

**“For God so Loves”**  
**John 3:1-17**  
**Andrew Foster Connors**  
**2<sup>nd</sup> Sunday in Lent**  
**March 12, 2017**

I failed as an atheist which is hard to do since there are so many more arguments for being an atheist than the opposite. There’s the church’s entanglements with empire – embracing so much of what Jesus rejected. The church’s preference for the absence of tension more than its hunger for the presence of justice. There are all the ways that we in the church hurt each other sometimes intentionally, sometimes not. There’s the scientific method which makes any kind of miracle obsolete, history which questions whether Scripture is anything more than an interesting library of books, and there are bad things that happen to good people and good things that happen to bad people raising questions about the power, or the goodness, or the existence of God.

And yet I failed as an atheist. It wasn’t for lack of trying. By the time I got to college I suspected I was only a Christian because my parents were Christian and they had fed me a steady diet of Jesus on the church’s dinner ware for 18 years of life. Faith was *their* narrative. It wouldn’t be mine. So I packed my bags but not my baggage, confident of my liberation. I wrote a 30 page personal history, a 15 page personal philosophy and turned it into my professor in my freshman college seminar “The Search for Meaning.” My personal philosophy came back with a C and a lot of red ink. “Utilitarianism is your personal philosophy?!” he wrote. “Really? That’s not even original! You’ve just adopted someone else’s philosophy. That’s not your own.” I tried pretending I was interested in fraternity life, but when the brothers finally ended my bid telling me, “your heart just doesn’t seem like it’s in it,” they were right. I tried pretending I didn’t care about anything, tried losing myself in cigarettes and Marxist coffee houses but each time I tried something “new” I heard his words – that’s not original. You’ve just adopted someone else’s philosophy. That’s not your own. Trying to live without a guiding narrative just led me to fall into another one.

“You’re gonna have to serve somebody,” Bob Dylan sang, but Dylan sounded too much like Jesus and I didn’t want to believe anyone who sounded too much like Jesus. I wanted my own thing. My own perspective. My own philosophy. My own way.

“No one can build a decent myth on her own,” Gordon Atkinson wrote recently. “You just can’t do it. You’re not smart enough and you haven’t lived long enough. Human narratives require time, community, conflict and resolution between varying points of view, and lots of trial and error.”<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Gordon Atkinson, “Negev Manifesto,” <http://gordonatkinson.net/essays-fiction/negev-manifesto>.

I imagine this could be the place where Nicodemus finds himself visiting Jesus one night. Steeped in the narrative of his faith yet yearning for more than a package of beliefs, a bag full of hand-me-down practices, a system giving answers that more and more serve to keep him safe. Hoping for a kind of transformation but also fearing it. Wishing to encounter the God who would change his life but also hoping it won't. Wanting to touch a mystery beyond the settled ways of his land or his faith, but also counting on things to stay the same. I imagine that Nicodemus might have found himself in a similar place – wanting to go deeper into his faith, but fearing where it might lead. Hoping for light that would cast away all shadows but fearing he'd have no place to hide.

There's a long tradition of reading Nicodemus as a kind of foil for the Jewish leadership: too afraid of his own people, so he comes at night. All the wisdom in the world, but he just can't see the truth – not like us Christians. To read it like that would be to adopt yet another system – anti-Semitism – that has roots even deeper than the Christian faith. There's an anti-Jewish way to read this text. Maybe that was party of John's community's intent.

But there's a different way to read this text: even people among us with the best education, with seats of honor and seats of power, even they – even we - must be reborn – made all over again. No one who faces the mystery of God walks away the same. Knowing someone else's narrative isn't enough. Living someone else's package of faith won't do it for you. Encountering God undoes you. There's no way around it.

Evangelical and charismatic branches of the Christian faith share this perspective. But there it's also turned into yet another system, another bag of tricks, another pathway prescribed by someone else. Take this two sentence prayer with a dip in the baptismal pool and call me in the morning. As my professor said, "That's not original. You've just adopted someone else's philosophy."

No, facing Jesus undoes you, undoes your personal philosophy, your command and control living, your self-assuredness. "I'm not even sure I believe in God much less Jesus," I told my professor. He was questioning me on my philosophy. "Jesus is, like, the only thing about you that's interesting," he quipped. He was merciless. "You're a white boy from southern suburbia. Nothing's more manufactured than that." I would have been offended if he wasn't so right. "Look," he said, "when I asked the class if they thought racism was still a problem you were the only white kid in class to speak up. Where do you think that comes from? You don't fit in with the frat scene because it seems like a fake kind of brotherhood to you. Where does that come from? And you don't trust authority because you've been taught the difference between people in positions of power and people with true authority. You may not believe in Jesus, but the way I see it, he's left his mark on you." I was a terrible atheist.

Jesus says that just as Moses lifted up the snake in the wilderness, so the Son of Man must be lifted up. When Moses puts the snake up on the pole, Andrew Prior points out, the people are forced to look upon the thing that is killing them.<sup>2</sup> When

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<sup>2</sup> Andrew Prior, "Wanderment," <https://onemansweb.org/wanderment-john-31-21.html>.

Jesus was lifted up on the cross, his disciples were forced to look on Rome's killing machine and death that hangs over all of our heads. And we are forced to look at ourselves and see our own vulnerability, our fear, our own cowardice. Forced to see how fleeting life is, how short our life spans, how there are no do overs in living. Forced to face the truth that we can't build any decent myths on our own. We don't live long enough. We're gonna have to serve somebody.

But we also see God there. In the worst of ourselves, the product of our sin, the worst of our suffering, we see God there. In the worst of our shame of what we've done to others, or not done for or with others, or what we've done to ourselves, we see God there. In the deepest of our longing or the hopes we dare not name for fear of disappointment, God is there. That's the narrative that I've chosen or maybe it's the narrative that's chosen me.

And here's John's claim about Jesus. He's not only the best evidence that we have that God loves the world. He's the best chance we have for facing the truth about ourselves without ending up lost or cynical or disengaged, drugged out or checked out, washed up or washed out. Not doctrine about him, not statements about him, not ideas about him, but the reality of God here in the world, here in your life – who sees you as you really are.

I think that's what love is. Facing the truth about ourselves without letting go of each other. That's what makes love so hard. Some of us pride ourselves in our ability to face the truth, but at the expense of relationships. Others of us are strong in staying in relationship, but only because we don't want to face what's actually taking place between us. It's what's broken about our politics. It's what divides our community. It's what's broken inside of us.

On the cross, we see both – what's killing us and God's refusal to participate in it. What's separating us from God and God's refusal to leave our side. On the cross we see the definition of love from God's side. Which is what gives me the courage to see myself like the professor saw me, like Jesus sees Nicodemus – adrift, but not beyond hope. Broken, but not beyond healing. Lost but full of possibility because God can be found there.

And so I wonder, what hard truths would the cross have you face in your own life? If you can bear to look at it, if you can stand the vulnerability of facing the God who leaves her mark on you, what hard truth do you need to face in your own life? The thing that keeps you from becoming yourself. The thing that disrupts your joy, or your loving, or your vocation in the world. Meeting Jesus in the dark, what truth about you does he bring into the light so that you can face it together?