

Quotable Phrases March 5, 2023

There are certain phrases that are a part of our fabric of our culture. For example, if I says, “May the Force be with you,” you instantly know that I’m a nerd.

If you are working on a complicated project with a friend, and you discover a problem, you don’t call up your friend and say, “Frank, there’s an issue with figure 42.” You call up your friend and you say dramatically, “Houston, we have a problem.”

If your sister says to you, “I’ll tell you what I want,” you are obligated to respond, “Tell me what you want, what you really really want.”

If you leave the house to walk the dog and you know you’ll return in 5 minutes, you can’t say, “I’ll return shortly.” You have to say, “I’ll be back.”

If you’re on a boat, and you find yourself talking to the captain, you have to say, “O captain, my captain!” Then you go to the front of the boat, stretch out your arms and say, “I’m the king of the world!”

If a co-worker is talking, and then there’s a long pause, and you realize that she was in fact addressing you, what do you ask her? “You talkin’ to me?”

Your friend is sorting through his old clothes and trying to figure out whether to hold onto his favorite shirt or let it go and give it to charity. You might sing to him, “Let it go...”

There are just these phrases that are engrained in our culture. We might not know the context of the quote or even where the quote comes from, but we know the line and if it’s from a movie, we know how the line is said.

We hear one such line in our Gospel story, and it catches our attention. I know that normally, you all are riveted to every word that is spoken in church. But occasionally, once in a blue moon, your attention might wander, especially when Jesus starts talking about earthly things and heavenly things and ascending to heaven, descending from heaven, et cetera, et cetera.

But then, “For God so loved the world...” and our attention snaps back. We think, “I know that. That’s a classic. That’s what those guys yell on street corners outside the baseball game.” This verse, John 3:16, is a staple in our society.

And if we’re being honest, it’s not always delivered in a warm, friendly, inviting way. And it is almost never delivered with any sort of context. John 3:17 is so often conveniently left off, about Jesus not condemning the world. So I’d like to look at this section today to explore what Jesus is saying.

The first point I'll direct your attention to is this. John 3:16 says, "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."

What it does NOT say is, "If you say that Jesus is your Lord and Savior, then you will go to heaven when you die." That's the message that we sometimes hear in this, but that is very much a human interpretation and by my lights, not anything like what Jesus was saying.

The context of this passage is a conversation between Jesus and this leader Nicodemus. John, the narrator, often makes it easy for the reader or listener to place him/herself in the story. (We'll see that in the next couple weeks as we hear stories from John's Gospel.) And in this story, we are Nicodemus. We are seekers who have heard about Jesus and his miracles, and we want to know more.

And in case there's any doubt of this, Jesus makes it clear in his language. Jesus, when speaking directly to Nicodemus, says, "You." "Don't be astonished that I said to you." But then, at other moments, Jesus uses the plural form of "you," saying, "You all must be born from above." It's like you're watching a play, and one of the actors breaks the 4th wall, turns to the audience, and starts talking directly to those watching the play. We are invited into this story as fellow seekers of Nicodemus.

The overarching image that Jesus gives to Nicodemus and to us is one of birth. That is the metaphor that Jesus uses to frame his invitation. Nicodemus, you'll notice, takes this image literally, which is the wrong way to think about Jesus' teachings. Jesus is talking about a new kind of birth.

Now I'm going to be honest with you today. Before I became a father, I had no idea what the birth process was like. Despite the fact that my father delivered babies for a living, I got most of my knowledge about pregnancy and childbirth from television.

Pregnancy, I knew, was a long process, and morning sickness was no joke. But once the morning sickness was over, life went on. A lot of women worked right up until they gave birth, so everything was fine, right? I had no idea the discomfort and exhaustion and sometimes the complications that pregnancy involved. It is not life as usual.

And then, again on TV, when the time for the birth, there's maybe 10 seconds of yelling and lots of doctors and nurses running around, and then out pops a clean, cute 3-month old baby. Done. (Granted, I could tell you in graphic detail some of the things that could go wrong, thanks to my dad's stories, but those were extreme cases.)

Sometimes faith is presented in the same way that birth is depicted. Sure, following Jesus is uncomfortable at times, sure. But there is an assumption that good Christians go to church, keep things tidy, and go about their lives.

That does a disservice to the journey of faith. There are times when faith is just messy. Times when we're angry at God. Times when we're confused, we doubt, we're not sure what we

believe. There are times when our faith lives are fallow, are gestating, times that we might not even know it, but we're being formed, being shaped.

And there are moments of break-through. Of joy. Of celebration. Of new birth, new beginnings. Times when we leave behind old ideas and enter a new chapter in which we better understand God.

Jesus' metaphor for following him as a birth, an entry into a new life, is a rich one.

That is the context for this whole lesson for Nicodemus. And if we choose this new life, if we choose to follow Jesus, we hear the result. John 3:16. Eternal life.

Two points about the wording in this verse. First, the word that we translate as "eternal" is not just a statement of time, of chronology, but more one of quality. We gain life that is rich and deep and meaningful. Abundant life. Second, the verse is in the present tense. It's not, "you WILL have eternal life," as if we were talking about being in heaven after you die. It's, when you follow Christ, "you have eternal life." New birth in Jesus leads to a rich life.

Lovely image. New birth, abundant life. But if you're there, thinking to yourself, "That sounds lovely, but I'm a little old to be thinking about new life," don't worry. In our Genesis lesson, we hear about God calling Abram to a new life. God tells Abram to leave everyone and everything he knows, because God will bless him. And Abram goes. He listens to God.

And then our passage ends, in the middle of a verse. I wish we had the second half of that verse. Because it reads, "Abram was 75 years old when he departed" from the land. Imagine being 75 and starting a fresh new chapter in your life. Or being 85, or 95. Abram reminds us that it's never too late to start a new adventure and follow God's call.

We often celebrate graduations, comings of age, marriages, the birth of children. But we also celebrate retirements as new beginnings, new birth.

Jesus calls us to a journey that is full and challenging and sometimes difficult and richly rewarding. It is, as we hear in John 3:16, rooted in love. All of this is possible because God loved the world, more than we know.

Amen.