Sermon Series: Summer Reading
Sermon Title: Nicodemus/Beginning Again **by David Hockett**
John 3:1-18 **June 3, 2018**

Well, we are ending where we began. On my second Sunday as senior pastor here I preached on John 3. Today, for one final time, I stand in this place as your senior pastor and am preaching from John 3. God has an interesting sense of timing and humor. The title in your bulletin says Nicodemus. I'll focus on him a bit but mostly these are my thoughts for you on this very special day.

I've shared this with some of you before but it's so good I'm going to share it again. A few years ago Kim and I were in Israel on a leadership retreat led by Dr. Bob Tuttle who is a retired professor of biblical studies and world religions. Dr. Tuttle would conclude each day by offering a few observations, helping us connect what we had seen in the Holy Land with our ministry of preaching and teaching the Bible, because being there, in Israel, is a bit like walking around in the pages of the Bible.

I'll never forget Dr. Tuttle talking one evening about how so many of us have made a mess of our lives, have made significant mistakes, and committed any number of intentional and unintentional sins. He looked at us and said, "Now I know some of you personally, so don't try and deny this." "Granted," he said, "some of us are pretty good at hiding it and covering it up, but if we believe the apostle Paul then we all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God – all of us, every last one of us. We are not always our best selves, our God-created selves. And yet, for some inexplicable, amazing, mysterious, mind-boggling reason there's the Gospel." We see it from the beginning of the Story, all the way through to the end when all things will be as God intends. Now you could see the story of Scripture literally written in the land. So, Dr. Tuttle looked at us and said, "in spite of all the ways you try and mess it up, God is madly in love with you."

You can say it any number of ways – but the good news friends, 3 years ago when I began, today, three years from now, the good news to Abraham and Sarah, the good news to Moses, the good news delivered by the prophets time and time again when the children of Israel had forgotten who they were called to be, the good news born to Mary and Joseph, the good news for a man named Nicodemus who came to Jesus at night hoping for a new story for his life, the good news proclaimed from the cross, the gospel that resonates from an empty tomb down through the centuries even to us, is – God is madly in love with you, with us, and will literally stop at nothing, not even death to make that love known.

John puts it this way:

> *This is how much God loved the world: He gave his Son, his one and only Son. And this is why: so that no one perish; but by believing in him, anyone can have a whole and lasting life. God didn't go to all the trouble of sending his Son merely to point an accusing finger, telling the world how bad it was. Rather, He came to help, to put the world right again.*

Friends, when we listen, when we pay attention, we discover why we are all here, why I'm a pastor, and we're disciples, and together we are Church.

When we listen we are reminded, like Nicodemus, that God is madly in love with us and there is a way to begin again. And God has called and gifted us, each one of us to participate in, to share in God's mission of loving and saving the world. Listen carefully to what the gospel really is, "…so that no one would perish, but by trusting in Christ, anyone can have whole and lasting life. God didn't go to all this trouble and give God's own Son just so that God could point an accusing finger at us, to say look how bad you are. God came to help, to put the world right again." Yes, we make a mess of things, but God wants to get us out of the mess. God is not eagerly waiting to condemn us to hell. God sees how many of us are already there and God has come to help, to set us free, to buy back that which was lost, to enable is to start over, to be born again, and to put the world right. And why? Don't ask me to explain it. The deep mystery is that God is madly in love with us. As Tim Keller says, "We are more sinful and flawed in ourselves than we ever dared believe, yet at the very same time we are more loved and accepted in Jesus Christ than we ever dared hope."

And this truth says something about the posture or attitude of the Church. If God is madly in love with us, and if God is madly in love with the world to the point that God would pour out God's own Son, then our primary attitude toward the world, toward our neighbor must be one of love. Why are we here Boone United Methodist Church? We're here because God loves us, and our mission is to follow Christ into the world, to get down on our hands and knees, and love God's hurting, wayward children whomever and wherever they are. In one sense it doesn't matter who your senior pastor is. That is the holy vocation that has been placed into our hands.

We are called to love. We are here not for ourselves, but for the life of the world. And we are called to embody for our neighbors a different way of being human, a way of being human that is shaped by the life of the One who came not to be served but to serve.

We are called to embody for the world the love of God we have known in Christ Jesus our Lord. We're called to be a foretaste of that Beloved community that Christ inaugurated with the seed of his blood and at the center of which stands his cross.

