

A colleague shared with me the night his son Benjamin was upset that Dad was putting him to bed earlier than he wanted to go, Ben in his anger said, "Daddy, I hate you." The father, exercising some parental wisdom replied, "Ben, I'm sorry you feel that way, but I love you." Benjamin's response surprised his dad: "Don't say that!"

Again, Dad said, "I'm sorry Benjamin, but it's true. I love you." "No!" came Ben's frantic response... "Don't say that again!" At which point Ben's father added, "Benjamin, I love you...*like it or not!*"

6 year old Ben was up to tricks we have all attempted at one time or another. He was trying to turn love into a bargain that might sound something like this... So, Dad, you want us to love each other, that is so important to you, then I will love you if you allow me to stay up late."

An article in Psychology today writes, "Bargains happen when we trade parts of the authentic Self for something we think we need more than the authentic Self. Unfortunately, we have all been taught to do that very thing from our earliest upbringing. In relationships where others become frightened by our authenticity, bargaining can cause us to give up ourselves to please them, to fit in, to connect. And we live into whatever identity best fits those desperate needs for connection."

Counselors teach us how bargains can become an infection in loving relationships. As we turn to the story of Nicodemus and Jesus, we might wonder where does this leave us as we hear these famous words, "For God so loved the world that God gave God's only Son, so that whoever believes in him may not perish, but may have eternal life."

Doesn't it sound a bit like God is bargaining with us? "I will give my own son if you people will draw nearer, you will receive eternal life if you believe in Jesus." This feels like the pitfalls of "if," but is that really what is going on here?

We say it every week, God's love is unconditional, it is a gift, it is ever-present and eternal. There is nothing we can do to secure God's glorious love and nothing we can do to lose it. At times, we may feel God has given up on us but upon closer look, it is likely we have isolated ourselves from God by our actions. We might say, God loves us... *whether we like it or not.*

But some ask, what about the part in the gospel which says, "everyone who believes in Jesus may not perish but may have eternal life." This really makes the equation sound easy, "believe in Christ, announce Jesus as your personal lord and savior, and receive eternal life." The problem is it turns faith into a litmus test. And we all know Christians dedicated to getting others to pass this litmus test.

“Jesus is my personal Lord and Savior...” It is a statement of faith which is important to many Christians, but when it becomes a litmus test to be considered in or out, it doesn’t allow for the variety of ways people come to faith in God. It becomes exclusivist and sounds like Christian Triumphalism and that does not seem in the Spirit of Jesus. Do we really believe Jesus, who in Mark 9, verse 40 tells his disciples, “Whoever is not against us, is for us,” do we really think Jesus would require a litmus test which excluded his own Jewish people, as well as Hindu, Muslims, Buddhists, Sikh’s and other Christians? There has to be something else going on here.

In addition we know this “litmus test” approach, taken to the extreme, has resulted in some very “UnChristian” consequences. Extreme Christians who unfairly generalize all Muslims as terrorists. An Extremist who believed he heard God’s call to attack a Sikh temple in Oak Creek, or recently we have seen assaults on Jewish cemeteries and threats to Jewish community centers.

As we listen to the story today we need to consider the gospel of John is written to other Christians, and to people seriously thinking about following Christ. The Author isn’t publishing this in a journal of world religions saying “We Are Right, You are Wrong.” The group being addressed has come that day because they are interested in learning more about the distinctive pathway Jesus paved. For Christians, the ways are through Christ. For people of other Faiths, we trust there are other, equally valid, paths to God.

So, where do we look in this story? Jesus tells Nicodemus faith is about rebirth. And here the story gets humorous. Jesus issues a profound and elegant call to embrace the daily process of dying to an old way of being and, rising to a deeper relationship with Christ, and Nicodemus comments about the impossibility of crawling back inside his mother’s tummy.

When Jesus talks about Rebirth, it is the opposite of bargaining ourselves; it is the deepening of our authentic self in a way that draws us closer to God, and builds up in us joy and courage. Jesus is talking about rebirth which was central in early Christianity and the New Testament, the idea we are born again... and again... and again. Dying and Rising, are the root images for the process of transformation which is at the center of the Christian life, and more specifically at the center of our Lenten reflective journey. Through the process of rebirth, little resurrections become animated in us.

Seminary was a place where many different approaches to Christian Faith merge. And as you might imagine, some of the ideas taught in seminary were challenging for students. One of the professors, John, was particularly adept at stretching, even challenging his students’ thoughts about faith and this rubbed some classmates the wrong way. I still remember a frantic classmate who was convinced Professor John had veered from true Christianity the student said with frustration in his voice, “Professor, I am having a lot of trouble accepting the things you are saying, you look at faith from a very different perspective than me, to help me accept that you aren’t leading me astray from the true faith, I just need to know, are you saved? Is Jesus your personal lord and savior?”

My professor who had been asked that question by previous students answered, “Yes I am saved. In fact Jesus saves me every day, without him I would be face down in a gutter.” As you might imagine it wasn’t the exact answer my classmate was hoping to hear, Professor John did not get an A+ on the litmus test, and yet no one could argue with him because he clearly articulated the ongoing process of dying and rising in Christ.

Rebirth is this process of getting saved everyday. Of recognizing how without Jesus we would be face down in the gutters of life.

I believe this passage is best used, not as a club to clobber those who don’t think like us, but as an invitation to greater intimacy with God. Intimacy plays a role in our human relationships, we know the power of Bonds instead of bargains. But, Information overload, tight schedules, demanding careers, technology and perfectionism keep folks anxious and occupied. In order to cope, we sometimes resort to bargaining: ‘If you do this for me, I’ll do that for you.’ It works for a while — until you’re exhausted from endless tasks and routines.

Intimacy requires something else and it’s the one thing bargains can never provide: true connection. I think humankind needs a new model.

Jesus’ call to authentic transformation and a deepening of our life in God is hard work. Dying to old ways of being includes the steps of grief including denial, and anger, sorrow and letting go, and finally acceptance. That is really tough, but it is why the elevator speech I would use to sum up this passage would sound sort of like that Father putting his angry 6-year-old to bed, What God is really saying is, “I love you; *whether you like it or not.*” Amen