

Grace to you and peace from God, our Creator, and from our Savior, Jesus Christ.
Amen.

John 3:16 is probably the best-known Bible verse in the world. It's been held up on countless signs at countless sporting events. It's a direct statement about God's love for every person, and for the entire created order. The word "world" in this verse in the original Greek, is "cosmos." So, in other words, God loves everything and everyone, God created.

This verse is in the middle of a conversation Jesus has with a man named Nicodemus, a Pharisee who visited him late one night to ask questions about who Jesus was.

This is right after Jesus cleansed the Temple. He's still in Jerusalem and he's on everybody's radar. And people want to know just exactly who this guy is. So, Nicodemus goes to find out.

But he goes at night, which tells us that even though he was a Pharisee and could officially question him, he went for his own reasons. He was genuinely curious and wanted to know and understand Jesus.

The conversation starts with a polite introduction and acknowledgement of Jesus as being someone who has come from God. And then it gets confusing.

Because of the way Nicodemus was educated, the way his brain was wired, he interpreted what Jesus said literally. And he had no reason not to. No one at that point in time, with maybe the exception of John the Witness – John the Baptist, really understood who Jesus was.

So, to be fair, his answers were a little confusing.

Because what Jesus was offering to Nicodemus was a brand new way of relating to God. A new way of believing. More than just cognitive assent or acknowledgment of God's existence.

On that night, Jesus invited Nicodemus to believe in him – in God – by being in relationship with him. For John's gospel, that's what belief in Jesus is – being in relationship with him.

And this relationship is rebirth. It's constant renewal and connection to God's loving Spirit. And it's also the beginning of eternal life. It makes eternal life both present and future, because in the relationship with Jesus – with God, eternal life begins now.

And it begins with invitation from Jesus, from God, from the Holy Spirit.

There are Christian faith traditions that teach that being "born anew" or born again is something we as humans do for ourselves. And that isn't true.

God creates the relationship with us. It is always God, Jesus, the Holy Spirit who acts first in our relationship with them. When we accept that invitation, we live in response to it.

Martin Luther says it best in his explanation to the 3rd Article of the Apostles' Creed:

I believe that I cannot, by my own understanding or effort, believe in Jesus Christ my Lord or come to him. But the Holy Spirit has called me through the Gospel, enlightened me with their gifts, and sanctified and kept me in true faith.

Belief in God, relationship with Jesus, is always our response to God's invitation – God's action, God's love – in our lives.

The judgment of not believing that John talks about here is an ongoing process – it isn't a once and done thing. It's repeated moments of calling out a wrong for the purpose of being called back into relationship with God.

Most often, we talk about it in terms of repentance and forgiveness. Acknowledging that we've turned away from God's love through a thought, word, or action and that we need to turn back toward it. Recognizing that the invitation is always there and will never be rescinded. And that believing in Jesus is as simple as receiving the invitation to be in relationship with him.

Author and theologian Barbara Brown Taylor tells the story of a woman who set out to discover the meaning of life. She read everything she could get her hands on and became "book smart." But nothing she read gave her the answer she was looking for.

She talked with other smart people and asked them about the meaning of life, and while their discussions were long and lively, none of them agreed on the same thing and she still looked for an answer.

She finally embarked on a round-the-world journey in search of the meaning of life. Everywhere she went, people told her they didn't know the meaning of life, but they'd heard of a man who did. But they didn't know where he lived.

So, she asked about him in every country she visited, and deep in the Himalayas, someone finally told her how to get to his house. It was a tiny little hut on the side of a mountain, just at the edge of the tree line.

She climbed to his front door and knocked. A kind-looking old man opened the door and said, "Yes?"

"I've come halfway around the world to ask you one question," she said, "What is the meaning of life?"

"Please come in and have some tea," was his response.

"No - no thank you. I didn't come all this way for tea. I came for an answer. Won't you please tell me what the meaning of life is?"

"We shall have tea," the man said. So, she gave up and went inside.

While the man was brewing the tea, the woman began telling him about all the books she'd read, all the places she'd been, and the people she'd met. The man listened, and as she talked, he placed a cup in her hand.

Then he began to pour the tea. She was so busy talking that she didn't notice when the teacup was full - so the man kept pouring until the tea ran over the sides of the cup and spilled to the floor.

"What are you doing?" she yelled as the tea burned her hand, "It's full! Stop! There's no more room!"

"Just so," the man said to her, "You come here wanting something from me, but what am I to do? There is no more room in your cup. Come back when it's empty, and then we'll talk."

We all experience times in our lives when there's no room in our cups. When we think we have all the answers we need up here (tap side of head). And that's normal. We're human. But when we get caught up in all the "book smart" stuff we think we need to believe in Jesus, there's no room for the relationship.

Nicodemus had everything the world had to offer. He was well-educated, he had a high station in life, a prominent leadership role, material wealth. And yet, he couldn't quite comprehend who Jesus really was.

We don't know if he ever did. We're not told. But I think he did. I think Nicodemus did come out of the cover of night and experience the new birth, and love and eternal life that Jesus invited him into. Because he appears twice more in John's gospel – in ch7, defending Jesus, and again in ch19 helping Joseph of Arimathea bury Jesus.

Both situations were quite public – very much in the light of day. Both were risky for someone like Nicodemus.

Our lives, as people of faith, are a series of responses to the invitation given by God, by Jesus, by the Holy Spirit. An invitation of relationship that offers us the experience of the love God has for the entire cosmos, a relationship that offers us eternal life here and now.

It isn't a relationship that's always easy or comfortable. Being rooted in God's love, it asks us to pay attention and to act on behalf of – and in solidarity with – people that are at risk and vulnerable. It asks us to speak the truth – to call a thing what it is.

¹To speak not with hatred, but with moral clarity, courage, and hope. Even when it scares us. Even when our voice shakes.

The relationship we have with Jesus is one that continually shapes and defines who we are. It's a relationship of constant rebirth and renewal and connection in the unending presence of God. A relationship that will never be withheld or rescinded. Because it's a relationship created and given by God.

Thanks be to God! Amen.

¹ Bishop Kevin L. Strickland, ELCA Southeastern Synod. January 24, 2026.