

If God So Loved the World...

Meditation on John 3:14-21

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Merritt Island Presbyterian Church

And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life. 'For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. 'Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him. Those who believe in him are not condemned; but those who do not believe are condemned already, because they have not believed in the name of the only Son of God. And this is the judgement, that the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil. For all who do evil hate the light and do not come to the light, so that their deeds may not be exposed. But those who do what is true come to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that their deeds have been done in God.'

The Rev. Jack "John" Borgal looks up reluctantly from his work--stacking and labeling boxes in a warehouse in a town on the Maryland/Pennsylvania border. He smiles tentatively and invites me in with a gesture. He stutters and his hands flutter. He looks with wonder at the rows and rows of boxes of winter clothes--about 1,200 of them, ready for shipping to the Ukraine. It is as if he were seeing the project of his passion to help the poor in tangible ways through my eyes, the eyes of a stranger, a reporter from the York Daily Record.

And he is amazed at what God has done.

Every day, John stops at the post office to pick up boxes of clothing on

his way to the warehouse. UPS delivers still more boxes to the warehouse in the afternoon. Volunteers from a church in Indiana would arrive in a few days to load the boxes onto a freight container. Then the donations would begin their month-long journey across the ocean to Kiev, where missionaries would distribute the items to people in need.

From 1992 to 2005, when I covered John's story for the paper, the ministry had shipped more than 22,000 Dole banana boxes filled with clothing, shoes, and personal care items to 22 countries. The warehouse in rural Fawn Grove, now called the Fawn Grove Compassion Center, is the only one of its kind in the Church of the Nazarene.

The ministry started with one empty banana box in John's church. Inspired by his passion to serve and give, donations of clothing, shoes and personal care items poured in. At first, boxes were stored inside the church--in the basement, hallways and even the pastor's garage. The ministry grew and the church added storage trailers to the parking lot. The first container of clothing was ready to be shipped in 1992 to Mozambique, a country embroiled in civil war and ravaged by drought and famine. But there was one small detail John had overlooked--the \$8,000 shipping cost. He despaired briefly, but didn't give up.

He asked the churches that sent in a box of clothing to send \$8 for shipping. And they did. John taped all 1,200 boxes in the first shipment by himself.

John, appointed to the unpaid position of Compassion Ministries Coordinator for the Mid-Atlantic District of the Church of the Nazarene in 1991, learned that people in churches who couldn't afford to go on mission

trips and didn't have much money to give still wanted to help people living in poverty.

"They wanted to do more than pray," John said. So he began to send monthly letters to the 90 plus Nazarene churches in the district asking for donations and teams of volunteers to help with the sorting, packing and loading of banana boxes.

The ministry in Fawn Grove continued to grow until, in 2000, Nazarene Compassionate Ministries hired him full time. A year later, the Fawn Grove church took a leap of faith and borrowed \$60,000 to pay for a 45 by 105 foot warehouse to store donations until they could be shipped.

The ministry branched out to include crisis care kits after the Kosovo conflict in 2000 and to countries recovering from natural disasters. In 2004, they started shipping packages of school supplies for children whose families could not afford them. Twenty containers holding 1,230 banana boxes each shipped in 2004 for missionaries to distribute in Poland, Jamaica, Nicaragua, Panama, Liberia and other places; 5,000 banana boxes were shipped to tsunami victims in Southeast Asia, Romania and the Ukraine. A shipment of lightweight clothing and seven small refrigerators for vaccines traveled to HIV positive orphans and their caregivers in Zambia.

People in the Fawn Grove church contacted me at the newspaper when John received a \$10,000 Passion Award from the Servant Christian Community Foundation, based in Kansas City. Their letter included one detail that made his ministry even more amazing to me. His ministry came together not long after he was diagnosed with a mental illness, bipolar disorder, which led him to give up serving as full time pastor and

administrator of their Christian school.

It was John's concern for the poor of God's world that brought him wholeness and peace as he sought to serve the Lord with what he **could** do, without mourning what he **could no longer do**.

The organization that awarded him \$10,000 for his ministry called him, "Banana Box Man."

John made the connection between God's love for the world in John 3:16-17, and what God requires of us who have been saved from our sins.

