



# First United Church of Oak Park

## Just a Comma

John 3:14-21

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Judgment, forgiveness, love, salvation, belief, light, darkness. There are enough abstractions in these verses to last us a lifetime. The words are all tangled up and woven together, and when the concrete thinkers among us try to make sense of them, our eyes glaze over. Perhaps that's why some of us tend to fasten on one verse of this text and hold onto it like a mantra. Or display its citation on big signs during televised football games. John 3:16. "God so loved the world that he gave his only son, so that everyone who believes in him won't perish but will have eternal life." John 3:16. A pastor told me once that if I committed this verse to memory, I would need to know little else about the Christian faith.

This is a great verse that's also packed full of big ideas, but it's not an easy verse. And sometimes when we try to use it as a stand-alone summary of Christianity, there's a danger that we do turn it into something simple, a predictable formula that people can trust. But it's not that easy, because the gospel of John isn't written for those of us who like things to be straightforward.

You are probably all familiar with the idea that the left and right halves of our brains work differently. Although apparently this is scientifically disputed, it is commonly thought that people with left brain dominance are good at math, language, linear reasoning, and managing routine life; they are not, however, very artsy. Artsy-ness is the province of those with right brain dominance. The right brainers among us are great at poetry, visual arts, subtleties of communication, and they are great at processing new information. The gospel of John was clearly written by a right-brainer, and he wrote for right-brainers; this book is jam packed with metaphors and irony and subtle imagery that really cannot be summarized into one little verse. I'm sorry to report that to those of you who, like me, prefer things to be a bit more neat and tidy. Whether we like it or not we are going to dive into a little paradox and mystery.

Our text this morning sits in an interesting location in the gospel, in between two stories in which Jesus encounters people to whom he offers a second chance at life. The first is Nicodemus, who comes to Jesus in the dark of night, in secret, to find out if Jesus is really from God. Nicodemus is an upstanding, pretty well-known guy in his community. He is a Pharisee, which means he has social standing, maybe a pretty good job. Maybe he's a lawyer, or a banker, or an interim lead pastor. He's a solid citizen, perhaps like lots of us are. Spiritually he may be a little like some of us, too; Nicodemus is drawn to Jesus. There is something about Jesus that grabs him, and he wants to be closer. But, in his world, in the full light of day, it is not exactly cool to be a Jesus follower; in fact it might make him seem a little strange, or dorky, so he comes to Jesus at night. Nicodemus is interested, but he's not really ready to make a full commitment. And Jesus calls him on it. Jesus challenges Nicodemus to make a deeper commitment and enter another whole dimension of life. "You must be born again," says the right brain Jesus. "Huh?" says the left brain Nicodemus. It takes him a while to get this invitation to start a second, new life in the midst of the old one.

Jesus makes the same offer to the person whose story is on the other side of our text: the woman at the well in John 4. Now this woman could not be more different from Nicodemus. He's a somebody. She is a nobody,

at every level. She is an outsider, a Samaritan, a woman whose religious and social culture is miles apart from the Judaism of the day. She is unmarried, which in her time means she is virtually disenfranchised. She's probably poor. She has a history, too, a past that she prefers to keep secret. In short, she's a sinner. She is so far out of Jesus' orbit that she doesn't even know who Jesus is when, to her surprise, he approaches her and asks for a drink of water. A conversation ensues, and within a few sentences Jesus offers her a second chance for life. He says, "If you recognized God's gift and who is saying to you, 'Give me some water to drink,' you would be asking him, and he would give you living water." To this very right brain statement the woman gives a very left brain response: "You don't even have a bucket." It takes a while, and lots more talk, for the woman to realize that the Messiah is standing in front of her, offering her a second chance at life.

In these stories, which stand on either side of this morning's text, Jesus offers people second chances at life. Look at the two people he picks. One is a pillar of his community, the other has broken most of her community's rules; one is a Jew, the other a Samaritan. One is a man, the other a woman. One has his act together, the other one's kind of a mess. Jesus welcomes them both, and, I think these texts together imply that Jesus welcomes everybody in between.

"God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him won't perish but will have eternal life." I heard Jeremiah Wright talk about this passage in the context of a discussion about whether the church should welcome the full participation of gays and lesbians. He pointed to the word "everyone." His point was that we in the church should not be setting participation boundaries too rigidly, because God's arms are open wide in this text. "Everyone who believes." We are all welcome to put our trust in Jesus.

And, as these stories show, we don't have to have faith all figured out in order to take that step. Believing is a kind of loose category here. The interested but tentative Nicodemus may be a Pharisee, but he doesn't have faith figured out. Neither does the woman; she's still locked in her old patterns of interpretation. Neither one of these people has faith figured out in Jesus' terms. They certainly have not mastered Christian doctrine, but that doesn't matter. It doesn't even seem to matter that they are not on Jesus' wavelength. What matters is that they have taken a turn toward Jesus. They are willing to give him a chance. That's all. It appears to be enough. He offers them another chance at life.

