

Episode 12: Conversations in the Gospel of John

Welcome to conversation in the Gospel of John we're glad that you've joined us for this podcast.

Stan: I'm Stan Harstine

Douglas: and I'm Douglas Estes I currently teach at Friends University and before that I was a pastor for many years

Stan: I've been working in First John so it's been a privilege to come back and talk about the Gospel of John in various ways Our Guest today is Craig Koester from Luther Seminary though he is now an Emeritus professor having retired recently so Craig how would you like to introduce yourself to our audience

Craig: yeah well I just appreciate the opportunity to talk and reflect a little bit with people about the implications of the years I've spent working on John but then also those who are currently working with the gospel teaching preaching I was a parish Pastor for a number of years before I went to grad school uh did some Parish Ministry while in grad school and I've been teaching seminarians for like 36 years after that and so the kind of the interplay between scripture and uh the concerns of the living breathing human beings among whom we work how does that play out uh that's been a long-term interest of mine and uh an interest that's never gone away

Episode 12: Conversations in the Gospel of John

Stan: we ask how you first got interested in the Gospel of John what sparked your interest maybe what made you decide to study this at a deeper level for your entire life

Craig: when I was growing up biblical you know reading the Bible was just sort of part of the of Church Life Church was an extension to family life and so I actually like the Old Testament better I thought there was a whole lot more Adventure uh in reading about you know Moses in the wilderness or King David or whatever uh the prophets railing against Injustice I thought that was way more interesting than the New Testament but when I was in college I spent uh a semester uh studying in Jerusalem uh with a college group part of that experience was going around doing Bible on location okay you go to the pool of Bethesda and you read the story about the healing of the man at Bethesda you go to the pool of salom and you read that story you go to Capernaum and you read those stories and you go to Cana whatever and as we were doing this I became intrigued with this combination of all of the tangibility the specificity I mean we're looking at rocks in the ground you know archaeological stuff and yet at the same time hearing these stories in which you get Jesus going off into you know into these flights of theological you know razzle-dazzle about life eternal life it was really

Episode 12: Conversations in the Gospel of John

that combination of some of the tangibility that I could see on these sites and this sense of of ever expanding depth that really uh that really intrigued me when I was in Parish Ministry too I was asked to do a bible study this you know a kind of a an extensive Bible study for our denomination man to try and do that while in Ministry was a was a stretch as well I think when doing that too one of the things I really fell in love with with the characters in John just as you're reading these people and sensing the humor in some of this was something I just found delightful you know you get a Nathaniel well can anything good come out of Nazareth it's like what you see is what you get you know it's he just puts it right out there you got to love this guy you know or the or the woman at the well and all of that banter back and forth you know just kind of you know challenging Jesus up throughout the whole thing just figuring out how does this whole sense of dialogue take you into places by the end that you never would have imagined when you started and just you know falling in love with the characters you know Mark Mark's an okay gospel but you only get a few verses I mean blind Bartimaeus calls out Jesus Son of David you know have mercy on me he heals him and then he's gone you know John nine you get the man born blind you

Episode 12: Conversations in the Gospel of John

get a chance to get to know this guy for a whole chapter it's it was really intriguing

Stan: and as you said we get the razzle-dazzle of Jesus discourses early on in your career you were looking at these big Concepts what did you learn about those and what do you wish you might have known when you were in Parish Ministry before you uncovered the depth of symbolism

Craig: maybe to start with your last question first what what did I wish I known I I remember that I found working with the story of Nicodemus to be an absolute headbanger I trying to track with the logic as we're going from basically High Rabbi at the beginning to you know unless you're born again then you know you can't enter the kingdom of God it's like wait a second I'm having a lot of trouble getting from point A to point B I wish I'd had had a little more help early on just trying to figure out how does some of these moments of challenge where where Jesus just absolutely takes the conversation as a 180 and the person is just left there kind of open mouth wondering I totally missed whatever you just said and so that was that for me was a headbanger and just learning a little bit more about the Dynamics of character development would have helped me a lot I think

