



[Rev. Steven S. Billings](#)

Sermon for the Funeral Service for Barbara Richardson
June 17, 2023

For God So Loved John 3:1-17

¹ Now there was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews. ²This man came to Jesus by night and said to him, “Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher come from God, for no one can do these signs that you do unless God is with him.” ³ Jesus answered him, “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God.” ⁴ Nicodemus said to him, “How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother’s womb and be born?” ⁵ Jesus answered, “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. ⁶That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. ⁷ Do not marvel that I said to you, ‘You must be born again.’ ⁸ The wind blows where it wishes, and you hear its sound, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit.”

⁹ Nicodemus said to him, “How can these things be?” ¹⁰ Jesus answered him, “Are you the teacher of Israel and yet you do not understand these things? ¹¹ Truly, truly, I say to you, we speak of what we know, and bear witness to what we have seen, but you do not receive our testimony. ¹² If I have told you earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you heavenly things? ¹³ No one has ascended into heaven except he who descended from heaven, the Son of Man. ¹⁴ And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, ¹⁵ that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.

¹⁶ “For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. ¹⁷ For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.”

Dear friends and family of Barbara Richardson, the Gospel appointed for this occasion proclaims God’s graceful heart: He loves you! Of course, He loves the whole world. But, while these words of Jesus are arguably His most well-known, they are nonetheless His least believed.

If our dear Barbara could rise up and speak, she would sound her praises to God clear as a bell, and would sing, even as she does now with angels and archangels and all the company of heaven: “Holy, Holy, Holy, Lord God of power and might: Heaven and earth are full of Your Glory. Hosanna! Hosanna! Hosanna in the Highest! Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord. Hosanna in the Highest!” “Worthy is the Lamb who was slain to receive power and wealth and wisdom and might and honor and glory and blessing.” “To Him who sits on the throne and to the Lamb be blessing and honor and



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glory and might forever and ever. Amen!"

Yes, our dear Barbara not only speaks, she sings, and jumps, and shouts for joy in the presence of Him who has loved her with an everlasting love. Scriptures calls Him the "Consolation of Israel." Barbara might have called Him her Peace. With a simple piety and reverence, Barb cherished Christ and longed to be in His presence. She always looked forward to pastoral visits, during which she would receive her Lord in His body and blood.

Barbara knew what it meant to "hunger and thirst for righteousness" and that righteousness was something that had to be pursued; it doesn't come to us naturally. She knew that she was by nature "sinful and unclean" and that she had no worthiness, honor, or merit with which to approach the Father. But she knew He had, in the Flesh of His Son, approached her. In her final days, when she could see little else, she longed, like Simeon, to see her Savior. She could truly pray with him, "Lord, now You let Your servant go in peace; Your Word has been fulfilled. My own eyes have seen the salvation which You have prepared in the sight of every people: A Light to reveal You to the nations and the Glory of Your people Israel."

For those who may wonder why we, her friends and family, are not distraught, why we are not in despair, we can tell them: "We do have tears, sometimes many tears, but we do not weep for Barbara; we weep for ourselves, for being deprived of her." Yes, "God so loved the world that He gave His only Son that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life." This assurance tempers our grief.

Sadly, this urn will cause some to deny that what Jesus said is true. In fact, some who knew of Barbara's not-so-pious moments – and, like the rest of us, she had her share – might be tempted to doubt our proclamation of God's grace toward her. But, let's recognize where those doubts come from. They originate with the deceiver, the enemy of God and man. For Jesus clearly says, "God so loved the world that He gave His only Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life."

Yet, He also preached about hell, didn't He. He said, "There will be weeping and gnashing of teeth." This is no mere figure of speech, but a pain and anguish that are real. And He says too: "Not everyone who says to me, Lord, Lord, will enter the kingdom of heaven." So, if the same Jesus who says, "God so loved the world" says that some will not enter heaven, someone may be wondering how we can be certain that Barb is in heaven? And certainly more pressing for you is the question: "How can I be certain that I will enter heaven?"

Let me answer that plainly. Jesus said, "*Whoever* believes and is baptized will be saved." That mercy and grace is promised to the whole world in our Gospel – "God so loved the world." That worldwide compassion, that love of God that fills the heavens and the earth, is placed by God specifically on you by the sprinkling of His grace in your hearts through the hearing of His Word and the blessing of His Sacraments.

We, who are pagans by nature, wicked from the time of our conception, are made holy by the Word of God in and with the water in Holy Baptism. You who have been baptized



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have been made children of God. You are what God has made you and you are loved beyond your wildest imagination.

There are times, of course, when even the most faithful Christian lives as though his faith doesn't matter, compartmentalizing faith apart from the "real" world. The devil has a million different reasons for you to deny the faith God has given you. If you've been living as if that faith doesn't matter, if you've been acting as though you don't believe, dear baptized child of heaven, let this be your wake-up call. If our dear Barbara could, she would call out to you from heaven: "Believe God now!" If He loves the whole world so much that He gave His only Son, how much does He love you?

Just like He did for Barbara, He's also calling you: "Come unto Me all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest." That's the Peace that Barbara so longed and hungered for. She had a foretaste of what she now has in fullness in the bosom of Christ. She bears witness that the Word of Jesus is true and is even now experiencing the joy of heaven – not someday, somewhere over the rainbow, but right now, this very day.

Yes, with countless millions, she is right now seeing God face to face. She's part of that great cloud of witnesses, who, if they could, would stand and preach the very thing I've been telling you: "God so loved the world that He sent His only Son," who calls to you today, "Come unto me. Come to me in faith. Be washed, be baptized, be cleansed of all your sin, in the Name of the Father and the + Son and the Holy Spirit."

Sometime in the future – maybe another hour, maybe another day, another year, maybe ten years – but, eventually, just like it was for Barbara, so it will be for each and every believing soul here this morning. You who believe will, like her, hear His final call of grace, and, like a Shepherd tending His flock, He will gather His lambs into His arms of mercy and carry them home to Himself. Are you ready? Believe in God, trust in Jesus.

"For God so loved the world, that He gave His Only Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish, but have eternal life." This means Barbara. And this means you. In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen