

The Absurdity of God's Love
John 3:1-17

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February 17, 2008

Landon Saunders was lecturing. Max Lucado was in the audience. No one could talk about Jesus like Saunders could. At the end of the lecture a student stood up, looking like he had walked right out of the Colorado mountains outside, with his stocking hat, down vest, nylon leggings and hiking boots. Throughout the lecture he had listened intently, standing behind the rest of the crowd. Now he addressed the speaker. "Do you mean to tell me that God became a baby and that he was born in a sheep stable?" "Yes, that's what I mean to say," Saunders responded. "And then after becoming a baby, he was raised in a blue-collar home? He never wrote any books or held any offices, yet he called himself the Son of God?" "Yes, that's right." "He never traveled outside his own country, never studied at a university, never lived in a palace, and yet asked to be regarded as the creator of the universe?" "That's correct," Saunders encouraged him.

This questioner was not a cynic or a show-off. He was uncomfortable in front of the large crowd. But he wanted to know, so he continued. "He was betrayed by his own people? No followers came to his defense? And then he was executed like a common thief?" "That's the gist of it," Saunders confirmed. "And after the killing he was buried in a borrowed grave?"

Max writes that the honesty of the dialogue kept the audience spellbound. They were witnessing one of those rare moments when two people were willing to question the holy. Here were two men standing on opposite sides of a deep chasm, one asking the other if the bridge that stretched between them could actually be trusted.

"And according to what's written, after three days in the grave he was resurrected and made appearances to over five hundred people?" "Yes." "And all this was to prove that God still loves his people and provides a way for us to return to him?" "Right." "Doesn't that all sound rather . . ." He paused a moment for the right adjective. "Doesn't that all sound rather absurd?"

All heads turned in perfect sync to look at Saunders. His response was simple. "Yes. Yes I suppose it does sound rather absurd, doesn't it?" Max Lucado didn't like that answer. Absurd means ridiculously unreasonable. Max yelled in his mind at Saunders, "Don't let him call God ridiculously unreasonable!"¹ But isn't God's love for us ridiculously unreasonable?

In our passage from John, Nicodemus, a Pharisee, a leader of the Jews, comes to Jesus under the cover of darkness so that no other Pharisee will see him coming to Jesus. Nicodemus knows the law of God. He also knows that Jesus has come from God. He came because he has seen the signs that Jesus has done. However, where Nicodemus trips up is where that student at the Saunderson's lecture was stuck. Nicodemus gets stuck in what he knows to be reasonable.

Jesus immediately challenges Nicodemus. "Nicodemus," Jesus says, "no one can see the kingdom of God without being born again from above." "How can somebody be born a second time?" he questions. Nicodemus is a teacher of Israel and he doesn't understand. Surely Nicodemus remembers from the scroll of the prophet Ezekiel that God will give a new heart to God's people, and put a new spirit within them? Is that what Jesus is talking about here? Is that what it means to be born again from above? Nicodemus' knowledge of the physical is blocking the possibility of what God can do. "How can these things be?" he asks.

Then, in verse 16, Jesus reveals what I believe is the toughest challenge for Nicodemus and the toughest challenge for us as well, for Jesus proclaims something even more absurd than being born a second time. "Nicodemus," Jesus says, "God so loved the world that he gave his only Son." Nicodemus, Jesus says, God's love is wide, wider than the ocean, wider than you have ever imagined. The love of God is not a new idea to Nicodemus, for he knows that the steadfast love of the Lord never ceases. But does that include everybody in Nicodemus' mind? What about the Gentiles and the tax collectors and sinners? Hearing that God loved the whole world sounded absurd to Nicodemus.