He offers everyone who believes a second chance at life. If Nicodemus and the woman exemplify what believing can look like, then it's a very broad category, into which lots of us might fit: it includes we who are curious about Jesus, we who are caught by Jesus' magnetism or mesmerized by his mystery, we who know Jesus a little and want to know him more, we who are willing to give faith a chance. God's arms are open wide in this text.

And the gift God offers is astounding. "Eternal life" this text names it. In John's gospel, Jesus calls it all kinds of things: being born again, drinking living water, eating the bread of life, encountering the way, the truth, the life. Jesus also says later in John, "I came so that they may have life—indeed, so that they could live life to the fullest" (John 10:10 CEB). I'd like to suggest that living life to the fullest is the gist of this text, and of our lives of faith in general.

One of our tendencies in reading this passage is to interpret "eternal life" as something reserved for what the old hymn calls the "sweet by and by." And that's a beautiful idea, that on the other side of death is a life awaiting believers in which tears shall be no more, no grief, or crying, or pain, and God will be with us. But I think it is a mistaken reading of this text to conceive of eternal life as only being in the future, beyond the grave. I think what Jesus is talking about here is our lives here and now, in Oak Park in 2019, and the second chance Jesus offers in faith is for us to live life to the fullest.

Have you ever seen Margaret Edson's play entitled *Wit*? You may have seen the HBO movie version performed by Emma Thompson. The heroine of this play, Vivian, is a scholar of John Donne's holy sonnets, and in part of the play Vivian remembers a conversation she had with another scholar about the correct punctuation of the last line of the famous sonnet, "Death be not proud." The last line reads, "And death shall be no more, death thou shalt die." According to the play, there is an argument about whether the correct punctuation should be a semi-colon or a comma, and the older scholar thinks the comma is really important, because it makes smaller the boundary between life, death, and eternal life, which is the point she thinks Donne was trying to make.<sup>1</sup> She says,

It reads, "And death shall be no more," comma, "death thou shalt die."

Nothing but a breath, a comma, separates life from life everlasting. Very simple, really. . . . It is a comma, a pause. Life, death, soul, God, past, present, not insuperable barriers, not semicolons, just a comma. It is truth.<sup>2</sup>

I quote this because it is truth—it is John's way of talking about Jesus' truth. It is spoken in all that metaphorical, mysterious, right brained language of John. It is not very straightforward, but, then, neither are life and death and fullness of life. They are complicated realities. And although we've organized our ideas about time to make life and death seem like a linear process, it's not. Death is a part of life, and life is a part of death, and everlasting life, in which we enjoy the fullness of life in the presence of God, can be as much a part of today's living as it is a reality in the hereafter.

Everlasting life is now, if we would but accept the invitation we are being offered in Jesus Christ our Lord. If we would but drink the living water, or taste the bread of life, or breathe in the wild, untamed Spirit that grants us second birth. Jesus offers us these gifts now.

Make no mistake about it. It is Jesus who is doing the offering. He is the gift bearer. For many years I read this text and the Nicodemus story about being born again the other way around—as mandates for believers. I thought these texts meant that I, as a believer, had to make the decision to be born again, I had to believe and get my dogmatic ducks in order, so that I could be saved eternally. That was my interpretation, and I was wrong. That interpretation short circuits the work of God. The message of these texts is not about all the work believers have to do to grasp the prize of eternal life; it's about the gift God has given everyone whose lives have been touched by Jesus Christ.

The Rev. Debbie Blue, a pastor at House of Mercy church in St. Paul, has a really wonderful sermon on John 3, in which she talks about Jesus telling Nicodemus that he needs to be born again. She reminds her listeners that when a baby is born, the one who does all the work is not the baby—it's the mom, the one giving birth.<sup>3</sup> She reminds of us of how hard God has worked, and still works, to bring you and me to fullness of life. God created us, and has walked with us in sin and rejection. God even took on human flesh. In Christ God was born, and suffered, and ate, and drank, and laughed, and died and lived again. In doing that God forever cracked the barrier that stands between the human and the divine, so God is in our lives, and we are in God's life, and life can be new, filled with the joy and gladness of God's presence. This is God's gift to us in Jesus Christ. Life lived fully. Life lived abundantly. Life lived now. This is the good news of the gospel. Amen.

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John Lahr. "News from Nowhere: Tales of Blighted Lives by Margaret Edson and Daniel Talbott." *The New Yorker* (February 6, 2012) 76-77.

<sup>2</sup>I quote this from the movie version. Script by Emma Thompson and Mike Nichols, based on the play by Margaret Edson. The YouTube clip of this scene can be accessed at [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FXpl\\_yvmKKA&feature=related](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FXpl_yvmKKA&feature=related).

<sup>3</sup>Debbie Blue, "Laboring God," in *Sensual Orthodoxy* (St. Paul, MN: Cathedral Hill Press, 2004).