

“Nic at Night”

Not a Fan – part #1 – based on the book by Kyle Idleman

John 3:1-21

[64 - title slide] *Welcome*

Prayer

[65 – football] I like sports. I am not an avid fan, but I enjoy watching teams do well. I’m often on the “bandwagon” – fans who get excited when the team is doing well, but otherwise don’t follow them closely.

It was different when I played in college marching band. We practiced five days a week, memorized our music, and cheered for our team no matter what was happening. Our passion was unaffected by the score or the weather. And even that commitment pales compared to what the football team actually did. Six practices a week, intense workouts, studying game film. They were really all in. The fans, however, only really seemed to show up with the team was winning. I witnessed the stadium going from nearly empty to selling out in just one season.

[66 – handshake] In our lives we are often asked to commit. To marriage, for instance. Or to a job. Some of you young people are on teams. My daughter is applying to college, and we keep getting letters and emails asking her to commit. Commitment is paramount for success. Yet when it comes to Jesus, a lot of us act more like bandwagon fans than committed followers.

Pastor Kyle Idleman in Louisville, Kentucky, wrote a book a few years ago with an intriguing title, Not a Fan. He pastors a large church. One time he was preparing his Easter sermon, and he thought about what to preach to the crowds, the “Creasters,” people who only attend on Christmas and Easter. He wondered, what will make them come back? What did Jesus preach to the crowds? So he grabbed his Bible and read John 6, the story of the feeding of the 5,000.

[67 – John 6:66 & quote] Near the end of that chapter, this verse hit him like a ton of bricks. “From that time, many of his disciples turned back and no longer followed him.” (John 6:66)

This was Pastor Kyle’s revelation: “It wasn’t the size of the crowd Jesus cared about; it was their level of commitment.” (Not a Fan (Zondervan, 2012), 13).

Jesus had just fed 5,000 people miraculously with seven loaves and two fish. Many of these people came back the next day looking for another free meal. Instead, Jesus told them, “I am the bread of life.” (John 6:35) Jesus asked for their commitment. It was not a popular message, so many turned away.

Today I want to discuss the difference between being a fan of Jesus and a follower of Jesus. In light of our Confirmation Service today, I think it’s appropriate.

[68 – Nicodemus] Nicodemus was a fan of Jesus who later became a follower. First, he came to Jesus at night, secretly. Nicodemus was afraid of making his commitment public. It might cost him his reputation. Says Idleman, “Being a secret admirer of Jesus cost him nothing, but becoming a follower came with a high price tag. It always does.” (29)

Jesus was popular with the common people, but not with the elite whom Nicodemus hung with. Nicodemus was a member of the Sanhedrin, the ruling council, and one of the Pharisees, experts in the Jewish Bible. He didn’t dare let his peers know he was speaking to Jesus. So Nic came at night when no one else could see.

[69 – Nicodemus and Jesus] Nicodemus starts his conversation well enough. “Teach, we know you came from God because of the miracles you do.” (John 3:2, my paraphrase) Nicodemus compliments Jesus. His faith is sincere. We can see that. We can even anticipate what Nic is going to ask next. He is going to ask something like, “What must I do to inherit eternal life?” or “What must I do to enter the kingdom of heaven?” or “What must I do to be saved?” This question is asked over and over by people who came to Jesus. (See Matthew 19:16, Mark 10:17, Luke 10:25, Luke 18:18, Acts 2:37, and Acts 16:30)

[70 – John 3:3, rebirth] Well, Jesus doesn’t waste any time. Before Nicodemus can even form the question, Jesus says, “Very truly I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God unless they are born again.” (John 3:3) That word, “born again” can also be translated, “born from above.” Nicodemus asks, “How a man be born a second time?” Nicodemus took the words too literally, so Jesus explains. “No one can enter the kingdom of God unless they are born of water and the Spirit.” (John 3:5)

Jesus is talking about complete renewal, not just human birth. This spiritual rebirth only happens when we offer our entire lives to Christ. Jesus actually admonishes Nicodemus for being a teacher in Israel and not understanding the spiritual nature of God’s kingdom. “I came from heaven,” Jesus says, “so believe me!” (John 3:12, my paraphrase.)

[71 – bible verses] What comes next is possibly the most famous soliloquy in the Bible:

¹⁶ For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. ¹⁷ For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him. ¹⁸ Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because they have not believed in the name of God’s one and only Son. (John 3:16-18)

John 3:16 might be the most beloved and well-known verse in the New Testament, maybe the whole Christian Bible. But it’s important to remember John 3:17-18 as well. Jesus did not come to condemn the world. He came to save the world. It is only those who reject Jesus who have to deal with judgment.

A lot of fans believe John 3:16. They can quote it. They memorize it. But a lot of fans would only repeat it “at night.” Nighttime prayers. Bible study. Safe places where the expectation is positive. There is no risk at 10:00am on Sunday morning saying, “Yup, John 3:16 is a great verse.”

[72 – quote] To borrow another quote from Idleman, “Fans are happy to follow Jesus as long as that doesn’t require any significant changes or negative implications.” (Not a Fan, 30).

This is the point. Lean in, listen up. Jesus doesn’t want fans. He wants followers. I’m not talking about Twitter, either. Jesus is looking for people who turn their lives over to him completely, people who take risks, who don’t think joining the church is like joining a club, they think joining the church is more like joining the Peace Corps. There is no telling where you might go next, and you have to be all in.

[73 – girl praying] Our confirmands are making that commitment today. They are a reminder to all of us that being a follower of Christ is not the same as being a fan of Christ. Jesus can be popular, but he wants to be your Lord, your Savior. Are you all in?

The six students who will stand before you today are not doing this in secret. They did not ask for a midnight service nor a secret meeting. I taught from day one, confirmation is their choice. They weren't born into it, they didn't inherit it. Although they were raised in their families and baptized, confirmation is the affirmation of their faith. It is their profession. I told them, “Even though these are not the vows you wrote, make them your own.” Following Jesus is hard, but it is worth it.

[74 – Cross kneeling] So allow me to speak directly to the six of you confirmands right now. Understand this: It is solely because Jesus loves you that you can do any of this today. Jesus is not asking for your perfection. He is asking you to respond to his love. He is asking you to allow the Holy Spirit to fill your life, to make you a faithful disciple of Christ. Not a fair-weather fan. Not a part-time Christian once a week, once a month, or twice a year.

I am proud of all of you for completing the assignments, participating in the conversations and service projects, and having real conversations with your mentors. Today is a rite of passage when one day you will look back and say, “There. Then. That's when I told people, publicly, I want to follow Jesus.” I pray it will be one of many times when you commit your life to Christ.

[75-crowd worshipping] Remember, you don't do this alone. You join this church today as full members, with the rights, responsibilities and accountability that all professing members of Grace United Methodist Church have. That means every person here today who is a full professing member of the church is on your team. We are in this together. We renew our commitment even as you make yours. This is your church. Make us be the church you want us to be. Better, make us be the church we know God wants us to be.

Let's pray.

Memory Verse: Matthew 16:24 (NIV)

Jesus said..., “Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.”

Reflection Questions:

1. What rites of passage do you recall from your childhood? How do they compare to today’s confirmation service?
2. When have you done something under the cover of darkness? Why didn’t you do it during the day?
3. Why was Nicodemus afraid to come to Jesus during the day? What might a public declaration of faith in Jesus done for his life?
4. When in your life have you publicly acknowledged Jesus? When have you turned away from him?
5. How does the fact that Jesus came to save us and not condemn us change how you feel about him?
6. What can you do to show daily that you know and love Jesus? Whom do you need to tell about your faith?