

**San Lorenzo Community Church**  
**United Church of Christ**  
Sermon from Rev. Annette J. Cook  
Sunday, March 12, 2017

**Hear now a reading from the Gospel of John 3:1-2, 16-17.**

**3** Now there was a Pharisee, a man named Nicodemus who was a member of the Jewish ruling council. **2** He came to Jesus at night and said, "Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God. For no one could perform the signs you are doing if God were not with him."

**16** For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. **17** For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him.

**This ends the reading from the Gospel of John. Thanks be to God.**

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Nichodemus – I'm going to call him Nick, if that's okay with you? Nick goes out at night and looks for Jesus. He finds Jesus – maybe sitting by himself on a park bench or maybe at one of those outdoor cafes with a cup of herbal tea – I envision Jesus drinking herbal tea.

Now Nick hadn't met Jesus before but he recognized him and called out – "Hey, you're Jesus. You're the one who has come from God."

So let's think about this for a minute. What do you do at night, in the dark? I don't know about you but, for me, I think of things like creeping around in the dark, or stumbling out of bed, feeling my way down the hallway to the bathroom, or turning on a flashlight to walk across the back yard. It's night, it's dark.

Under the cover of night, people have secret meetings they don't want anyone to know about. Under cover of darkness, you can talk privately, you can talk confidentially, you can open up and ask the hardest questions or even reveal something deep and special.

After my Dad died, I would go back to Michigan to visit my Mom and she always wanted to go for a drive. It didn't have to be a destination drive – we didn't have to go somewhere in particular. She just wanted to see the countryside and the beautiful farms and lakes of Michigan again. So the two of us would pack some drinks and maybe a bite to eat; we'd fill up the minivan with gas; and we would head out – any direction we wanted. North, south, east or west – it didn't matter.

We could drive to Hartwick Pines State Park in the north and see the enormous old-growth pines, the tallest trees in all the state. We could drive to Ludington in the west and visit the Lighthouse – an iconic beacon for the ships of Lake Michigan. Anywhere or nowhere was just fine. I would drive for an hour or so and then something amazing happened.

We had been talking, telling stories, talking about the church and her neighbors and my work. But about an hour into the drive, my Mom would start to talk about very personal things. She would open up. This would happen on every visit. We would go for a drive and about an hour into the drive, the stories she would tell, the questions she would ask, the conversations we would have were suddenly much deeper, much more personal. She would talk about missing my father since he had passed; she would ask about God and whether there was enough love in the world; she would reflect on her life and if she had truly done all she could for others.

I think there is safety in talking in the car. You don't have to look at the person in the eye, so you don't risk too much vulnerability. The conversation is confidential because it is just the two of you – there is no risk that someone else will walk into the room or interrupt. And you know the other person will stay and hear the whole thing – they can't just leave. They have to remain present.

Over the course of many visits, I grew to love these conversations and this time together.

I think that's why our friend Nick went out one night to find Jesus – he wanted a private, confidential conversation. He wanted to find Jesus when Jesus wasn't surrounded by so many other people. And our friend Nick wanted to reveal something deeply personal and important.

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Since they didn't have cars in Jesus' day, Nick couldn't invite Jesus to go for a drive. So he did what he thought was the next best thing. He went out at night, in the dark, to find Jesus and reveal that he believes Jesus is from God – that all of the teaching and healing and feeding and touching – all of these things were signs that God was with and in Jesus the whole time.

You see, Nick was a smart guy. He studied in school. He learned all about the Bible. He paid attention to the world around him. So when he finally found Jesus alone, in the dark, in a quiet confidential place, he was able to ask his deep and personal question – “How can all of this be? How can it be that we mortals can be born again? How can it be that we might see the realm of God in ourselves, in others, in the world? Jesus, how can it possibly be?”

Jesus tells him these famous words: “For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.” And Jesus continued “For God did not send his Son in the world to condemn the world but to save the world through him.”

You see, Jesus tells our friend Nick that God's love is the very essence of possibility. God's love cannot be measured by our human methods. God's love holds all possibilities.

Think about it. If I were making some cookies, I would use a measuring cup to make sure that I put in exactly the right amount of flour, sugar, and milk. I wonder if we might use a measuring cup to measure God's love. The Bible says, "The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want....my cup runneth over." (Psalm 23:1,5) Well, if our cup runs over with God's love, I guess a measuring cup isn't going to hold God's love.

If we were building something, we might use a tape measure to measure the length, width, and height of things. I wonder if we might use a tape measure to measure God's love. The Bible tells us that God's love is higher than the heavens. (Psalm 108:4) If God's love is higher than the heavens, then I think a tape measure isn't going to measure it, is it?

Maybe if we use a watch – a watch measures time. There will probably be some people here this morning who used their watch to reset our clocks to Daylight Savings Time and make sure we all got up early to be here this morning. I'll bet there are even some folks here this morning who will use their watch to measure how long the pastor's sermon lasts.

So can we maybe use a watch to measure how long God's love will last? The Bible tells us that God's love is from everlasting to everlasting. (Psalm 103:17) Wow! If God's love is from everlasting to everlasting, I guess a watch isn't going to do the trick.

No, to describe God's love for us you have to use words like always, and everything, and everywhere, and unconditional, and everlasting, and everyone. How do you possibly measure a love like that?

Well, you don't. You don't measure it. You experience it. You don't contain it. You let it flow out of you. You don't size it up and put it away in a box. You live into it with every action and every word and every kindness.

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As Eugene Peterson has translated this text, he says "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." So the question is, not how to measure God's love, but where do we begin?

A forest ranger in Wales described the most common question that visitors to his park ask the forest rangers. Many people, he said, come to the park to hike one of the beautiful trails that wander through the forest, trails designed to display the magnificent trees and plants, to let the hikers encounter the array of wildlife in the forest, and to take hikers on to hilltops for breathtaking views of the countryside. But the most frequent question that visitors ask the forest rangers is not "Where does this trail go?" or "How long does it take to hike it?" or "Do we need bug spray on the trail" but instead "Excuse me, can you tell me where the trail starts?" It makes sense. No matter how lovely or breathtaking a trail may be, if you don't know where the trail starts, you can't hike it.

Where to start? Right where you are. Right now. Right here. Every single person here today is a living example of what God can do and how much God can love. You have the gifts and ability for you are the immeasurable love of God in everything you do.

There is no accusation, no shame, no oppression, no fear that is not and cannot be overcome because you are the immeasurable love of God.

- For our neighbors and those who are fearful of deportation, you are the immeasurable love of God.
- For our transgender sisters and brothers singled out and publicly shamed, you are the immeasurable love of God.
- For people of color and all of the races of the world, you are the immeasurable love of God.
- For women who continue to march, you are the immeasurable love of God.
- For our Jewish brothers and sisters hated once again for their loyalty to the God of Israel, our God, you are the immeasurable love of God.
- For our Muslim brothers and sisters vilified for devotion and obedience, you are the immeasurable love of God.
- For the world, the cosmos, that wonders who will protect it, you are the immeasurable love of God.

Amen.