Text: John 3:1-17

**Introduction**

The basic Lutheran theological understanding is law and gospel. But like all bumper sticker slogans, there are a million ways to twist the original idea, usually so you end up with exactly the opposite. For example, the modern way of hearing law and gospel is law bad gospel good. You could argue that the Reformation itself was a recovery from the opposite: law good gospel dangerous. Both of those are changing the conjunction. Law or Gospel, Law then Gospel. Pick your conjunction. Hook up the words and phrases and clauses as you like.

But there is another way option that is popular. You hear it from politics all the time. The 3rd way. When you find yourself in a polarized situation, or experiencing a tension, the desire is always to relieve the tension, to find a way out of the polarity. And maybe some 3rd ways actually do this. Although I’d be hard pressed to think of one. Most third ways at their best are language games that allow for one side of the tension to win and the other to save face. At their worst they are language games that attempt to trick someone just long enough to lose.

Within Christian circles a common third way proposed between law and gospel is love. And I’m not throwing this out there to downgrade love as a theological virtue. Although I’d probably argue in English that we were much better off when it was called charity. That both gave the virtue some needed distance from eros and bolstered the meaning of charity beyond rounding up you purchase at China Panda to the nearest dollar. What I mean by saying love is often thrown at as a 3rd way is that love is often invoked to set aside the law or to remove the specificity of the gospel. “Love covers a multitude of sins.” Yes, it does. But the person who quotes that rarely asks or acknowledges the cost. Love covering a multitude of sins looks like the cross. It looks like Jesus saying “forgive them father, they know not what they do.” Someone else has recognized the cost of the law and chosen to pay it for you. Or something like “God is love.” The way that is usually invoked is to create an anonymous gospel free of the means of grace, free of how the Spirit Works. This 3rd way use of love is usually just an attempt to remove the tension of law and gospel, of being both sinner and saint.

**Text**

The text that ends with the gospel in a nutshell is the perfect one to reflect upon how we attempt to use the word love today.

The story centers around an exchange between Jesus and Nicodemus. Nick is described both as a Pharisee and as a ruler of the Jews. So Nick was both a man who was serious about his religion and was of some mixture of social status, education and popularity to be an acknowledged leader. He might have even been a member of the Sanhedrin, the highest ruling council of the Jews. The story also starts out with Nicodemus coming to Jesus by night. It is far from original to say that the literal darkness is something of a symbol for spiritual darkness. Although I’d also point at the immediate next line of the text where Nicodemus states why he’s present and admits something big. This ruler of the Jews calls Jesus Rabbi. Nick is willing to take some instruction from Jesus which is a big admission. He is also not so blind as to miss everything. “No one can do these signs that you do unless God is with him.”

Nicodemus has seen enough and has enough spiritual insight to see the work of God. What he is after is a rational statement of what is this itinerant rabbi’s purpose. Jesus, what is God doing in you? And maybe, “How can I help? How can the Pharisees and the Rulers of the Jews help you in your divine purpose?" And of course part of any question of “how can we help you” is the quid pro quo, “you are going to play nice with us, right?”

And I think most of Jesus’ answer is simply disabusing Nicodemus, and any of us who might think this way, that we have anything to offer the mission of God in Jesus. Or that we can control it in any way.

First, to be part of it, one must be born again or born from above. That mixture of social status, education and popularity that created the ruler of the Jews – any ruler of any group we could say – is of no use in what God is doing now. The only means of entry into the Kingdom of God, it rebirth from above. Now Nicodemus doesn’t understand this, so Jesus translates his metaphor into the specific action of being born of water and the spirit. Even in the time of Nicodemus the reference would have been understood. John had been baptizing for a long time, with a message of one coming who would baptize with the Spirit. Whether King or pauper according to the flesh means nothing to the Spirit. Whatever you think you are offering for help for the Kingdom according to the flesh, save it. The Kingdom is not in the quid pro quo business.

Second, Jesus specifically expands on the work of the Spirit. It blows where it wills. We hear its sound, but we don’t really know where it comes from our where it goes. So Nicodemus being able to see the signs that Jesus does is hearing the sound is seeing the effects, but he doesn’t really know. And we are the same. We often might have intimation of the Spirit at work. We can see his effects, but without a Word from outside of us, we don’t really get it. And we certainly cannot control it or channel it.

What Jesus is doing is from God, but Nick, you can’t help, at least not yet. Nick, you can’t even understand what is going on around you.

Now what happens when you tell an “expert” you don’t know what you are talking about? Or when you tell the “expert” that what he thinks he knows has all been built upon the sand?

You are lucky if all they do is sputter back like Nicodemus, “How can these things be?”

But Jesus presses the case. “You are the teacher of Israel and you don’t get it?”

God does what he does. And he works through the means that he establishes. As crazy as those means might seem. Nicodemus, think of that snake that God had Moses make in the desert. Where the heck did that come from? One moment everyone who worships the Golden Calf is killed, and the next God is lifting up a bronze snake.

**Christology**

And this is how God has chosen to work in this age. He has sent his only son full of the Holy Spirit into the flesh. “Truly, Truly, I say to you, we speak of what we know, and bear witness to what we have seen.” This is the Word from outside of us. This Christ is the Word that tells us about the Father. This Christ most importantly is the one who testifies about the love of the Father for all his creation.

For the Father so loved the cosmos, that he gave his only son.

God is not love in some vague amorphous way. God is love in his son. God is love most clearly in the Son of Man lifted up. God is love when we look at that cross and are forgiven our sins and healed of our sickness until death. Just as Moses lifted the Serpent, so the Son was lifted, that we might have eternal life. God is love in this very specific way. The law was not set aside. That law was fulfilled. Jesus was obedient unto to the cross. The grace is not some anonymous warm fuzzy. The grace is in the blood and body broken.

Don’t try to use love as some 3rd way past law and gospel. Because the love of the Father is made known only is the very specific person of Jesus Christ. We can’t relieve the tension anywhere but under the cross.

**Moral**

And Jesus bids us in this life to pick up our cross and follow him.

We are called to love our neighbor, but the love – the charity – we are called to is defined by this cross. It is a love of obedience and a love of grace. It is a love that doesn’t deny either, but finds relief of the tension only in our hope.

**Eschatological**

And what is that hope? “Whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.”

What is that hope? “That God did not send his son to condemn the world, but to save it.”

The love of God is the cross. The love we are called to live is the cross. And the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing. We speak of what we know, but the world does not receive our testimony.

The World wants a love that it can buy or barter or channel. The world wants an anonymous love. The world wants an easy third way.

The Love that is given is the Son lifted up.

The love that is called for is concrete and hard: of law and gospel, or obedience and grace.

A love sustained by faith in His cross, and Hope in the Father He testified to us about who would not have his creation condemned.