



**“Toss or Save?”**

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John 3: 1–17 (ILL)***

It’s nearly that time of year again. It’s nearly time for spring cleaning. This is not my favorite March activity. I would so much rather watch NCAA Basketball or Cactus League Baseball.

Part of the reason I resist the urge to spring clean is because things usually get worse before they get better at my house. I usually make a bigger mess trying to decide what to toss and what to save, than when I leave things crammed in my Fibber McGee-like closets.

Another reason that I resist spring cleaning is that I know too much. I know what’s in my closets, and I don’t necessarily enjoy revisiting the items in them, or repeating the challenge of trying to decide what to toss and what to save.

There are, for example, some clothes that I’ll probably never wear again, either because they’re out of style or because I may never be that size again, and there are some accoutrements that I cherish—but agonize over—because I don’t have the appropriate place to display them.

So I normally don’t look forward to spring cleaning, but this year may be different. This is because Margo Heath has been such an inspiration to me—and to several others in the congregation. This just might be the week that I get started on spring cleaning.

For those who may be worshipping with us for the first time, I’ll explain that Margo has been providing us with periodic updates on her “spring cleaning” successes this winter during “Joys and Concerns,” and has reminded us that seasonal cleaning can be more fun and rewarding than we may think.

Three weeks ago, for example, Margo showed me a beautiful silver bracelet that she found in the jacket pocket of a winter blazer that she had mothballed several years ago and that she had recovered in her recent “big dig.” Margo also shared that she’s found money, too—maybe not enough to double her pledge, but definitely enough to have been given that rare, triumphant feeling about her efforts. Margo, we admire you and celebrate your success, and we aim to follow suit—literally and spiritually!

Whether we are aware or not, a similar kind of house-cleaning opportunity awaits us in terms of our spiritual lives. The triggers, however, may be less obvious than a change of seasons. Sometimes major life events kick us in gear to do our spiritual housecleaning. Exposure to another faith tradition can also provide the inspiration to do the deep dive. And grappling with certain scripture passages can be another occasion to go digging in our spiritual cubby holes.

Today's gospel reading provides one such example of a passage that is dearly loved, but often challenging for progressive Protestants, like us. It is challenging for us largely because this pericope in general, and John 3:16 in particular, is such a significant part of our identity and heritage, and because this passage has been interpreted in ways that have been theologically and ethically troubling to many of us.

To illustrate what I mean, I'll offer a summary of the passage, followed by an analysis of the theological interpretations of the passage, and conclude with some suggestions about what to toss and what to save.

## II

John, and only John, tells the story of a man named Nicodemus, a Pharisee and member of the Sanhedrin, who came to Jesus and asked him to solve a theological brain-teaser that had been troubling him for some time. Nicodemus wanted to know exactly who Jesus was. Was he a prophet, a teacher, or perhaps even the messiah?

Nicodemus observed that Jesus was a holy man, because he performed certain signs only attributable to such a person, but Nicodemus was unsure and unwilling to commit to anything more. Nicodemus hoped, like many a first-year philosophy student, that the professor would do his work for him.

Jesus read Nicodemus' elusiveness and hesitancy exactly for what it was—fence sitting—and he challenged him to get off the fence and make a commitment, one way or the other.

Jesus said, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born anew, one cannot see the realm of God." Nicodemus replied, "How can someone be born who is old? Can anyone enter their mother's womb a second time and be born?" Jesus answered, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the spirit, one cannot enter the realm of God."

Like many of us, Nicodemus wanted a logical answer to his earthly question that was grounded in scientific reason, but Jesus kept responding with comments that were the spiritual equivalent of Japanese haikus. Nicodemus didn't get it, and so he questioned Jesus further.

Jesus replied, "How can you be so smart, and still not understand. Your inability to comprehend who I am and what I'm about is not related to the need for more

information—it's about the need for you to decide and make a commitment to follow me or not.

You resisted the practical advice that I offered you about this life, so why would you take my spiritual advice about the next life? Just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness and showed Israel the way to overcome slavery and sin, so must I be lifted up so that I can show you and others the way to new life.”

John caps off today's gospel reading with two sentences, which Martin Luther, the great Protestant Reformer, dubbed “the gospel in a nutshell.” John explains:

For God so loved the world that God gave His only begotten Son, so that whosoever believes in him shall not perish but may have everlasting life. For God sent the Son into the world, not to condemn the world, but that the world might be saved through him.<sup>1</sup>

So there you have it. Today's gospel reading in plain English, with the last two verses (3:16–17) quoted from the *King James Version* of the Bible, which—if we were taught to memorize this passage as children, and many of us were—is the way that we learned it and took it to heart. Now to the spring cleaning.

