

File: Lent 4B SOC John 3:1-21

Grace to you and Peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, Amen!

There are two things that happen in every school, there's the educational component and then there's the EDUCATION. Author John Ortberg talks about it using the words **the formal curriculum and the hidden curriculum**. The formal curriculum consists of reading, writing and arithmetic which as one gets older turns into Math, Family and Consumer Science, English, Phy. Ed, history and more. Faculties, school boards, politicians, teachers and concerned parents spend a lot of time working on the formal curriculum. The formal curriculum is a powerful tool for making one's way in the marketplace. Study after study shows the importance of at a minimum having High School Diploma for generating future earning potential.

Then there's the hidden curriculum (School Boards and teachers and administrators work really hard at valuing every child and they have policies to provide the best education possible) the hidden curriculum is experienced in the soul. The hidden curriculum consists of which students get called on and which get ignored? Who do other students want to sit next to at lunch and who sits alone? Whose jokes get laughed at? Whose body is shaped right? What's cool

and who's cool and who isn't. What you experience in the hidden curriculum shapes your soul and people always believe the hidden curriculum. ALWAYS!

And it's not just in school. Often when you go to work somewhere there's some type of training where you learn about how the company works in terms of policies and procedures, product knowledge, that kind of stuff. Then there's how the company really works when perhaps a coworker pulls you aside and give you the inside scoop.

When it comes to faith there is what you might call the formal curriculum. The important doctrines from Scripture that we say we believe in---and we do. Phrases like "saved by grace", "being born again", "we're a child of God", "God's unconditional love" and more. They are true but after you hear them a million times they can become kind of a cliché and lose their power.

Then there's the hidden curriculum of our hearts, and just like the hidden curriculum at school or how the workplace actually works in the hidden curriculum of our hearts is where we really hash out this faith stuff. It's not really a curriculum in the sense that it's written down, no one teaches it, but it comes naturally. We experience it in the corners of our hearts that we don't like to talk about: it's the corner where we wonder does God really forgive me? Is God really that graceful-don't I have to earn something? Maybe I really can love God and

money. Maybe the Holy Spirit guides others but not me? If God really loved me than why would this have happened to me?

In John 3 we see the conflict between the formal curriculum and the curriculum of the heart with a guy named Nicodemus. He was a Pharisee. A Pharisee was a religious teacher who taught the formal curriculum—all of the doctrinal stuff—He would have been what you might call the “answer man” when it came to religion. The passage says “he came to Jesus in the middle of the night and said Rabbi, we know you are a teacher who has come from God. For no one could perform the miraculous signs you are doing if God were not with him.”

Why the night? Because he didn’t want others to know he was interested in matters of the heart that the “formal curriculum” couldn’t answer. That the real heart of faith begins not with rules but with the heart of God.

And Jesus doesn’t waste any time and gets right to the heart of the matter: “I tell you the truth, unless a man is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God.” Nicodemus doesn’t get it because he’s thinking about being physically reborn not a spiritual rebirth where a person understands God and the world in a new way.

The conversation continues and in John 3:16-17 Jesus says two of the most famous verses in the entire Bible. “For God so loved the world that he gave his

only begotten Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world but to save the world through him.”

These passages about being born again and for God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten son are for many--just part of the formal curriculum of religion. And lots of people question them when people who claim to be born again or who call themselves followers of Jesus have some ugly part of their life become public. The questioner will say look, you people claim all of this great religious stuff but why would I go there when you can't even live up to what you say you believe. Pretty legitimate question don't you think? Legitimate because faith in Christ for many quickly turns into a list of rules --do this--don't do that rules that nobody can fully live up to. Rather than faith in Christ being completely and first and foremost about the character of God.

So Jesus goes on to say beginning with verse 19 “This is the verdict”. In other words here's how it really is Nicodemus, here's how it really is Pastor Eric, Choir, musicians, and all of us “Light has come into the world , but people love darkness instead of light. Everyone who does evil hates the light and will not come into the light for fear of darkness for fear their deeds will be exposed. But whoever lives by the truth comes into the light, so that it may be seen plainly that what they have done has been done through God.”

Whoa, that's not the verdict we want. It's not true Jesus, we love the light not darkness, at least we love what we think is our light. This makes it sound like (whiney) God isn't fair. What about all of the love, grace, mercy and forgiveness stuff and the entire formal curriculum we've been taught? But Jesus I know all of the right words, I went to Sunday school when it was convenient, I thought I was doing all of the right stuff at least most of the time.

Wow, Jesus is really going for the jugular he's not just handing out participation trophies for just knowing the formal curriculum. And his verdict goes against our way of thinking that doesn't want to address whatever darkness may linger in our heart, whether it's the darkness of judgementalism, the darkness of self-righteousness, or thinking we don't really need God or can trust God or that God really could care about us THAT much. We really do have a beef with the light of Christ because it exposes what we don't want seen or want to admit.

It would be like going to a Dr. because somethings wrong. Her diagnosis confirms your suspicions and she suggests a certain remedy, surgery or treatment. You know what she's saying is true and it will not only ease your pain but actually cure you. But then you storm out of the office, very angry that the Dr. told you the truth and you say something like "I don't need your help, I'm not sick, nothing's going to happen to me." The cure was available but it's been refused. In essence that person has brought the judgment of the disease on themselves by refusing

care. But the truth is the Dr. has diagnosed and exposed the truth and given you a way through it.

The good news is the light of Christ has come into the world to expose our darkness and he gives us a way through it. But let's be honest here, while we know it's true, nobody likes having someone else point out our flaws or have our dirty laundry aired in public or have our reputation damaged----much less having God expose or reveal the rebellion in our hearts. Why are we so afraid of that kind of "Come to Jesus meeting with God?" Because the darkness in our hearts wants us to think that if we go there and are that honest there really might NOT be forgiveness. So we try to maintain our sanitized self-image to keep the darkness within hidden. So we fool ourselves into believing either there really isn't any darkness, sin or rebellion or that it's not that big of a deal.

But Jesus says "I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life." And from 1 John 1:5 "This is the message we have heard from him and declare to you: God is light and in Him there is no darkness at all."

This morning the beauty of our confession and forgiveness is this (and I hope you will pay extra attention to them this morning in a few minutes before communion): In our confession we admit to God and---think about--publically in

front of others that the light of Christ exposes darkness in our hearts, the Bible calls it sin. It's kind of like pulling back the covers from our heart and exposing not the specific details but the overall condition of our need. And in the words of forgiveness the light of Christ shines again with the message of forgiveness.

When that light of Christ shines on that hidden curriculum in our hearts there is forgiveness just as there's healing for the one who accepts the Physicians protocol for treatment. Don't fear letting the light of Christ expose your heart for when it is brought into the light of Christ he gives us a way through it and there is redemption and the possibility of being re-born again.

May God bless you this morning, especially during the confession and forgiveness and as you come forward to the altar to receive communion—May God bless you with that possibility of being born again each day. Amen!