

Universal Problem, Universal Gift

We've got a problem – a big problem. You do, and I do. And this problem is not all the downed branches in the yard from last week's ice storm; nor is it, students, that you procrastinated on your science fair project, so you whipped it together this week, but you don't think it's very good. This problem has nothing to do with your health (even if you're dying); or your wealth (even if you're bankrupt); or your job (even if you hate it); or your marriage (even if you're going through divorce); or your kids (even if they drive you nuts); or your parents (even if they drive you nuts); or even your age (whether you're young or old). Every single one of us, everyone in the world, shares the same monstrous, colossal, universal problem. What do you think it is? "Well, we're at church, and he's the pastor, and this is the sermon; so he's probably going to say 'sin.'" And you're right! But that's part of the problem. We don't take sin very seriously or grasp the eternal consequences of our sins. But Jesus wants us to! He wants us to understand our universal problem.

So he lays it all out for us, and for Nicodemus, in John 3. Listen: **"Very truly I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God unless they are born again... No one can enter the kingdom of God unless they are born of water and the Spirit."** No one! That is a blanket condemnation of the whole world, of every person who's ever lived, including you and me, because we all are under this curse of sin, our universal problem. It all started in the Garden of Eden. We heard about it last Sunday in Genesis 3. Satan tempts Eve; Eve eats the fruit; she gives to it Adam; Adam eats the fruit. And now humanity is corrupted. We heard about that last Sunday in Romans 5: **"One trespass resulted in condemnation for all people" (18).** It's universal! What happened in Eden impacts everyone – which is exactly what Jesus says here: **"Flesh gives birth to flesh."** Many of you are parents; all of you are children of parents. **"Flesh gives birth to flesh"** means that because of Eden, parents don't just pass down their good looks to their kids; they pass down their sin! You inherit sin and guilt from your parents. And sometimes we think of sin as just bad behavior, naughty words, wicked thoughts. Yes, those are sins. But sin is also a status, a condition, a diagnosis, an infection – it infects you, from birth, from conception. The term for this is original sin. Listen to these passages. Psalm 51: **"Surely I was sinful at birth, sinful from the time my mother conceived me" (5).** Ephesians 2: **"As for you, you were dead in your transgression and sins" (1).** Romans 3: **"There is no one righteous, not even one... There is no one who does good, not even one... For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (10, 12, 23).** And here Jesus says, **"No one can see the kingdom of God... No one can enter the kingdom of God."** This is universal language to describe our universal problem.

Compounding the problem is that, even if we know this in our head, we don't always believe it in our heart – because the doctrine of original sin levels us; it puts us all in the same boat, and we don't like that. We don't like to think of ourselves as having the same spiritual diagnosis as, say, a rapist, a terrorist, or a murderer. There's a voice within us all that always tries to justify ourselves, in a number of different ways. 1) We try to minimize our sin. "It's no big deal. God's not concerned with this." Well, yes he is! 2) We compare ourselves to others. "I'm not perfect, but I'm nowhere near as bad as that person!" Well, God will deal with them, but he'll also deal with you! 3) We try to counterbalance our bad with good. "If I do enough good things, that will outweigh the bad things I do. And I think that I've done a lot of good things; I'm a pretty good person." Well, that's work-righteousness, and the Bible is very clear that we cannot save ourselves or earn our own salvation. So, none of these manmade solutions can solve our universal problem of sin. **"No one can see the kingdom of God... No one can enter the kingdom of God."** No one! And without a real solution to this universal problem, no one can escape our universal punishment: eternity in hell.

But that night with Nicodemus, Jesus unveiled the universal solution: a gift from God himself for all mankind, every person of every generation – God's universal gift. Jesus said, **"Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the wilderness, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, that everyone who believes may have eternal life in him."** Remember the story from Numbers 21? The children of Israel are wandering through the desert on their way to the Promised Land. But they complained and griped to God about their food and water. So, **"the Lord sent venomous snakes among them; they bit the people and many Israelites died."** But the Lord was gracious and provided a universal gift. **"The LORD said to Moses, 'Make a snake and put it up on a pole; anyone [universal] who is bitten can look at it and live.' So Moses made a bronze snake and put it up on a pole. Then when anyone was bitten by a snake and looked at the bronze snake, they lived" (4-9).** So here's the gift: a long, wooden pole up in the air. At the top is an ugly sight – a snake (who wants to look at a snake?). But it's precious – it's bronze. And it is for everyone, because everyone who looked up at this ugly, beautiful sight was completely healed! That was then; this is now: a long,

