

Sermon: Must We?
Text: John 3:1-17
Date: March 19, 2017
Context: WWPC
Fourth Sunday in Lent
By: Rev. Dr. Steve Runholt

You must be born again.

John 3:7

I didn't see him at the Super Bowl this year. But now that tournament time is here, maybe he will yet turn up on our TV screens before March Madness is all said and done.

I'm talking about the guy with the rainbow afro and the goofy clown glasses. The one who has made a bit of a career turning up at the biggest sporting events in the country, holding aloft that hand-painted sign that says simply, John 3:16.

How he affords such expensive tickets is a mystery to me. And what he hopes to achieve with his weird boosterism is anybody's guess. And yet he's onto something to be sure. He's tapped into a deeply held belief among church folks that this short text, John 3:16, is about the most important verse in the whole Bible.

So, on the one hand, maybe this weird, out-there guy makes us buttoned-down Presbyterians cringe a little. And yet it's hard to be too critical of him.

Because in the end, who can disagree with him, really? *For God so loved the world that God sent a divine emissary to show us what that love looks like, and to open the way for us to experience it.*

It really is an astonishing thing to think about. For God so loved the world. Amazing.

But as we just heard, that verse comes toward the end of a long story. A story about a religious leader who comes to Jesus in the night.

He's among the very first people in the Bible who seek Jesus out. Ordinarily it's Jesus who does the seeking and the finding. The healing, the forgiving, the calling out for service.

But here the tables are turned. Nicodemus, a leader in the Jewish temple, comes to Jesus by night. It's how a lot of us come, of course, though we may come for different reasons.

Maybe we come in the night because, like Nicodemus, we're afraid of being found out. We're afraid of what the neighbors will say if this persistent and unsettling hunger we feel for God is found out, afraid we'll drop a notch or two in their estimation, just above the goofy guy with the John 3:16 sign.

Or we come in the night because that's so often when God is found; because, oddly, it's often easier to hide our needs and our hopes and our fears in the bright light of day. But when night falls and the curtains are drawn and we're all alone, well, then there's no hiding from ourselves or from God.

We don't know why Nicodemus came to Jesus. Maybe this religious professional was hungry for new life.

Maybe after all those years pouring over nothing but text he finally realized that he was hungry for something besides words. Maybe religion itself wasn't enough for him. Maybe he wanted a relationship with the living God.

So he comes in the night and gets a bigger dose of this Jesus, a bigger answer to his questions, than he could have imagined, the punchline of which is another legendary phrase from John 3: *You must be born again*, Jesus tells him.

Some of us were raised in churches where this was one of the first Bible verses we memorized, right along with John 3:16.

But if you did not happen to grow up Baptist, you might be thinking, really? Must we be born again? Wasn't I born okay the first time?

We'll yes, of course you were. For God so loved the world, and that includes you.

But lest you get too dismissive of this idea, that you must be born again, let me say maybe that's because you've never really been broken.

Maybe you've never reached the point where you're searching for God from inside a jail cell, or on the floor of a half-way house for heroin addicts, or from the prison of shame or regret for what you've done, or failed to do as a spouse or parent or sibling or neighbor.

Maybe you've never used up your life, or burned it up, or shot it up. Never wasted it, or squandered it such that you feel like you're dead inside and are desperate for a second chance, desperate for new life. Desperate to be born again.

Or have you? We don't know exactly what drove Nicodemus to come to Jesus that night. But maybe you have more in common with him than you care to admit, in the bright light of day.

For her part, Megan Phelps-Roper would have been glad to admit that she needed to be born again. Growing up, it was one of her core beliefs.

Megan is the daughter of Fred Phelps. That name may ring a bell. Now deceased, Mr. Phelps was the pastor of the Westboro Baptist Church.

For many years now, Westboro members have famously, notoriously, toured the country in a non-stop hate campaign. They hold up signs at funerals and protest marches that express their views about gays and lesbians and Jews and just about anyone who disagrees with them, in language that is profoundly offensive to anyone outside of their limited orbit.

I have often wondered if Westboro's members really believe the hateful messages on their signs, or if their offensive antics aren't just a publicity stunt that somehow also enables them to generate donations from the lunatic fringe.

But evidently they do believe them.

Here's how Megan tells it¹:

I was a blue-eyed, chubby-cheeked five-year-old when I joined my family on the picket line for the first time. My mom made me leave my dolls in the minivan. I'd stand on a street corner in the heavy Kansas humidity, surrounded by a few dozen relatives, with my tiny fists clutching a sign that I couldn't read yet: "Gays are worthy of death." This was the beginning.

