The Rev. Kimberly Reinholz
Church of the Holy Spirit
March 1, 2026
John 3:1-17

At the turn of the century, during live broadcast sporting events, TV cameras often revealed someone in the audience holding a sign with [John 3:16]. This form of evangelism seems odd to me—not because “For God so loved the world" is untrue, but because this shorthand assumes viewers already know the reference is the Book of John, Chapter 3, Verse 16.

While in the 1990’s and beyond, people could look it up online, I wonder whether showing a single line of scripture on a sign truly brings the comfort and recognition that come from understanding God's love.

Simply knowing that God loves the world and everyone in it enough to suffer crucifixion for reconciliation is far deeper than a Google search can reveal. Sharing that love genuinely takes more than a sign, but at times it feels risky to do so openly, so we resort to hints or hide our faith, hoping not to be noticed and to avoid risking our comfort.

To understand this dynamic further on a community level, it helps to consider how, over the centuries, organized religions have had an interesting, complex, and challenging relationship with world powers. In Rome, before Constantine’s conversion, the Church was persecuted. Afterward, it was elevated to the status of the state religion.

Since then, in different decades, the desires of diverse leaders have adapted Constantine’s approach, claiming Christ when it suits them and denying Jesus when it is justifiable.

Before there was a Church, in Jerusalem, the relationship between Judaism and government was fraught. Although the Roman occupation had lasted for nearly a century, Jews were permitted to practice a form of self-governance and to keep their faith, so long as they didn't make waves. In Jesus' time, the governors of Syria/Palestine were appointed by Roman authorities. The Jewish people were ruled by the Sanhedrin, or the 70 Rabbinic Judges, who interpreted and enforced the law. While the Romans technically didn't have a role to play in their service to the Sanhedrin, the empire certainly preferred that the priests, levites, and lay people in these positions be more moderate and malleable.

They wanted leaders who were willing to submit to the empire's yoke, or at least did not foster radical ideas such as revolution or revolt. One of these moderate judges who held court in the Temple complex nearly every day, except the Sabbath and Festival Days, during Jesus' time was Niccodemus, who may well have been sitting in the Hall of Hewn Stones, another building within the Temple Mound complex, hearing testimony on the day that Jesus entered Jerusalem.

Perhaps he was there when Jesus cast out the money changers and threw over tables. It is possible that his position depends on his being perceived as nonthreatening to the powers that be.

Niccodemus comes at night to ask Jesus some questions. It's not clear whether Niccodemus is asking these questions on his own behalf or as a representative of the Sanhedrin. We do not know if this is a crisis of faith or a precursor to Jesus' arrest and trial.

But Jesus' response to the questions seems to call into question Nicodemus' own knowledge, faith, and awareness of the law, which he professes to interpret and apply to the community.

When he asks, “Are you a teacher of Israel and you do not understand these things?” Jesus is wondering where Nicodemus’ loyalties lie.

From this interaction, we see how Jesus’ challenge to Nicodemus is not limited to that historic moment. Rather, it extends to all of us. It can seem self-evident that when people hold positions in the public sphere, either as professionals or volunteers, who seek justice, pursue mercy, and walk humbly with God, they love God, know God, and seek a relationship with God. But good deeds are not solely the obligation of Christians or other God-fearing individuals.

This calls for us to examine the connection between action and faith. Faith observed does not follow the logic that if it looks like a duck, quacks like a duck, and waddles like a duck, it must be a duck. There are many reasons people pursue justice and mercy that have nothing to do with Jesus, God, or the Holy Spirit.

While serving as the associate rector for service, campus ministry, and pastoral care at GHTC, I regularly worked alongside volunteers at our Red Door Community Meal. Over six years, I worked with well over 200 individuals who cooked, served, or cleaned up every Friday. I knew why some folks were volunteering if I needed to sign off on forms for court, class, or clubs. But I never knew why most of the people who worked alongside the five regularly leading parishioners gave their time, talent, and energy that day.

Every week, I welcomed folks with the same speech, reminding us all why we did what we did. It went a bit like this: Hi, I’m Mother Kim. Thank you for being here today. You being here allows us to live into the promises we made at baptism: to seek Christ in all persons, to love our neighbor as ourselves, and to respect the dignity of every human being. While you don’t need to be a Christian to cut a carrot, your participation in

today’s meal allows us to live more fully into our faith, and we thank you for that.

Before overseeing church ministry, I believed ministry and volunteering were the same, that good works were enough, and that motivations didn't matter. I thought proclaiming Jesus as the reason was optional. But that assumption is off the mark.

Our motivations matter. Everything we do reflects God's love for us and creation. It's an acknowledgment that God loves us enough to die on the cross—an act of eternal and unconditional love. If we believe our actions alone suffice, or try to hide our faith to avoid discomfort, we fall short of our call as Christians. We must actively raise up Jesus and the meaning of the cross, not settle for silence.

If Christians do good works without also proclaiming knowledge and love of God, we're like those holding up the [John 3:16] sign and assuming everyone understands. Christianity is not just about worship or good works—it shapes every part of us from baptism onward. We are called to identify and proclaim our faith as truth. While Google can answer what Christians do, only our explicit words, actions, and presence reveal God to others. This is our opportunity to clearly state our calling as Christians, not hiding behind coded references or anonymity, but by explicitly naming Jesus as the reason for all that we do.

Amen