### III

John 3:16 is one of those passages that I have had to bring out of my spiritual “treasure trove” on more than one occasion in adulthood and assess what to do with it and all the baggage that has come with it.

On the one hand, as children growing up in the Lutheran Church, this was the first Bible passage that my sister and I were taught to memorize. Our Grandma Nehring and Aunt Hazel drilled us on memory work every time they saw us. John 3:16 was always on their list of passages that they expected us to recite at the drop of a hankie.

Mrs. Johnson, one of our Sunday School teachers, repeatedly said that Martin Luther referred to this passage as “the gospel in a nutshell,” and that she agreed with him.

Truthfully, their validation of the passage was enough for me, for many years. Martin Luther said it, Grandma and Mrs. Johnson agreed. John 3:16 was the gospel in a nutshell. What else did you need to know? Not much.

So I went merrily along through life sharing the view that John 3:16 was the gospel in a nutshell, and that what we most needed to know and believe was these words. This interpretation worked well for me until I went away to college and encountered Christians who were more evangelical and fundamentalist than those whom I had known growing up in Iowa. These Christians used John 3:16 as a wedge to define, at

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<sup>1</sup> *King James Version*.

least for themselves, who would be tossed and who would be saved when their last days came on this earth.

My theological conundrum over John 3:16 deepened throughout college and graduate school as I became friends with people who had been raised in other faith traditions, particularly Judaism and Unitarian Universalism, and as I got to know good people who considered themselves humanists and agnostics. More and more, this passage, John 3:16, which had once seemed so simple, became increasingly more complicated.

Perhaps you can relate to my quandary. Perhaps you can relate, even if you weren't raised Lutheran, even if the elders in your family didn't drill you on memory work, and even if you have never heard anyone refer to this passage as the gospel in a nutshell. Maybe you, like me, have had to do some spiritual spring cleaning.

What to do with John 3:16? Toss or save?

Since many Christians argue that this passage promotes a message that would set millions of good people outside of the circle of God's grace—because they weren't raised to believe that Christ was their Savior or they haven't embraced this belief when exposed to our faith—maybe I should toss this passage from my Biblical canon. Maybe I should toss Christianity altogether.

God knows, decent people have chosen one or both of these options and have made that choice with less angst than me; but I could do neither. I could not toss out John 3:16 or the Christian faith. Instead, I have learned to live with the tensions that this and other passages stir in me and in our culture, and I have learned to be mindful of what's in my spiritual closet and the closet that we call Christianity.

I have also come to believe that my decision to live with and struggle with difficult scriptural passages, with the Bible as a whole, and with troubling aspects of our tradition, is more than a matter of personal preference. It's a profound theological and ethical statement about something that, *en masse*, could have a very negative effect on our society, if this were the only Christian message that people thought was faithful.

So I invite you to hang in there with me on this spiritual house cleaning stuff and to trust the process, knowing that sometimes it gets worse before it gets better. Sort of like spring cleaning in our apartment.

Why get on with the spiritual housecleaning? Why save passages like John 3:16? Why keep struggling with this and other troubling texts and interpretations? Why not toss some passages or the whole darn cannon?

My answer to these questions is that do so—to toss rather than save—is to throw the baby out with the bathwater, and to hand the keys to the Church over to those who, for the most part, will never bring the tools of modern scholarship to bear on textual study, or on the ethical application of ancient truths to modern conundrums, and to allow

Christianity to become a philosophy largely about exclusion and xenophobia—which is fundamentally contrary to Christ’s ministry and overall message.

Further, if we give up John 3:16 (and other passages that come with a lot of baggage), then the only people left in Christianity (and our society) to interpret these texts will be people who stop reading before they get to verse 17, which affirms God’s universal gift of salvation and intention to save everyone, rather than to toss those who don’t subscribe to a particular interpretation of this or other passages. This is, in part, what Jesus was trying to tell Nicodemus: don’t try to make a logical proof based just on one interpretation. Look at my whole ministry and let that experience transform your understanding of who I am, and what we are called to be and do in the world.

If we only go with John 3:16 and one interpretation, and we give up the overarching message of the Christian message, then we give up our religion to those who would privilege one verse and one interpretation of that verse and ignore additional messages. Likewise, if we give up John 3:16, we do the thing that we accuse our adversaries of doing. We privilege one verse and discount others along with the larger message of Christianity.

So where does this leave us? My answer is that the challenge to dig through our spiritual closets and do some serious housecleaning can be a rich and rewarding Lenten exercise. In fact, it can be even more rewarding than finding jewelry or cash in an old blazer. It can be an occasion in which our faith is deepened, and our tradition is enriched as we remember, reclaim, and refresh that which we have received, and as we discern how best to care for and pass on our faith to others. So let’s get on it. Let’s get on with our spiritual housecleaning. Amen.