This absurd, unconditional, extravagant love of God has always been a controversial topic and impossible in the human mind. Dwight L. Moody, an evangelist well known for his emphasis on God's love, was greatly disturbed the first time he heard of the wideness of God's love. In the winter of 1968, a converted pickpocket now British preacher named Henry Moorehouse showed up unexpectedly in Chicago and asked to speak to Moody's congregation. Moody had to be away for a few days, so he reluctantly arranged for Moorehouse to preach at midweek gatherings in the church basement. He returned on Saturday from his trip, and asked his wife about Moorehouse's preaching. "He preaches a little different from you," she told Moody. "He preaches that God loves sinners." "He is wrong," Moody replied. Mrs. Moody advised her husband to withhold judgment until he heard Moorehouse preach.

On Sunday morning, Moody noticed his congregation carrying Bibles. He had never told them to bring Bibles. Moorehouse announced his text, “John 3:16: God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish but have everlasting life.” Instead of delivering a well-shaped three-point sermon, Moorehouse went from Genesis to Revelation giving proof that God loves the sinner. Moody remembers it this way, “I never knew up to that time God loved us so much. This heart of mine began to thaw out; I could not keep back the tears.” From that moment on, Dwight L. Moody turned in his ways to become an apostle of the love of God.

How do you respond to the statement, “God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believes in him should not perish but have everlasting life?” Do you believe it? Do you really believe it? Do you question whether it is really possible for God to love them, over there, the people you don’t like? Do you feel unworthy of such a love? Do we, in our true heart of hearts, think it absurd for God to love us, to love me, passionately enough to die as one of us?

God’s love is almost too good to be true. It is patient and kind, never envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Even after generations of his own people had turned away from God time and time again, he loved them. Even after his own friends betrayed and denied him, he still died for them. And today, after billions of people have chosen power, wealth, and fame over God, God still waits for them. Millions taunt, deny and reject him today, and God still desires that they receive the salvation he freely, lovingly offers. Max Lucado, after recounting this impossible love aptly notes, “How absurd to think that such nobility would go to such poverty to share such a treasure with thankless souls.” Frederick Faber expressed it in hymn form writing, “That Thou should’st think so much of me and be the God thou art, is darkness to my intellect, but sunshine to my heart!”

Humans give up on love so quickly, so easily. God will not. It is the essence of who God is. For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but have eternal life. God sent the Son into the world, not to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.

But maybe it’s not so absurd to us, once we realize God has a father’s love for us. God has the kind of love that loves something that looks like Winston Churchill when it is born, screams in the middle of the night, and emits foul smells. A father’s love assembles countless toys and bikes, works hard year after year to provide food, shelter, clothing and many wants for his

children, and yet at Christmas or Father's Day, he receives a tie or an Old Spice Gift Set under a card with everyone's name on it. It is a love that for me threatened to break my boyfriend's legs if I was not home by midnight. A father's love is a love that fights to the death for the safety of any and all of his children. It is a love many of us have experienced from our earthly fathers. But, even if our own father is or was not the ideal, we know what we needed and wanted from a father – and that is what God is, the perfect Father. And that is how God loves the world – with a Father's love – not based on behavior, but on the fact that we belong to him.

I have often wondered what happened to Nicodemus. Was he finally overwhelmed and convinced of God's love by his interactions with Jesus – the proof of God's absurd, amazing love? John reports that Nicodemus pleads with the chief priests and Pharisees to give Jesus a fair hearing. After Jesus died, Nicodemus helped Joseph of Arimathea prepare Jesus' body for burial. I wonder if Nicodemus saw the Son of God lifted up on the cross and finally believed the absurd tale of a God who loves the whole world. I wonder if he was born from above with the knowledge of that love.

Are you overwhelmed and convinced of God's amazing absurd love for you and for the world? This is the essence of who we are and what we believe. It is the headline of our faith. It is for many people the only Bible verse known by heart. And it is enough. The absurd love of God should be what we know and cling to, what we teach, and what we proclaim to the world for as long as we live. We should all be wearing rainbow wigs and John 3:16 t-shirts everywhere we go. For the only thing more absurd than a God who loves like this is for those who know it not to share it. For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but have everlasting life. Wow! That's absurd. That's wonderfully and gloriously absurd! Thanks be to God!

ⁱ Max Lucado, *God Came Near*, p. 29-32.