Episode 12: Conversations in the Gospel of John

Stan: and that's one of the nice things that the academic world does actually offer is that we take time for months or even years to ponder how did we get from Nicodemus opening statement to Jesus returned Salvo where the the normal Pastor has like two hours right they're they're reading through that they're doing a sermon by thinking about that it just provides extra fuel for them to maybe perceive the story a little bit differently

Douglas: so it's interesting BEC that you bring this up because this is one of my questions for Craig so on the one hand the Gospel of John is highly ambiguous on several levels but on the other hand there are symbols in the Gospel of John which you can easily be like oh this is what he means cut and dry light and dark here it is real simple how do we navigate the ambiguity of John and the temptation to feel very certain about things especially in the local congregation scenario

Craig: yeah the the question you're raising there really it it really gets to the heart of a lot of what I had to work with in in dealing with the questions of symbolic language and the story of Nicodemus is a great example of of that um so Nicodemus comes by night oh well is that literal or symbolic or is the answer yes it is both literal and symbolic I mean it should be read that way one of the things that I uh was working

Episode 12: Conversations in the Gospel of John

with in the book on symbolism which was my you know earlier longer study was how do we talk about a symbol that may have kind of a a focused Center of meaning and then how do we acknowledge what is often called a penumbra of vagueness looking at a a focal point of light I mean the light radiates out and then eventually just kind of Fades and you're not quite sure well where does light morph into darkness where does and there aren't any fixed lines and it's often that way with John and then the question is how do you sort that out so for example with the light imagery that what what can we say about that because light does have a variety of meanings and yet it doesn't mean just anything I mean light appeals to a listener or a reader on the experiential level oh that's important I think John honors experience and for people in ministry that's hugely helpful I mean maybe people don't have advanced degrees in the Old Testament and they're not able to pull up all of these Old Testament verses that might inform what light imagery means in John but people have seen a sunrise okay, the dawning of a new day people have been able to you know experience sort of the the sense of hope that the dawning of a New Day brings, we've got Expressions you know the light went on oh okay I understood you know the light went on in my mind I understood something in a in a new way you know that to

Episode 12: Conversations in the Gospel of John

Daylight something something can also mean to expose it can also be a threatening sort of an image and that just being able to play on some of our own experiential associations there allows you to to play with the text some and explore some of the possibilities which I think John leaves open-ended what that means for a preacher is that it actually becomes invitation to explore an invitation to allow the ambiguity to generate some imagination in you as you're reading through the text now that doesn't mean that John just leaves everything kind of a morphous out there um John eventually does get around to putting things into a very focused sentence and what strikes me is so interesting is that with this with a character like Nicodemus who's so not he's he's notoriously ambiguous does he really get it does he really not get it is he somewhere in between against that backdrop of our uncertainty we really don't know does he get it or not at least in chapter 3 Jesus comes through with his probably most piercing succinct statement of the Gospel message for God so loved the world it's that utter directness in the middle of this ambiguity that I find so intriguing how about if we talk about what actually gives life if birth is what gives life well let's talk about what is it that gives life it's divine love and that just pierces through it and says okay I may not have been able to track with every twist and turn of the

Episode 12: Conversations in the Gospel of John

conversation but I know where the focus is that's that brilliant blazing Light Beam that comes right out of the middle of John 3 for God so love the world and that gives you a place from which to begin exploring the rest of it knowing that I may not be able to answer every question about what every verse means but I got a sense of this is where we finally got to go this is where the light really shines

Stan: and I think one of the problems that we have when we're dealing with John is in the background we have the synoptics or we have Paul and in the synoptics and in Paul things are a little bit more straightforward and John doesn't bring them straightforward and so we want we strive we urge and are trying to get something straight out of the gospel and it just refuses to play that game which I find delightful but I know that pastors would often times struggle through that because they're looking for a simple straightforward direct approach