The context of John 3 is that a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a respected teacher and leader of the Jewish people, has come to Jesus at night with burning questions. He begins, "Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God; for no one can do these signs that you do apart from the presence of God." His use of "we" hints that he is not the only secret believer in Christ.

Why at night? Some say it was because Jewish teachers studied at night, especially those who worked during the day. More likely, he comes at night to avoid being seen. As we read in John 12:42 and 43, "Nevertheless many, even the authorities, believed in him. But because of the Pharisees they did not confess it, for fear that they would be put out of the synagogue..." Coming to Jesus at night is also symbolic of him leaving the darkness of ignorance and sin and moving to the dawn of understanding in the light of Christ. Jesus, in John 12:46, speaks in terms of light and darkness again, saying, "I have come as light into the world so that everyone who believes

in me should not remain in the darkness.”

Jesus foreshadows his death on a cross when he says that the Son of Man will be “lifted up.” He compares his work for salvation to Moses’ in v. 14, who lifts up the serpent in the wilderness so that Israel, who sinned against God and are dying after being bitten by snakes, would be saved.

All who believe in him, Christ says, and only those who believe in Him-- will have “eternal life.”

Then Jesus talks about works and how they reveal who are believers. He isn’t saying that our works save us. He is simply saying that if we are his disciples, then we will do good deeds that will be “clearly seen” and be a witness to our faith. Others will see our deeds have been “done in God.” But some love the darkness and hate the light. They don’t want their evil deeds exposed.

At the end of this passage, we are left wondering what Jesus thinks of Nicodemus. If he is a model for discipleship, his is very different than the model of discipleship of the Samaritan Woman with whom Jesus speaks at a well in John 4. Though she won’t understand, at first, she will be moved during the conversation to believe in Christ and tell the world about him. Many come to the faith because of her. Is Jesus scolding Nicodemus in this conversation or encouraging him on his journey of faith? For one day in the future, Nicodemus and others will come out of the darkness to “do what is true” in the light. Nicodemus will reveal his heart for Christ when he comes with Joseph of Arimathea to the cross in John 19:39. Together, they remove Christ’s body, then carry, anoint and bury him in an empty tomb.

We are left wondering, in this passage in John 3, about this God who

sent the Son into the world, not to condemn it, but so “the world might be saved through him.” Has he left the door open a crack to the possibility that every human being might be saved?

We ask ourselves if what we do reveals the light of Christ within us. And does God desire to use us more to bring about his plan for the world’s salvation?

John Borgal thought his ministry years were over. He felt useless, worthless when he was diagnosed with a mental illness. But God had given him the gift of faith and a *passion* to help people around the world, people that God so loves.

John knew that God loved him and had a plan for him, just as we can be certain that God loves us and has a plan for us, too.

If we believe in the God who so loves the world, the God who desires no one to perish, but all to have eternal life, then we, also, must love and serve the needy of our community and world.

“For we are God's handiwork,” Paul says in Ephesians 2:10, “created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.”

The blessings of service and giving are that we will find, as John Borgal did, our own healing and wholeness.

I leave you, once more, with a challenge. What new compassionate ministry can you and I do, starting small, and asking the Lord to grow it? What will reveal the light of Christ to those who walk in darkness?

John’s ministry started with one empty banana box--sturdy, stackable,

and free from local grocery stores. His ministry grew by steps and leaps of faith and support from his church and denomination. One banana box at a time.

It has been nearly 13 years since I met with John. I looked for him on the Web yesterday. And I found him on a 2017 Facebook post for the Fawn Grove Compassion Center.

They call him, “Banana Box Man.”

Let us pray.

Heavenly Father, we thank you for your great love for the world that led you to send your Only Son to save us from our sins. Thank you for your desire for no one to perish, but for everyone to have everlasting life with you. Help us, Lord, that we may always walk in your light and be a witness to your mercy and grace and not be tempted to slip away to the darkness and hide our sins from you. Give us energy, compassion and creativity to help people struggling in poverty. Guide us in your will. Grant us faith and a willingness to make sacrifices for our neighbors, to give from the heart and from our abundance, Lord, because we have more than we think we do. Stir us to begin small and partner with other groups, perhaps, as John Borgal did, to serve and care for needy people in the world that you so love. In Jesus’ name we pray. Amen.