wooden pole up in the air – a Roman cross. At the top is an ugly sight – a man being crucified (who wants to look at a man being crucified?). But it's precious – it's the Son of God. And he is for everyone, because everyone who looks up at this ugly, beautiful sight is completely healed! **“Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the wilderness, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, that everyone who believes may have eternal life in him.”** So can you see? The crucifixion of Jesus is God's universal gift to the world – the perfect solution to our universal problem. We can't minimize our sin, or compare ourselves to others, or counterbalance our bad with our good, or earn our own salvation. We can do nothing! So the Lord does everything, for everyone! Just look at the snake on the pole and be saved! Just look at the Son of God on cross and be saved. This is God's universal gift.

And while this profound, universal truth is sinking into Nicodemus's heart, and our hearts, John offers us this marvelous explanation, the most famous passage in the Bible: **“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.”** Notice the universal language. The **“world”** – that's everyone; **“whoever”** believes – this gift is for everyone! So let's break this verse down. God so **“loved”** – this gift is given in love; God's heart is filled with love. He loved the **“world”** – which is surprising because the world is evil; the world rejects God; the world is filled with sin. Why would God love world!? There's nothing about us to love! But that's the point! He doesn't love us because we deserve it. He loves us just because! That's called grace, God's undeserved love. So in love he **“gave”** – gifts are given – **“his one and only Son.”** There's nothing more precious to the Lord than his Son. But we had a problem, and we needed Jesus. So God gave us his own Son, as a gift, so that **“whoever believes in him”** (more on that in a second) **“shall not perish,”** in hell, **“but have eternal life,”** with the Lord forever in heaven. There's the problem and the gift; there's the law and the gospel. No one excluded; this applies to everyone. The situation and the solution are both universal.

Now, does that mean that everyone goes to heaven? No, because not everyone believes. **“Whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.”** And verse 18, which comes right after today's reading, says, **“Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because they have not believed in the name of God's one and only Son.”** So believing, trusting, having faith in Jesus is your connection to the gift – just like it was for Abraham. Remember? **“Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness” (Rom 4:3).** But rejecting Jesus, turning your back on him in unbelief, means rejecting and turning your back on the gift. And by nature, we're all unbelievers; we're all born without true fear of God and true faith in God. So, if the gift is universal, but is only received by faith (which we don't have by nature), then where does our faith come from?

Jesus answers that here in John 3, as well. **“Very truly I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God unless they are born again... No one can enter the kingdom of God unless they are born of water and the Spirit.”** A second birth is required, which, as Nicodemus learned, has nothing to do with a labor and delivery room. Your first birth gives you life; your second birth gives you faith. **“Flesh gives birth to flesh”** – your mother gives you your first birth; **“but the Spirit gives birth to spirit”** – the Holy Spirit gives you your second birth. Being born again means that the Holy Spirit works saving faith in your heart and converts you, changes you, from being an unbeliever to being a believer in Jesus. Your second birth is your conversation to the Christian faith – something you cannot do on your own; the Holy Spirit must do it for you, as a gift. And how does he do it? One of two ways: either through the Word of God (preached, taught, heard, explained), or through the Word and water Sacrament called Holy Baptism. 1 Peter 1: **“You have been born again... through the living and enduring word of God” (1:23).** And here Jesus says, **“No one can enter the kingdom of God unless they are born of water and the Spirit,”** – the Spirit's working through the water of Baptism. Now, I could preach for hours about Baptism. But for today what I want you to see is that through the Word of God and through the Sacrament of Baptism, **“the Spirit gives birth to spirit;”** The Holy Spirit gives us second birth and gives us faith in God and makes us children of God.

So, the problem of sin is universal – it infects us all. God's gift of salvation through Jesus is universal – he died on cross for us all. Faith in Christ is not universal – Christians believe, but many people don't. Which leads us to two reactions. 1) Thank God every day for your salvation through Jesus, and for your faith in Jesus. And 2) Look for opportunities to share your faith with people who just don't understand the universal problem and the universal gift. Next Sunday we'll see Jesus sharing the gospel with the woman at the well in John 4. And he brings her to faith; she is reborn! The message we have here today in John 3 is for everyone. The world needs to know this, and we need to be reminded of this: that we have a universal problem; but in love, in Christ, God has graciously given us a universal gift.