

Jim Gill

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"Information Please"

Genesis 12:1-4a John 3:1-17 Romans 4:1-5;13-17

INTRODUCTION TO GENESIS 12:1-4A

In our passage from Genesis this morning we read about God's call to a landless, childless, seemingly futureless couple and promises that all three descriptions will be turned around. Hear the word of the Lord.

INTRODUCTION TO JOHN 3:1-17

In the cover of darkness a professor of the law named Nicodemus came to Jesus because he saw something in Jesus that stirred his heart. Hear the gospel of our Lord from the 3<sup>rd</sup> chapter of John, verses 1-17.

Let's Pray. Dear Lord, we thank you for this marvelous love that motivated you, that moved you to send your only son into our world. We pray that we would be moved to share that love of Jesus with those you so love, especially those who are yet unaware that they have been so loved by you. As we read of this loving encounter between Jesus and a man named Nicodemus we pray that we would have a greater insight as to how to approach those who seek us out, even in the cover of darkness. As we hear and meditate on this story, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord our Rock and our Redeemer.

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Many years ago, in a small town in the Pacific Northwest there lived a young boy named Paul. He was just a little boy when his family became the proud owners of one of the first telephones in the neighborhood. It was one of those wooden boxes attached to the wall with the shiny receiver hanging on the side of the box... and the mouthpiece attached to the front.

Young Paul listened with fascination as his mom and dad used the phone. He decided that somewhere inside the wonderful device called a telephone lived an amazing person. Her name was "Information Please"... and there was nothing she did not know. "Information Please" could supply anybody's number... and the correct time!

Paul's first personal experience with "Information Please" came one day when he was home alone and he whacked his finger with a hammer. The pain was terrible and he didn't know what to do... and then he thought of the telephone. Quickly, he pulled a footstool up to the phone, climbed up, unhooked the receiver, held it to his ear and said: "Information Please" into the mouthpiece. There was a click or two and then a small clear voice spoke: "Information." "I hurt my finger," Paul wailed into the phone. "Isn't your mother home?" "Nobody's home but me," Paul cried. "Are you bleeding?" "No," Paul said. "I hit my finger with the hammer and it

hurts." "Can you open your ice-box?" "Yes." "Then go get some ice and hold it to your finger." Paul did and it helped a lot.

After that Paul called "Information Please" for everything. She helped him with his geography and his math. She taught him how to spell the word "fix." And then when Paul's pet canary died, she listened to his grief tenderly and then said: "Paul, always remember that there are other worlds to sing in." Somehow that helped and Paul felt better.

Nicodemus came to Jesus seeking information. He starts with the information he has--"we know that you are a teacher sent from God for no one could do the things that you do unless God were with him." But he comes seeking more.

Jesus response was not exactly related to Nicodemus statement. Jesus didn't affirm that he was a teacher sent from God. He said that no one could even see the kingdom of God unless he was born again.

For Nicodemus, that was TMI--too much information. You see, Nicodemus was a fundamentalist, a man who took everything literally. He said, "Born again? How can I get in my mother's womb again and be born again?" If Jesus was a teacher sent from God he sure taught some strange things, things that made Nicodemus more confused than before he came to Jesus. He came KNOWING that Jesus was a teacher sent from God, but he left WONDERING what being born again meant.

When the encounter was over and Nicodemus went away puzzled John gives us the greatest line that far outshines all the valentines ever written--" God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten son."

When Richard Nixon ran for President in 1968, the Vietnam War was at its height. One of Nixon's TV commercials showed a photo of an American soldier in Vietnam with the word "Love" written on his helmet. The image bothered one of Nixon's media men. "It reminds [people] of hippies," he said. "They don't think it's the sort of thing soldiers should be writing on their helmets."

About a week later, however, a letter arrived from the mother of the soldier. She said how thrilled she was to see the photo of her son in Nixon's TV commercial. She wondered if she could obtain a copy of the photo. The letter was signed "Mrs. William Love." (1)

The soldier was not making a statement about his feelings at all. He was simply putting his name on his helmet.

Jesus said that no one could enter the kingdom of God unless he was born again, born anew, born from above, born by the love of God.

What is love? Love is Jesus Christ giving his life for a sinful world. Love is giving his life even for those that took his life. Remember, it was a Roman Centurion at the foot of the cross, one of those who actually participated in crucifying Jesus him that said, "Surely this was the son of God."

Love is speaking not a word of defense when he was wrongly accused of something he didn't do. Love was saying from the cross, "Father, forgive them for they know not what they do." That is love in its purest sense. That is love without reservation. That is love that asks nothing in return.

All other love pales in comparison. A father loves his children, but hopes that in return he would receive some modicum of love in return. A husband loves his wife and in return he hopes for her fidelity, her emotional support, her mutual affection. A wife loves her husband expecting the same. Jesus loves in hope that he will receive love in return, but he loves even though, and in spite of the fact that he might not ever receive anything in return. Jesus loves in spite of the fact that all he might receive in return is crucifixion.

We were not saved by great teaching or great philosophy or great ethics or great miracles. We were saved by the greatest love ever shown to anyone. We were saved by the sacrifice of one man's life. We were saved by a tragic, horrible, cruel death. That is why needed more information than Jesus was a teacher sent from God who did things that only a person who had God with him could do. Jesus was the Son of God who was God and did the only thing that God could do--be sent to give his life for the sins of the world.

