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“Are You Loved?”
John 3:14-21

One Saturday morning, years ago when my daughter Abbey was about 4 she was playing with her mommy’s lipstick. She put it on her tiny lips, way too big and planted a pint sized kiss on my cheek. It was cute and I thought nothing more about it.

Later that morning I made a run to the grocery store and as I was in the checkout line for some reason the young attractive cashier was smiling broadly at me. I knew it couldn’t possibly be because she was attracted to the rumped not yet shaven Saturday morning pastor with the Diet Dr. Pepper and Doritos. My curiosity was piqued when she continued to smile at me and then she asked me, “Are you loved?”

I looked at her somewhat confused, and then she pointed to my right cheek where the bright red lip print of a 4 year old’s kiss rested. Then I knew why she was smiling at me. I sighed and responded, “Yes, I am loved.”

Jesus came into the world to let the world know that they are loved. And loved not only by their over exuberant children but they are loved by God. He came into the world to put in us his kind of love so that people who do not yet know his love can come to know it.

Unfortunately we don’t always have something as obvious as lipstick on our cheek to tip people off that we are loved. And, unfortunately we can’t always go around planting kisses on folks so that others can tell that they are loved. Sometimes it takes how we act, things we do, yes and even the things we say to communicate how loved the world is. (Joe Biden just posted an apology online saying in the future he will respect other people’s personal space)

Nicodemus was a literalist. He took Jesus’ words literally. When Jesus said he had to be “born again” Nicodemus was confused. He could not understand how a person could be born again. He asked if it meant that he had to go into his mother’s womb again. Now that’s dumb question! It a question only a man would ask. Am I right ladies?

Jesus tells Nicodemus, and Jesus tells us, that when we look in faith to him, we receive a new kind of life-- eternal life. That is how we are born again. There is no mystery here. Those who believe in Jesus Christ are born again; they are ushered into a new way of life that never ends. This is incredibly good news for the human race.

In John’s Gospel, eternal life is not an extended quantity of life that begins at death. Eternal life, rather, is a new quality of life, a new kind of life that begins

when we believe and begin to follow Jesus. They don't have to wait to die to have eternal life. Eternal life begins when people look to Jesus and believe and have a spiritual birth, are "born from above" or are "born again."

The Greek word used for love here points to the kind of love that loves another with no thought of return or reward. That is God's kind of love for us. God does not love us because we deserve to be loved. God does not love us because God gets a reward from loving us. God just loves us.

It's the same way with me and my children. I just love them. I don't love them because I expect to receive a return or reward for doing it. I just do. That is all. No reward. No reason.

One of my favorite jokes about people meeting St. Peter at the Pearly Gates is about a man who, when he showed up at the pearly gates, St. Peter was waiting. "I want to enter Heaven," said the man. "You may enter," replied Peter, "if you have accumulated 100 points on earth."

"Well," said the man, "I was baptized in the church and scarcely missed a Sunday in my entire life."

"That's good," said Peter. "That's one point!" "One point? -- only one point? Well, I was the President of the Church Council 5 times and I taught Sunday School for 25 years."

"That's good. Another point." "What!? only one more point!? Well, I tried to live a good life. I tried to be a good father and husband."

"That's good," said Peter again. "That's worth one more point." "The man said, "Well at this rate the only way I'm getting' in is through the grace o' God! "

Peter said, "97 points! Come on in."

God loves you...loves me. No matter who you are. No matter how you have lived your life. No matter how terrible you think your sins are. God loves you. Believe it and eternal life is yours. Believe it and you can be born again, born again with a new kind of life that triumphs even over death and the grave.

Now let me say that after being born again there is a process of spiritual growth that is incumbent upon us. There's more to eternal life than being born. Just like there is more to our earthly life than just being born. There's LIFE! There's LIVING! There's GROWING. We need to start growing. I know you've been born again, but the subsequent questions are have you been growing again and again?

When we are born physically we have no choice but to start growing. Unless there's something wrong with us it's automatic. It would be odd to see a 40 year old baby in diapers on the sidewalk who had never learned to walk because he tried it once when he was 18 months old and fell and gave up.

In the same way, our eternal life doesn't stop with our spiritual birth. A spiritual birth is a beginning not an end. In John 3:17, we read: For God sent the Son into the world, not to condemn the world, but that the world might be saved through him."

God didn't send Jesus into the world to condemn it. That is not God's message. That is not the Bible's message. That is not to be my message. Listen to the way John puts it.

We do not have to judge people. People judge themselves. The only way to NOT be forgiven is to run away from forgiveness. The only sins that can't be forgiven are the ones for which people refuse to repent.

