

February 17, 2008

Spiritual CPR

You've all seen it 3:16 or John 3:16. There's the people who sit in the end zone at the football games and they hold up that sign with John 3:16 written on it. They are all members of what's called the "3:16 Club." Max Lucado has a book titles 3:16. There's the 3:16 Live Ministry. John 3:16 is probably the most quoted scripture ever, "For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son that whoever believes in Him shall not perish but have everlasting life." What an appropriate verse for Lent. Maybe you thought of this verse as you silently came into church today. This is what it is all about, God loves us; He gave His Son, who lived simply and died so that we might simply live eternally.

What I like about today's' assigned Gospel reading is that it gives us the behind the scenes look at John 3:16. What led up to Jesus saying this? Well, we see in John chapter 3, "Now there was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a member of the Jewish ruling council. He came to Jesus at night." Let's focus in that. There are three aspects to this verse. The first is, "There was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus." We all know that Jesus and the Pharisees were often butting heads. Who was a Pharisee? Well, the Pharisees were a religious or political group that arose in the 2nd Century B.C, 200 years before Christ. They were an offshoot of the Hasidaeans, which means, "pious ones." The name Pharisee comes from the Aramaic word, "Peras", which means, "to separate." Put them together and you've got Pharisee, "a pious individual who separates himself from the world to follow the law of God." Their roots were righteous; the people of Israel had been suffering under rule of foreign kings. The Pharisees figured that it was because the people had turned from God and as a result God had withdrawn His hand of blessing from them. They wanted the people to turn back to God and to follow His law this is a noble and righteous cause. However, as time went by and their popularity grew, the Zeal for the Law almost deified it and their attitude became external, formal and mechanical. They were not all that interested in doing the correct thing but in doing things correctly. They had lost the spirit of the Law. So there's' the Pharisees.

The next thing we hear is, "There was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus a member of the Jewish ruling council." That group was called the Sanhedrin, you know, the guys who had Jesus crucified. The Sanhedrin itself had its' beginnings in 2 Chronicles 19:5-11. It began as a

group of Levites, priests, and chief fathers under the leadership of the high priest. This group was to act as a type of court to settle disputes among the people. By the time of Jesus it had become a kind of Supreme Court that consisted of 71 members. These 71 members came from the chief priests, the Sadducees, Pharisees and the scribes though it appears that most scribes were Pharisees. Up until A.D. 30 the Sanhedrin could pronounce the death penalty after this they had to seek approval of the Roman pro council hence, the Sanhedrin's request of Pilate to crucify Jesus. Put these points together and we've got Nicodemus was a high-ranking, pious Pharisee who was a member of the Sanhedrin that condemned Jesus to die.

Now the third component; "there was a man of the Pharisees, a member of the Jewish ruling council. He came to Jesus at night." Why? Well you just heard it the Sanhedrin was opposed to Jesus. Nicodemus couldn't be seen with him so he came to Jesus at night. This was secretive but look at what he says to Jesus he says, "Rabbi, we know you are a teacher who has come from God for no one could perform the miraculous signs you are doing if God were not with him." This leads Jesus to go right to the heart of the matter. Jesus responds to this declaration that they know he's from God by saying, "I tell you the truth no one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again." He's telling Nicodemus, Nicodemus I know you want to be in heaven I know you want to do right by God but you need a fresh start. Nicodemus obviously doesn't quite get this because he says, "How can a man be born again when he is old? Surely he cannot enter a second time into his mothers' womb to be born." And then Jesus gives the answer, "I tell you the truth no one can enter the kingdom of God unless he is born of water and the spirit." Born of water is obviously a reference to baptism, which signifies new birth. Just as when a baby is born the mother's water breaks and the child is born and baptism the water is poured, sprinkled or the person is immersed in this water they pass through water again but this time into a new life as God's child.

This is why Paul says in 2 Corinthians 5:17, "He is a new creation the old is gone new has come." The old self and all that it has been has been washed away a new disciple is born. The water is a symbol of a new birth. The problem is this when you're done with your baptism the water is dried off, it's only skin deep what is necessary now is to truly be born of the Spirit. The word that Jesus uses here for Spirit is "pneuma" from which we get the word pneumonia. It can be translated as wind, spirit or more literally, "the breath of God." Just as God breathed life into man at creation He breathes His Spirit into us at baptism. Our bodily breathing is called

respiration when you breath you respire, I guess you could say in a spiritual sense at baptism God performs CPR on us. We are dead in our sins until we repent but then God breathes into us and we are inspired. Baptism it's a two-part sacrament. In confirmation we learned it's the water combined with the word. Really its the physical and the spiritual its repentance and inspiration, its the old birth and the new birth.

I chose the Old Testament reading for today. I broke away from the prescribed reading because this verse came to mind as I worked on the sermon, Isaiah 46:8. It's a verse that's inscribed on the Holocaust Museum in Washington D.C. It says, "remember this, fix it in mind, take it to heart." In the case of the Holocaust it is the idea that we remember so that we prevent a holocaust from ever happening again. Today it applies to something very good. Remember, fix it in mind, take it to heart, what? Your baptism and your baptism or confirmation vows. You don't remember them? Well I'll remind you of them. You can take them again and you know what every one will know the answer on whether you have really taken those vows.

Jesus told Nicodemus, "You should not be surprised at my saying you must be born again. The wind blows wherever it pleases you hear its sound but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with every one born of the Spirit." When the wind blows you can't see the wind but you sure can see its affects. To be very blunt if you have been baptized with the Spirit people will see the affects of the Spirit in your life. Your life changes God truly becomes number 1 and you live for Him because you understand John 3:16. God loves us; He gave his only son for us so that we can have salvation. God did and does everything for us and as a result knowing how much God loves us and has done for us and is doing for us you want to do everything for Him. And so I ask you your baptismal questions again. You can answer them in your heart, you can answer them in your spirit, and you can answer them to God almighty. Question 1, "Do you renounce the devil and all his works and all his ways?" "Do you believe in the triune God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit?" "Do you believe that Jesus Christ is the only begotten Son of the Father that Jesus did come into the world to seek and to save the lost, that he did die on the cross to save us from our sins and that he rose again from the dead the give us the sure hope of eternal life?" "Do you believe in the Holy Spirit as God's continuing presence with us and do you accept that spirit as your personal comforter, equipper and guide?" And finally, "Will you continue to study and grow in God's word? Will you strive to nourish your heart and mind with it? Will you do God's will as it is revealed to you in the Holy

Scriptures and will you commit yourself to serving God and His body here at this church and in this community through faithful church attendance and the volunteering of your time, talents and treasures?"

May God give you the strength to say, "I do" and may He breath His Spirit into you may you be inspired because you have undergone spiritual CPR.

In our Savior's name, Amen.