Douglas: but what Craig said is gold here because if you wanted to start a small group let's say at your local church there isn't a better passage to start with than in John 3 because it allows the group to talk think Nuance things and then get to the clarity of how God's love transforms us so there's room to play and then there's a very clear statement I'm going to just say at the end at the end that culminates

Episode 12: Conversations in the Gospel of John

everything so in a way it's John is doing something on a totally different level

Stan: the other part that you brought out I think Bears witness for um the pastors is that sometimes we expect that the characters in John are going to have an immediate snap decision well none of us ever do that it takes us 10 or 20 years sometimes to have a snap decision about believing in Jesus we have to go through all we have to go through the Old Testament and we have to go through the fun stories of the Old Testament the action Adventures of the Old Testament and the prophets of the Old Testament as you did in your life to get around to to getting to John and going oh this actually I I can't quite Master this it's intriguing to me and we think sometimes that we have to have an immediate response when John is going uh there's too much at play here for you to get me right at the first and he keeps pushing that with some of the character development

Craig: to develop that just a little bit more if I could just to kind of develop what you just said Stan for people that are that are working whether it's in a a small group study or uh or in Preaching it's it's very interesting to just work with the with the stories where you have characters in John precisely because they have that they have multiple

Episode 12: Conversations in the Gospel of John

Dimensions to them I mean they're not just simple a lot also depends on even the The Voice tone and they they draw you in so you know if you're reading the story of the woman at the well I mean it's amazing how people supply voice tones they're drawn into the story you know that Jesus is sitting by the way well and you know give me a drink well how is it that you would Jew ask a drink of me a woman of Samaria well was she quizzical was she hostile was she baffled was she being evasive well if you want to get it right and just nail it the story is going to frustrate you but on the other hand if you want to have people enter into the story bring their own experience to the reading of the text I also find it so helpful in John and one of the things that students often find surprising and encouraging is how often the people in John's gospel ask questions how often how the gospel seems to invite questions and exploring questions

Stan: and how often Jesus doesn't answer the questions

Craig: how often he doesn't ask answer them but he draws you further uh one of the things I find intriguing like in um in the opening chapter of the Gospel you know you get John the Baptist who says Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world and you get a couple people that go following him and the very first thing they do

Episode 12: Conversations in the Gospel of John

is to ask a question you know well Jesus asks a question well what what are you looking for and they ask a question well where are you staying I mean nobody's nobody's giving answers everybody's asking questions and then Jesus says come and see that the very first thing this Grand announcement of Behold the Lamb of God does is not to provide an answer but to raise a question a question that's worth exploring and going further the first thing that happens at the woman at the well it's she asks a question very first thing that happens with Nicodemus is how can a man be born when he's old and to think about how the gospel raises questions invites us to ask our questions to voice our questions actually becomes an extraordinarily important thing in faith formation you know So for anybody who's working with faith formation in Ministry you don't start off with the answers you start off with hearing a message that makes you wonder about something being able to articulate your wonderings and then being able to say how am I going to get anywhere with these wonderings well you get it in relationship with Jesus nobody gets their questions answered in advance you get your answers as you keep going and that's so true to life I find that is just so true to life

Stan: yeah I think one of the things that John actually flips on the side is that it's not a book a gospel that's giving a lot of answers but it is

Episode 12: Conversations in the Gospel of John

giving information and from the information we have to then draw lines of inquiry to ask some questions or perhaps the information doesn't fit with what we previously thought was in our realm

Douglas: no I like questions oh yeah yeah so and I think I think what Craig is saying is is so good because it ties in to the ambiguity section because I would argue that most of the characters questions are rhetorical devices in a sense that are the same questions that we have as the reader and so that they they hook us because uh it makes us want to ask those questions and you're right Jesus doesn't answer those questions at least not explicitly from the get-go but John wants us to keep asking those questions until we get the right answer

