

There you have it folks. Today's gospel may contain the most well known verse in our New Testament, "For God so loved the world that God gave the only begotten son that whoever believes in him would not perish but have everlasting life." I'm more fond of 17 "God did not send the son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world through him might be saved." But that's there too, so we all win!

We know these verses. if you watched sports in the 80s and 90s you saw the guy who always had the sign on the sideline. The verse is well known. But how many people honestly know that it was to Nicodemus that Jesus said this? I usually forget, until I get to the readings for this Sunday. Most Christians can quote the verse and may speak of how it distills the Gospel, but like so many other religious texts, to take it out of context makes us lose some of the impact.

Growing up in the evangelical baptist churches of the south, the words of this verse were almost a mystical incantation. If you just share these words with someone, they will completely understand the Gospel and repent. Yes, the words do express the sacrifice God was willing to make for us, but what is important is how those words were received.

What happens after Nicodemus hears these words? How is Nicodemus changed? No one knows. Words that today seem to have such power to change lives of those who hear it, got nothing on first hearing.

Nicodemus doesn't drop everything and follow Jesus like James and John or the other disciples. He doesn't fall at Jesus' feet proclaiming Jesus the Messiah. We have no idea, because the Gospel just says "after this Jesus and his disciples went in to the Judean countryside."

How irritating! For that great statement I want an immediate return on the investment. But there's nothing. How often do we feel that in the church? We do feeding programs. No one comes to church after we give them food. We offer programs for kids, and the same three families participate. We offer love to people in so many different ways and how do they show appreciation? Do they even appreciate it? Or are they just taking advantage of our kindness?

Well, there's the problem. It's not our kindness. If we are willing to be the vessel for God in this world, then we have to be open to the reality that the impact of God's love happens on God's time which is a schedule that can be well beyond our human desire for immediate gratification.

Nicodemus takes off four whole chapters in the Gospel of John. We don't see him again until Chapter 7, which is some time later. And in that moment in chapter 7, Nicodemus, one of the 71 rabbis of the Sanhedrin speaks up against his colleagues reminding them that Jesus can't be arrested and tried without first being examined.

It's a passing moment, literally two verses. Jesus isn't there to witness it nor any of the disciples. Heck, most folks aren't even aware he reappears elsewhere in the gospel of John at all. But in that moment, Nicodemus provides the return on investment. Nicodemus speaks up for the one who is being wronged. Nicodemus speaks truth to lies. Nicodemus does more to live the gospel in that moment than I may ever do.

Our modern world wants a return on our investment. We want to see people changed when they hear the word of God. We want the world full of Isaiah moments where the voice of God speaks and we say here I am lord, I have heard your voice, send me! We want Saul conversion moments with bright lights and cinematic music because we have put some effort into doing some Jesus work. If none of those happen how we will quantify our Key Performance Indicators to establish the viability of the program to the church council when budget time rolls around?

To quote a rather annoying, but appropriate commercial. "That's not how that works, that not how any of that works!"

Investing in following Christ is not a safe investment from our worlds point of view. We may never see the return. We might.... I taught junior high Sunday school over a decade ago. One day years later, I got a letter from a kid that had been in that class thanking me because they finally understood what I meant when I said loving your neighbor didn't mean having to like them.

Sure that was a heartwarming letter to receive, but there were about 10 other kids in that class that I've never heard from. Does that mean they didn't learn something? Of course not. They still may not get some of the lessons I taught, but then again they might. That's for the Holy Spirit to move within them, and not necessarily for me to see or witness.

The things we say and do in love for our neighbor may never yield results we can see. That's not why we do them. Jesus died for the most pious among us as much as for that person who is just not right. And our work amongst the children of god, who are all the people of this world, no matter what we think of them, is not for our benefit, but theirs and the glory of God, not the glory of me.

Yes, it is frustrating to offer food, clothing, or programs to a community that takes and seemingly never gives in return. That's not why we do it. Goodness knows I've taken far more of God's forgiveness than I've shared.

It is tiring. It's frustrating. It is annoying as all get out to offer love to people that don't appreciate it. But in acknowledging that, we understand a bit of how God could feel about us sometimes, yet through grace does not.

The investment of loving our neighbor may never pay off for us to see. When we embrace that we come to know that it is the loving that matters, not the response. Then we begin to understand what separates Gods work through us from our work even if they look an awful lot alike.

God did not send the son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world through him might be saved. Jesus ascended, we are left to be the vessel for the Holy Spirit to continue this truth. May we all come to embrace that Gods work is done in Gods time, even when done through our hands.