

# WHEN YOU NEED A MAKEOVER

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John 3:1-17

June 7, 2009

(TRINITY SUNDAY)

Long ago ... so long, in fact, that it's kind of depressing ... the Sunday School teacher in the Primary Class at the Wayne Methodist Church would ask all the children in her class to draw pictures of people in the Bible. People like Joseph with his coat of many colors. And David conquering the giant, Goliath, with a sling and a stone. And Noah and the monkeys and the zebras and the tall, tall giraffes (with their ears in the *clouds* nearly) toting their suitcases and overnight bags as they boarded the ark.

One Sunday she asked us to draw a picture of God. And when we were finished, she said, she would put them up on the bulletin board so everybody in the church could see them. And then, of course, if they ever happened to meet God, they'd know it was him. Because they'd have seen him before -- his picture there on the bulletin board. ✚ And it turns out that God looked a whole lot like old man Smith who sat out on the courthouse lawn everyday on one of the benches, whittling his cedar stick and chewing tobacco. God (in the pictures) was the spittin' image of the old man. I mean, you'd have thought old man Smith was the Almighty himself. Except for the yellow stains in his beard ... and the bibbed overalls, maybe. But God was old in those pictures. And he had lots of whiskers. And who knows, maybe he *did* sit there on one of those benches.

But that's what we did in the Primary Sunday School class "back in the day." In the previous *century*, mind you. We drew pictures of God.

Now, I don't know if they still do that in Sunday School. We'd have to ask the people who were born in *this* century, I suppose. The ones who were here just a little while ago. But there *is* something else kids in Sunday School do

these days. They don't just draw pictures of God, anymore. They send him mail. Email in fact. To [thealmighty@heaven.com](mailto:thealmighty@heaven.com), I suppose. And they have lots of questions.

A girl named Jayne sent an email to God and said, **Dear God, in Sunday School they told us what you do for a living. But who does it when you're on vacation?** And Allison, another little girl, wrote, **Dear God, I read the Bible. What does begot mean? Nobody will tell me.** And another one said, **Dear God, are you really invisible? Or is that just a trick? Love, Lucy.** And there was one that said, **Dear God, I went to a wedding and they kissed right there in the church. Is that okay?** Oh and a little girl named Norma had a question about those giraffes. She said, **Dear God, did you mean for the giraffe to look like that, or was it an accident?**

And there was a kid -- this is one of my favorites -- who said, **Dear God, thank you for my baby brother... but what I asked for was a puppy. Love, Jenny.** And then there's the one that said, **Dear God, it rained for our whole vacation and is my father mad! He said some things about you that people are not supposed to say, but I hope you will not hurt him anyway.** And it was signed, **Your friend (But I am not going to tell you who I am.)** ☒

Those are the questions. Kids have *lots* of questions about God. And lots of questions *for* God ... like, **“Why is the sky blue?”** or **“Why did you make Poison Ivy?”** or **“How did you know when to make me?”** Lots and lots of questions. Good questions, mind you...

But those aren't the only questions they have. There was a story in the Boston Herald not too long ago about one of the teachers at the Cathedral Grammar School there who gave his eighth-graders a writing assignment. And that's what it was. He asked them to write letters to God. He said, “A lot of kids their age aren't really comfortable talking about their deeper thoughts and feelings. So I thought this might be a good way to get them to open up.”

He's twenty-seven, and this is his third year there at the school. And he said, "I thought it would be a lot of fun – a good way for them to use their imagination," he said, "and maybe show their sense of humor."

And so a few nights later he settled back in his favorite chair at his apartment, reached for a stack of letters, and started reading. And the first letter he read said, **"Dear God, "Why is my grandmother sick? She was the one that would take care of me, warm up my milk, run my bath water. She is in my mind every single day. I just want her to say my name and smile. That would bring tears of joy to my eyes. I wish just one day of her illness would go away so I can tell her how much I miss her and how much I love her."** He thought the next one would be a bit lighter. But it said, **"Why did my little cousin have to die?"** And the next one said, **"Why did my father's friend get shot in the head?"** and **"Why did my mother have to get in a car drunk?"** And others said, **"Why do young kids sell drugs?"** And **"Why does there have to be so much killing?"**

So many questions. People have questions. *Real* questions. It doesn't mean there's something wrong with them. It doesn't mean they've got it all wrong, or they're flawed or immoral or bad, mind you. They just have questions. We all do.