Craig: another thing I was is I was working on the the sort of the issue of symbolism which again deals with the questions is that John recognizes that people can see the same thing and not see the same thing uh you can see the same thing and interpret it in exactly 180 degree opposite ways uh I think which is interesting again for people in Ministry I mean how often do you are you dealing with people who for whom even if you've got sort of a common point we're looking in the same at something and we're interpreting it in very very different ways uh yeah what do we make of life experience in terms of interpreting it so

Episode 12: Conversations in the Gospel of John

so differently I appreciate John because John brings the questions into the narrative and allows the give and take to allow meaning to emerge I mean a classic case would be the healing of the man born blind go wash in the pool of salom the men went washed came back seeing okay what does that mean you get the neighbors wondering well is this the man who used to sit and beg no it's not the the same one it's like him but not the same no well is he the same or is he different I mean it's sort of interesting well yes he is the same and yes he is different it's but they're trying to grapple with what happened here okay so if Jesus is really healed on the Sabbath what does that mean well it means he's a sinner well wait a second no does healing mean he's a sinner no it means he's from God well they're both seeing the same thing from entirely different perspectives and so it creates an occasion for saying how do we sort out the differences why would somebody think he's a sinner why would somebody think he's not um and it's through that interplay between the questions in that long story that you begin to see what is the will of God what is the action of God God's action is to give life and um if God is giving life to this man both in terms of renewed physical health and uh a kind of renewed Faith Insight um that's got to be a God thing not a sin thing that's where the interplay of questions recognizing the ambiguity

Episode 12: Conversations in the Gospel of John

of experience in this case a healing and how often our pastor is working with people's own faith experiences you have a Health crisis in your family what does that mean well it's the answer is probably not simple how do you invite people to ask the questions and to grapple back and forth was it something I mean asked the disciples question was it something we did was is God got something against us that we had this Health crisis in our family uh and if not then Where Do We Go From Here pastors are dealing in this realm all the time trying to make sense of experience and John deals with experiences of Health crisis health issues like with the healing stories he deals with issues of death and grief like in the story of uh Mary Martha and Lazarus he allows John allows them to say what they need to say Lord if you'd been here my brother wouldn't have died they don't just have to make nice right up front they can say what they're really thinking and at the same time to kind of work with Jesus to say does that mean despair gets the final word or is there a way in which Christ can even meet you there where the question may not be fully answered and yet the promise of life can be given nonetheless I mean that that's where you get this sort of deep engagement with human experience I think in John and grappling with

Episode 12: Conversations in the Gospel of John

what does it mean I think it's an extraordinarily valuable that way for for
Ministry

Stan: so that kind of raises a question what is this life that John is offering what have you learned in your career about this thing called life of the ages uh eternal life that John proclaims so frequently

Craig: I think I think for me that's one of the things that over the years I've come to appreciate more about John than ever before that John really is about the issue of life that life is really the key thing all the way through the gospel and so yeah what is this life you're exactly right that that life is more than a heartbeat I think um there is a physical Dimension to life in John Jesus embodies the word the God's creative word the embodied life is important there at the same time there's a relational Dimension to life that's why faith is so important for authentic life that life authentic life is to be in relationship with the God who made you there's a present Dimension to life that's individual personal um there's also a collective Dimension to life that life is something uh that's lived in relationship with God and with other people that the gift of love which is Central to the giving of life is what binds people together with God and with each other and so life in love is collective life it's interpersonal life life also has a present Dimension and a future

Episode 12: Conversations in the Gospel of John

Dimension that in John eternal life begins now in faith because you're in relationship with the Eternal God mean so eternity is right there in the in the immediate yet life doesn't end with the last breath or the last heartbeat that there's a future Dimension to life through the promise of Resurrection uh as you do your funerals life ends and yet does that mean that death is real but death is not final that life does get the final word so it's a hugely important concept which is well worth exploring

Stan: and I think what's uh important about what you said that is perhaps you've learned a better way to to teach the seminarians as they go into Parish Ministry but in a congregational life when things are going well we seem to be very individualized but when the times become difficult we find out if we have that connection with each other that is defined by this love and it would be really wonderful if somehow when things were going well we could find this connection that we have with one another and live this life of Faith together more in the good times and not just count on it in The Not So Good Times

