God loves us unconditionally**

God loves you. God loves you no matter what. God loves you whoever you are and whatever you do or did. You are beautiful in God's sight because God loves you. You are holy because God loves you. So, love yourself first as God loves you. We, Christians, are often told to love our neighbors but we rarely hear that we should love ourselves. Many Christians struggle with the feeling of guilty and shame. But we must remember that God loves us and God forgives us. So we should love ourselves because God loves us unconditionally.

Our cultures keep saying that you are beautiful if you are young, and nice-looking. You are lovable if you are healthy and rich, independent, capable, smart and good. You are more lovable if you have a lighter skin color. If we internalize these negative cultural voices into our heart, we cannot love ourselves when we don't have these required characteristics.

I am relatively young and healthy but I have to admit that I am not as healthy and physically capable as I was 20 years ago. About 5 years ago, I went hiking in the White Mountain with 3 young adult members of my church. All of them were in their mid-twenties. On the day of our hike, I had to wake up early and drive 3 hours to get to the mountain and felt I was already tired when I got there. Since they were young, they walked fast. When we started walking uphill, my heart started to beat faster and I couldn't catch my breath. I didn't want them to slow down because of me, so I kept up my pace until I felt nauseated and dizzy. Eventually,

we had to turn back to our campsite. That was the first time I failed to complete a hike because of my physical condition. I felt like my youth was gone and this feeling really disturbed me. I didn't like this feeling of loss. Have you ever had a similar experience?

In my previous church, one church members had to move into a nursing home. She was 88 year-olds and her physical health was declining so she didn't have a choice. Her real struggle was not that she has to move to the nursing home but her feeling of loss. She felt that she had lost her capability for independent living and now she had to rely on someone else. She felt that she was useless. I have met many elderly people who have felt the same way my church member felt. Our society emphasizes independence and productivity and therefore, we value abled and young bodies while we devalue disabled and aging bodies. Our society makes us feel that we are not beautiful if we are old. We are not lovable if we are dependent.

But my friends, this is not what we hear from the Bible. God didn't tell us that we are lovable only if we believe Jesus Christ and are capable to making pledges and having an able body to work for the church. What Jesus showed through his life is the complete opposite. God loves us before we believe. God loves us even if we couldn't do anything for God. God so loves us all that God gave his only Son to save us all before we repent and change our lives. Rather, it's God's unconditional love that transforms us.

God loves you. You are beautiful and loveable because God loves you. You are holy because God forgives you. So, love yourselves and forgive yourselves whatever you have done wrong in the past. God loves you unconditionally.

### **God loves all people**

But God also loves all people. God loves all people, no matter who they are. God loves young people as well as old people. God loves Americans. Right? So too Koreans, Chinese, Central Americans, Africans... God loves all people. God loves Christians so too Muslims, Buddhists, shamanists and Jews. I am not saying that all religions are the same or all religions are the ways of salvations. What I am saying is that God loves all people, no matter what. That's why God gave Jesus Christ to the world.

God loves black people, white people, brown people... God loves all people and doesn't see our skin colors. God loves morally righteous people and also people with criminal records. God loves people with comfortable houses and God equally love people living on the street. God loves all people whether they identify as gay or straight, liberal or conservative, Democrat or Republican. God loves us all.

So there is nothing holy about discriminating against people in terms of their religions, skin colors, sexual orientation, and age. There is nothing holy about judging people by their physical appearance, productivity, and what they have.

As people of God, we have to affirm the sacredness of all people...their beauty and holiness. Because God loves all people unconditionally, they are holy unconditionally. They are beautiful and lovable unconditionally. Say "no" to any voices that reject and undermine this sacredness in you and other people.

My friends, God loves you unconditionally. God loves you and forgives you. During the season of Lent, remember God's unconditional love for you and practice loving yourselves and loving your neighbors. Forgive yourselves and forgive your enemies with God's love. Learn to enjoy God's love. Amen.