And so did Nicodemus. He'd seen things lately he'd never seen before. Things he'd never dreamed of, mind you. Things that left him *baffled* and *confused* and *in the dark* in so many ways. And that was a new and strange thing for him, I'm sure. Because Nicodemus was a scholar. Studied the Torah from the time he was a young boy. He'd been set apart for this -- to be a teacher, a leader among the people of God. And he was. People *respected* this man. They looked to him for wisdom in the ways of God.

But Nicodemus had questions. He wasn't an eighth-grader or a third-grader, mind you, but he had questions. And he was searching for answers.

So like the children who wrote their letters to God, Nicodemus decided to go to the Source. But not right away, mind you. He waited. Waited until it was dark. And *then* he went to Jesus ... who happened to be there in Jerusalem, at the time. And, mind you, Jesus was not a scribe or a temple official or even a member of the local ministerial association. He had not been formally trained. No seminary degree. Or even a college diploma. Jesus was ... Well, you *know* what he was. He was a carpenter. A builder. A working class man. And yet, Nicodemus went to **him** for answers. Maybe that's why he waited till nightfall... Because it was a little embarrassing -- a great scholar and teacher, a leader of leaders seeking advice from a woodworker. What would people think? What would you think? L

So that night, when it was dark, Nicodemus came to see Jesus. And this is what he said. **Rabbi ... we know that you are a teacher sent from God. We've seen the signs. God is with you. He must be. There's no other way to explain what we've seen and heard...** And there was a question in there somewhere, I think -- something Nicodemus really wanted and needed to know. Something important. So important that he just *had* to see Jesus -- even though some of the others were against this woodworker-turned-rabbi. But before Nicodemus could get the words out of his mouth, Jesus responded. **Nicodemus**, he said, **the truth is no one can see the Kingdom of God unless they're born from above.**

Now, you know that means. Jesus was talking about a makeover. Isn't that what they call it? But not like the ones you see on TV with the plastic surgeons or the hair stylists and fashion experts. He was talking about a **spiritual** makeover. Being *re-made* from the inside out.

But Nicodemus doesn't get it. He just hears the words and skims the surface. Takes Jesus literally and that's it. **What do you mean?** he says. **How**

**can someone my age be born again? Am I supposed to go back to my mother's belly and be a baby again?**

Oh, but that's just the thing Nicodemus. This isn't something you or anyone else can do. It's something the Spirit does. It's something God does. Not something YOU can do. Look, you didn't have a lot to do with your physical birth. YOU didn't make it happen. It wasn't YOUR achievement, mind you. SOMEBODY ELSE did that for you. And that's how it is with God, too, Nicodemus. You are born of the Spirit. It's something GOD does. And you have about as much to do with that as you did when you were born. You can't make it happen. You can't re-invent yourself, or give yourself a makeover when it comes to the God-life. It's something God does. ✠

It reminds me of a woman who wanted desperately to find the meaning of life. So, first she read everything she could get her hands on -- history, philosophy, psychology, religion. She read it all. And she learned a lot, mind you. But she still didn't know the meaning of life.

So she found other people who were learned and wise. And she listened to them and had long discussions with them. But they couldn't tell her. They all had their opinions, but no two of them agreed.

Finally she put all her belongings in storage and she set off in search of the meaning of life. She went to South America. And she went to India. She went everywhere she could think of, practically. And everywhere she went, people told her they didn't know the meaning of life. But some of them had heard of a man who did. Only they weren't sure where he lived. And she asked about him in every country on earth until finally somewhere in the Himalayas, somebody told her how to reach his house. Which turned out to be a tiny little hut perched on the side of a mountain.

So she climbed and climbed to reach his front door. And when she finally got there, with knuckles so cold they hardly worked, she knocked. And when the old man answered the door she thought she would just die from happiness. And she said, “I’ve come half way round the world to ask you one question.” And she was still gasping for breath. “What is the meaning of life?”

The old man said, “Please come in and have some tea.”

And she said, “Oh, no. No thank you. I didn’t come all this way for a cup of tea. I came for an answer.” But the old man looked at her and said, “Come in. We’ll have some tea.”