Douglas: let me ask a different question that we may uh you know go in a different direction feel free to you know this can be a short answer you know it's it's up to you but over your illustrious career in

Episode 12: Conversations in the Gospel of John

Johannine studies what has been the biggest change that you've seen in our field

Craig: when I was first getting into Johannine uh really back in the 1970s the field was dominated by kind of the questions of the community the community the Johannine community that there's an assumption that uh that the gospel and Epistles were written for a community of people what how can we reconstruct their history and so on and at the center of that was this idea that what gave a definitive shape to John's gospel was this experience of being put out of the synagogue that there's a trauma of separation from Judaism that was a huge thing and I was right in the middle of it because I was studying with Ray Brown and Lou Martin who were kind of the key uh The Architects of that of that approach I think over the years there's been a there's been a movement away from trying to reconstruct a lot of stuff behind the text and focusing more on what's the dynamics within it which I think is important there certainly are elements of conflict within it but I also think that there's a more expansive aspect to John's gospel that I would want to uh give full weight to I mean clearly you've got members of the Jewish community in John they're comforting Mary and Martha at the death of Lazarus I mean you find crowds who seem very

Episode 12: Conversations in the Gospel of John

sympathetic to Jesus you find the sort of the honoring of of Jewish uh tradition and in its implementation and the telling of the Jesus story uh in ways that don't displace it or discount it but but adapt reinterpret it so that it becomes a much more I think salutary way of trying to read John within a healthier relationship within within Judaism that's not uniform it's not everybody who's moved in that direction but I think there have been some significant moves beyond viewing the trauma of separation as the defining thing to saying there's actually a lot more going on in this environment uh which is well worth exploring s

Douglas: o you're uh Doctor was Raymond Brown yeah did you choose uh to go to Union because of Ray

Craig: Union was where I wanted to go because when i' been working with John in in Parish Ministry Ray Brown's commentary was the thing it was the definitive work so yes I applied various places Union is where I wanted to go I just absolutely wanted to go there and you know what was interesting when I went because I went to visit grad schools one of the things that I found interesting too is this young kid making you know fear and trembling you know can I meet with the great Ray Brown and uh he said sure I'm teaching a class you know just come sit in on the class and then afterwards we'll talk and what I found so

Episode 12: Conversations in the Gospel of John

remarkable about Ray is that he was of any of the people I interviewed with looking at grad schools Ray was the pastor he absolutely was that he was asking about my family he was asking about just all the the logistics of things of what it would mean come to study in in New York City what some of the stresses the strains would be that one would need to deal with but he was taking a holistic look at what a graduate study mean taking into account me my family my son trying to give us a sense of perspective and I thought wow this guy he he he flies to the Vatican he goes to all these International conferences he's a sought-after speaker he's taken time to actually ask me about my family about what grad school means he's helping me think this through not just what my ideas are but what is life like I've never forgotten that what a pastoral presence he he genuinely was uh and remained so all the way through my experience with him he he genuinely was

Stan: well that's a very good memory of a career long time past so we want to thank you for taking time today to have a conversation with us and share insights gained over your career on the Gospel of John very pastoral based very parishioner based and we always enjoy hearing that you have any final words you'd like to say to our audience as they make you a popular author who might get invited to fly to the Vatican or uh

Episode 12: Conversations in the Gospel of John

speak all over all over the country and attend International Conference

Craig: no I think uh just final words would be words of thanks to you for actually trying to to facilitate a conversation between some of the academic studies of of John and in Parish Ministry because if if academic study and in Parish Ministry don't engage in dialogue we're really hurting each other because interest in John's gospels obviously got to have an important popular base you don't just do it in the academy uh it's finally an important text because it's a text for the people and not just for the scholars

Stan: well thank you Douglas final words

Douglas: no it's great as always great as always

Stan: well we think it's great it's always fun and we appreciate you our listener for taking the time to join in with conversations and the Gospel of John