GOD SO LOVED THE WORLD...Can you think of anything this world is more hungry for than love? We want to love and to be loved. To realize that the very nature of God is love is almost more than you or I can comprehend—almost too much information.

Some people become hardened by life. They become cynical, suspicious. They refuse to stick out their neck for anyone. But Jesus was not like that. God so loved the world that He gave his only begotten Son. He not only stuck out his neck, he opened his arms for us....and risen, he opens his arms to us.

There is nothing in life more rewarding than giving to another. The apostle Paul said, "It is MORE blessed to give than to receive." But there is an important corollary that we must also recognize. In order to be able to give love we must also be able to receive love. In order to be able to forgive others we must also be able to receive forgiveness and to forgive ourselves. Jesus said it in the prayer he taught his disciples to pray, "forgive us our debts AS WE forgive our debtors."

A child who has not known love will have a hard time giving love. Faith is not a response to an intellectual acknowledgement of God from a "great teacher who

was sent from God. Faith is a response to God's love. That is why the cross is such an important part of Christian faith. It is on the cross of Calvary that we see the love of God most clearly. To be sure the miracles of healing were tremendous demonstrations of Jesus' love and compassion. The miracles of feeding thousands of folks with a small boy's lunch demonstrated how much Jesus loved the crowds. But the greatest love was shown in the greatest pain...the pain unto death on a cross.

Could it be that in this secular society we really do not feel loved? Could it be that we feel that our lives lack significance? Could it be we feel isolated and alone? Could it be that part of the spiritual, emotional and moral malaise of our time can be explained by the fact that secular humanity has lost sight of the cross?

So many today are a bundle of anxieties. That is why we accomplish so little. What we need is to relax in the knowledge that we are loved. "Do you believe in Christ? Then what in the world are you worried about? Accept his love. Lay your deepest concerns at the foot of the cross.

Jill Duffield writes, "We need to leave what we know to see the new thing God will show. Keep in mind Abram was 72 when God told him to "go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land I will show you." Keep in mind Nicodemus was a leader, an expert, well established and respected when he sought out Jesus and asked questions that resulted in Jesus chiding him. Are we willing to be humble learners, leaving what we know, going to where God will show, open to a rebuke or a correction, accepting that God gives greatness not for our sake but so that we will be a blessing to others?"

When Paul, the little boy who used to call "Information Please" was nine years old, he moved from his small town in Washington state with his family to Boston... and as the years passed he missed "Information Please" very much. Some years later as Paul was on his way out west to go to college, his plane landed in his hometown of Seattle. He dialed his hometown operator and said, "Information Please."

Miraculously, he heard that same small clear voice that he knew so well. "Information." Paul hadn't planned this, but suddenly he blurted out: "Could you please tell me how to spell the word "fix?" There was a long pause. Then came the soft answer: "I guess your finger must be all healed by now." Paul laughed. "So it's really still you. Do you have any idea how much you meant to me during that time when I was a little boy?"

She said, "if you know how much your calls meant to me! I never had any children and I used to look forward to your calls so much."

Paul told her how much he had missed her over the years and asked her if he could call her again when he was back in the area. "Please do," she said, "just

ask for Sally." Three months later, Paul was back in Seattle. This time a different voice answered. He asked for Sally. "Are you a friend?" the operator asked. "Yes, a very old friend." Paul answered. "Well, I'm sorry to have to tell you this," she said. "Sally had been working part time the last few years because she was sick. She died 5 weeks ago." Before he could hang up, the operator said: "Wait a minute. Did you say your name was Paul?"

"Yes." "Well, Sally left a message for you. She wrote it down in case you called. Let me read it to you. It says: 'When Paul calls, tell him that I still say: there are other worlds to sing in.' He will know what I mean." Paul thanked her and hung up and he did know what Sally meant.

"There are other worlds to sing in." That is precisely what Jesus meant when he said we must be born again to see the kingdom of God. The kingdom of God is that other world to sing in. (3).

When Jesus said to Nicodemus that night: "You must be born again." That's what he meant... We are born into this world, but when we are born again we are born into that other world to sing in. In that other world there are a lot of singers, Nicodemus and, as of last Sunday Nona Rushing, and Paul and his dear friend "Information Please."

Let's pray, Dear Lord, what wondrous love is this O my soul, o my soul. That caused the Lord of heaven to send his son to earth to give his life for the ransom of many... of us. We cannot begin to fathom the pain, the rejection, the agony, the struggle to give in to the temptation to run away from it all. Yet, he willingly laid down his life for his friends. Thank you that we are included in that great company of friends who have been redeemed by him. Thank you that he has entrusted to us the privilege of continuing his ministry by sharing his love with others. Give us the grace, the mercy, the compassion, the strength the courage, the faith to step out and to give of ourselves to others following his example. Hear now the concerns of those gathered here this morning.

1. Gerald Tomlinson, *SPEAKER'S TREASURY OF POLITICAL STORIES, ANECDOTES, AND HUMOR*, (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: 1990).

2. Jeffrey Holland in *VITAL SPEECHES*.

3. ChristianGlobe Networks, Inc., Collected Sermons, by James W. Moore