So she went through the door and into the little house. And while he was brewing the tea she caught her breath. And she started telling him about all the books she’d read, and all the people she’d met, and all the places she’d been. And he listened. And as she talked he placed a tea cup in her hand. And he started pouring the tea. And she was so busy talking that she didn’t even notice when the cup was full. So the old man kept pouring. And the tea spilled over the brim and into the floor and all over her. And she yelled when the tea burned her hands. “What are you doing? It’s full. Can’t you see that? Stop! There’s no more room!”

And the old man said, “That’s right. And yet you come wanting something from me. But what can I do? ***There’s no room left in your cup.*** Come back when it’s empty and *then* we’ll talk.” ☒

That’s what happened in Jerusalem that night when Nicodemus went to see Jesus. He had all this knowledge about God and the things of God. His “cup” was overflowing! But he still didn’t know God. There was not one drop of God in his cup. So, in a way, Jesus said, “Look Nicodemus. What you’ve been searching for ... what you’ve really been looking and longing for all this time isn’t another book, or a scroll, or somebody else’s idea about the

meaning of life. what you're looking for is God. God himself. Don't be filled up with knowledge *about* him, Nicodemus. Be filled *with him*. *Make room for him*.

God is the One who can *make you over*. God is the One who will make a new person of you. It's not something you can do. You can see it and feel it, just like the wind. But you can't make it blow. The wind doesn't blow this way or that because you *make* it, mind you. It blows where it will. And that's how it is in our *life with God*. We don't control God. We can't make God love us or change us. It's not a reward. It isn't something we get because we've worked so hard for it. Or because we've done this or not done that. No, God loves us because that's what God does. *That's who God is*.

God so loves us -- God so loves the world that he ... what does it say? He **gave**. God gave his Son for us. It's a gift. God's love is a gift... And what else does it say? **Who-so-ever believes...** Whoever receives it. **Whoever**, mind you ... has this new life. As if you're made over. Re-created. Reborn and given a whole new (and everlasting) life. ☩

**For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believes in him should not perish but have everlasting life.**

A pastor in England received a call one day about a family in town, not far from his church, who could really use some help. It was a young mother of three who had lost her husband in a terrible accident. And she was barely able to make ends meet, what with the three little ones there, and bills on top of bills, and a landlord who had no sympathy for her or her children. It was just too much. And the sad part of it all is that she had no one to turn to. No family. No friends. No goodhearted neighbors to lend a helping hand. So the pastor went to see her. And when he did, he learned that she was about to be evicted for failing to pay her rent.

That was on Saturday morning. So the next morning at church, the pastor – Reverend Morgan – stepped down from the pulpit and told the congregation about this family and their needs. And they took up an offering for them that morning to help them. And it was amazing, he said. People were generous. They really wanted to help. And that morning they gave enough to pay all the back rent and several months in advance. And the preacher was so excited that he went straight to the woman’s apartment after the service. Because he couldn’t *wait* to tell her the good news. So he knocked at the door. But there was no answer. And he knocked again and waited for someone to come to the door. But no one came. And he knocked louder, again and again. But there was no answer. And finally he went away disappointed. Discouraged. He thought, “It’s too late. The landlord has put her out because I was too late.” And he didn’t know how to reach her or even where she might have gone.

Several hours later, the young woman got in touch with him. And she told him that she was there in the apartment earlier that day when he came to her door. And she heard him knocking. But she was afraid to answer, she said, because she thought it was the landlord. She thought he had come to collect the rent, when all the time it was a friend bringing a wonderful gift.

There are so many people who picture God that way. They see God as a landlord who comes to demand what we owe him. But Jesus says, “It isn’t like that. God is a **friend**, a **loving Father** who wants to give you a wonderful gift. The gift of his love.” You don’t have to earn it. The truth is you can’t. You can’t achieve it. You can’t *make* it happen. It’s a gift. It’s like being born, says Jesus, Fathered from above. It’s simply a gift to be **received**.

So let me ask you this morning ... What are your questions? What are you longing for? The meaning of life? A new beginning? A spiritual makeover?

Acceptance? Forgiveness? Healing? Or wholeness? Jesus invites you to come to him. Receive the gift. And know that God is with you and for you ...

**For God so loves the world ...**

Let's say it together ...

**For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believes in him should not perish but have everlasting life.**

This is the word which is given for you. Amen.

*Soli Deo Gloria*

*Benen, ObLSB*