Friends everything we do must be directed to this end – to living, and teaching, and sharing the love of Christ with others, with all those Nicodemus's who come wondering if there just might be a way to begin again. We don't exist for any other reason than for this – that is the great big God-sized dream we are being invited to participate in. And that's what we've tried to be about together the past three years and what you will continue to be about when Pastor Lory Beth joins you in July.

Now, while I have been your senior pastor these past 3 years I have tried to live before you as one who is a friend of Jesus and as your friend, giving you a part of my life, by sharing my family with you, and by sharing with you everything I've learned of God and from God. I have given myself to not merely working here as your pastor, someone paid to perform a religious function or role for you, but have tried to live among you as an equal in the faith. Because that's what Christian ministry is, as I understand it. If it is anything, Christian ministry is incarnational – that is, it is ministry with skin on. (Buechner) It is ministry that is embodied – it is found not in programs and plans, but in people and relationships. And so, when we seek to live out the gospel and to love one another as Christ has loved us. That means we must risk ourselves, we give our whole selves, body, mind, heart and soul to the ministry of loving God, one another, and our neighbor as Jesus has loved us. So with that in mind I simply want to leave you with a few observations.

First, I must simply say thank you. From the very bottom of my heart I am deeply grateful for each and every one of you and especially our staff. They are a part of what makes this such a special place. I am grateful for your creativity, your willingness to serve, your prayers, your presence, your sense of humor, your willingness to forgive, your patience, your faith, your generosity, your desire to try new things, and to rarely utter those seven words that are the death of the church "We've never done it this way before." And most of all Kim and I are grateful for your love and care for our family – especially the way you have loved and prayed for Salem and Abbey while they've been away at school and for the way you've loved and welcomed Eli as if he is one of your own. With St. Paul I say,

> *"I give thanks to my God always for you because of the grace of God that has been given you in Christ Jesus…"*
> (1 Corinthians 1:4)

Secondly, I urge you by the grace of God in Christ Jesus to love the Lord your God with all your heart, and all your soul, and with all your might, and to love your neighbor as yourself. This is the way of life to which we have been called and for which you were set apart in baptism. Making

money, achieving success, building houses, receiving awards and the praise of your colleagues is all fine and good, but this is the truest vocation of your lives. The Hebrew is *lev shalem* – with a whole heart. It is the way of Jesus, the way to peace, and the way to abundant life.

Third, I would not be a very good Wesleyan if I neglected to encourage you to keep the general rules of our Church. Do no harm, do all the good you can, and stay in love with God. Which means care for your relationship with God and don't neglect the means of grace. Pray, be always engaged in the prayerful reading of the Scriptures both in private and in community. Be faithful in your attendance in worship. Receive the sacrament of Holy Communion as often as you can. Give generously of your money, your time, and yourself. Uphold one another in love and bear one another's burdens in the bond of Christian fellowship. Speak with one another concerning your life of faith. Lovingly hold one another accountable and support and encourage each other in love. Do not be judgmental but be merciful as God has been merciful to you. Forgive one another as you have been forgiven. And by all means welcome the stranger in your midst for in so doing you are welcoming Christ.

But most of all be friends of Jesus. Jesus is our center of gravity. You cannot grow closer to Jesus and grow apart from one another. So, by all means be friends of Jesus by doing what he has commanded you – by loving God and loving one another and by teaching and living the good news that God so loves this world that there is indeed the chance to begin again.

Finally, I know that you will welcome Lory Beth and Greg with the same warmth and love with which you welcomed us. Lory Beth is an exceptional pastor and leader. God has blessed her with many gifts and I truly believe she is the right person being sent to Boone UMC at the right time. Most importantly she knows, believes, and lives the gospel. She is a friend of Jesus which means that she is already linked to you by the power of the Holy Spirit. She is already your sister, your friend in Christ. I trust you will do all that you can to welcome her, to encourage her, and to support her in her ministry among and with you.

And while you do, never forget the gospel:

> *This is how much God loved the world: He gave his Son, his one and only Son. And this is why: so that no one would perish; by believing in him, anyone can have a whole and lasting life. God didn't go to all the trouble of sending his Son merely to point an accusing finger, telling the world how bad it was. He came to help, to put the world right again.*

We love you all. Please know that you will be in our prayers each day. We covet your prayers in the weeks, months, and years to come. Take heart and be comforted in knowing that those friends who are united in the Lord never say good bye, only - God be with you until we meet

again. And never, ever forget, “in spite of all the ways we may try and mess it up, God is indeed madly in love with us.” Thanks be to God. Amen.