Our protests soon became a daily occurrence and an international phenomenon, and as a member of Westboro Baptist Church, I became a fixture on picket lines across the country.

In my home, life was framed as an epic spiritual battle between good and evil. The good was my church and its members, and the evil was everyone else. My church's antics were such that we were constantly at odds with the world, and that reinforced our otherness on a daily basis.

"Make a difference between the unclean and the clean," the [Bible] says, and so we did. From baseball games to military funerals, we trekked across the country with neon protest signs in hand to tell others exactly how "unclean" they were and exactly why they were headed for damnation.

Now, I grant you that the Westboro army is extreme in its fundamentalism, not so different from the Taliban in some ways--less violent, yes, but no less hateful.

But as a good Baptist, Megan was raised to believe that she, like everyone, must be born again. What surprised her was discovering later in life that she needed to be born again, again.

Here's how that happened:

In 2009, she says, [my] zeal brought me to Twitter. Initially, the people I encountered on the platform were just as hostile as I expected.

¹ She tells her story in full here:

http://www.ted.com/talks/megan_phelps_roper_i_grew_up_in_the_westboro_baptist_church_here_s_why_i_left

They were the digital version of the screaming hordes I'd been seeing at protests since I was a kid.

“But in the midst of that digital brawl, a strange pattern developed. Someone would arrive at my profile with the usual rage and scorn, I would respond with a custom mix of Bible verses, pop culture references and smiley faces.

They would be understandably confused and caught off guard, but then a conversation would ensue. And it was civil — full of genuine curiosity on both sides. How had the other come to such outrageous conclusions about the world?

For Megan, these conversations planted seeds of doubt about her interlocutors. *Could these people really be so bad if they are willing to exchange messages with me? Is what I believe about them true?*

Eventually this experience transformed her. Because people were willing to engage with her, and not just yell at her, she began to understand that the people with whom she was in dialogue were not, as she put it, the demons she had been led to believe.

And that was the moment when she was born again, again. Now she happily tells this story of transformation to anyone who will listen.

Ultimately it was love that saved Megan--love, not theology, not ideology, not argument or persuasion, just love that was the driving force behind this new birth.

It was people who were willing to see past the signs, past her weird, hateful Tweets, and see that underneath them lived a human being.

I wish I could stop there and just point to Megan as a sort of textbook example of the need to be born again, even if you've been born again once before.

But I can't stop there. Because Megan isn't the only one who was transformed by this experience. The people on the other side were, too.

The people who, like me, would have been quick to send incredulous Tweets back to her, expressing their outrage at her hate.

Do you see how this works: Hate, leads to outrage, leads to more hate, leads to more outrage. Unless and until something interrupts that cycle, it's likely to go on forever.

Mercifully, love interrupted it for Megan, love in the form of a willingness to listen to someone radically different from oneself.

This experience didn't just change Megan; it also transformed the people on the other side of these conversations. They, too, were born again by and through the power of love.

So, I'd like to stop right here with this one last inspiring note: That one of Megan's early antagonists eventually married her. One big happy ending! Huzzah to the power of love! The redeeming, transformational, soul-saving power of love.

But again, I can't stop there. Because lately I, too, have been surprised at my own need to be born again, again.

I first started to become aware of this need a few weeks ago, when we launched our study in our adult education class of Debby Irving's penetrating book, *Waking Up White*.

Ms. Irving had her own born again experience, centered around her discovery of the extent to which white privilege and white supremacy dominate American life and culture, and her realization of the profound but largely unseen ways she has benefited from it, virtually every day of her life.

Like an iceberg of privilege--just the tip visible to most observers, but a lurking mass of injustice underneath the surface. Injustice directed squarely at people of color.

She saw this dangerous mass everywhere she turned, in every institution that matters: in housing and lending and banking practices, in the educational system, in healthcare and mental healthcare, in policing and law enforcement and the judicial system and, yes, even in the church. Sometimes especially there.

When you begin to see these patterns, this lurking mass of injustice, these realities that daily affect the lives of white people and people of color in such dramatically and profoundly different ways, there's just no going back.

Not if you believe John 3:16: *For God so loved the world.* Not your world. The whole world.

If you really, truly believe that, the rest is easy to understand:

Nicodemus said to him, "How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born?"

Jesus answered, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. Do not marvel that I said to you, 'You must be born again.'

Because only then will your new life really start.

Amen.