I want to close with a true story told by Dr. Edward Bauman of Washington, D.C. Years ago a boy named Tony was born into a family in a Midwestern state. He was blind at birth. He suffered from an extremely rare eye problem for which there was no known cure. When the little fellow was about seven years old, his doctor read in the New England Journal of Medicine of a new surgical procedure that showed some promise for correcting this particular problem. A young surgeon at Massachusetts General Hospital in Boston had developed it. The local doctor and the surgeon began communicating. The boy's full medical record was sent. A decision was made to try surgery. Since Tony's family could not afford the expenses involved, local churches and civic clubs helped out.

Tony had a favorite teddy bear which he kept with him almost all the time. This teddy bear had begun to show signs of wear. One eye was missing; one ear was chewed off; and through several holes the stuffing was oozing out. Tony's mother told him that she was going to buy him a new teddy bear to take to Boston. Tony rejected that offer in no uncertain terms. What good is a new teddy bear when you have an old, familiar, friendly one already broken in? So, the old teddy bear went to Boston and remained close to Tony through all the medical procedures leading up to surgery: the x-rays, tests, and consultations. In fact, the boy and his teddy bear were not separated until the anesthesia was applied.

Throughout this whole period the boy and the young surgeon were becoming great friends. In fact, the surgeon was almost as excited as the family about the possibilities of this surgery. Somehow there was a good chemistry of friendship and trust between physician and Tony. When the surgery was completed, Tony was heavily bandaged and had to remain quite still for a number of days. That is very hard for a 7 year old. But each day the surgeon was in and out of the room encouraging him.

Finally came the day for removing the bandages. For the first time in seven years of life, a little boy could see. Though the vision was blurred at first, it gradually clarified. For the first time Tony looked into the faces of his parents, saw a tree, and a sunset. The young surgeon was almost literally jumping up and down for joy.

Before long it was time for Tony to be discharged and to go home. The surgeon had been dreading this day because the two of them had become such good friends. On that final morning, the surgeon signed the necessary discharge papers. He gave Tony a big hug and said, "Listen, I own stock in you. I expect to get letters from you regularly. Do you understand?"

Then Tony did something totally unexpected. He said to his surgeon friend, "I want you to have this," and handed him his teddy bear. The surgeon's first impulse was to say, "Oh no, I can't separate such good friends." But something stopped him. With a flash of sensitive genius, the surgeon understood what Tony was trying to do. He wanted to give his dear surgeon-friend the most precious gift at his disposal, so full was his heart with love. The wise surgeon accepted the teddy bear with a hug and a thank- you, assuring Tony that he would take mighty good care of his friend.

For over ten years that teddy bear sat in a glass case on the tenth floor of Massachusetts General Hospital--one eye missing, one ear chewed half off, and stuffing oozing out of holes. In front of the teddy bear was the surgeon's card. Just beneath his name he had written this caption: "This is the highest fee I have ever received for professional services rendered." A little boy had given the most precious item he had, out of a love-filled heart.

Over 2000 years ago, with a heart filled with love, I our gracious God looked out upon a sin-marred, snake-bit world that needed to know that they were loved. God's great heart was so full of love that God gave us the most precious gift at his disposal; he gave his only Son.

In Jesus Christ, God planted a kiss on every cheek in the world. Our job as his church is to ask people we meet, whether we can see the lipstick or not, is to ask, "Are you loved?"

1) Gregory McGarvey, No Other Love

Let's pray. O Lord.-God of light and life, through the ages your messengers have proclaimed that your day is at hand. Creation has spoken of your care and benevolent love. You sent Jesus into our midst so that there could be no denying your concern for our wellbeing. You are the God who restores that which people destroy. You mend brokenness and bring wholeness in the midst of fractured relations.

Reform those who disregard how creation depends on your grace. Give them a sense of how all things ought to hold together. You have instilled in us such awesome power; grant us humility to acknowledge your gift and exercise it humanely. Make us aware of how fragile life is, that any one part cannot be abused without affecting the whole. Help us work toward a rightly offered creation whatever our role or status.

We pray for those whose relationships are in disarray. Keep us from premature or harmful judgments that only enhance the pain. Help us to offer reconciling suggestions when they can be helpful, and make our presence beneficial in overcoming loneliness. You have taught us what it means to love one another. You have show how interdependent all creation ought to be. Keep us mindful of the mutual support we can offer one another, and make us willing to bear another's burden as though it were our own. Let us shed some light on what it means to love others as you so love the world.