

Sermon – 3.11.18 – Patrick Meagher

Numbers 21:4-9, Ephesians 2:1-10, John 3: 14-21

In this familiar section of John's gospel, I've always been drawn to the way the author presents Nicodemus the Pharisee. We first meet him just prior to our passage, under the safety of darkness, as he approaches Jesus with some inquiries. Jesus has just gone public with the miracle in Cana and the dramatic cleansing of the temple we heard about last week. With his interest piqued and his heart now engaged, Nicodemus retreats to his head with some theological questions. We learn Nicodemus is a Pharisee, and seen as a leader of the Jews of Jerusalem. He is part of the Sanhedrin, the ruling group of Pharisees who, with their powers limited by Rome, struggle to maintain control over the Jewish community. Jesus has begun to stir controversy and challenge the religious authority, and Nicodemus risks a lot even speaking with this unpredictable new teacher. But approach he does, and the sincerity of his questions draws us in. He's trying to understand this upheaval all around him.

Later on, in chapter 7, Nicodemus speaks *up* for Jesus during a very public debate, but stops short of professing his devotion. We don't hear from him again until after the crucifixion, when he joins the few gathered to prepare Jesus's body for burial. Here he brings large quantities of expensive oil and perfume, revealing something of his wealth. It's pure speculation to think how this wealth came to be, but perhaps he benefited from the system of financial gain Jesus had just overturned in the temple.

It's to this sympathetic Pharisee, and into this moment in time, that Jesus speaks in our passage. Nicodemus approached him in darkness, and Jesus invites him into the light. We don't hear Nicodemus's reaction, but we find him in chapter 7 still a functioning member of the ruling Pharisees. Perhaps this call to the light was too much.

A wealthy leader, with power and privilege in society, Nicodemus has reason to balance his interest in Jesus with self-preservation. How easy it could be for us to cast judgement here, yet I'm drawn to him because John doesn't write Nicodemus as a villain or a moral failure at all. In fact, I believe the character of Nicodemus is an open door—an opportunity-- for many of us to enter and engage with this Gospel story. While power, privilege, and wealth varies among us, it's a safe bet a majority of us have more in common with Nicodemus than we do with the beggars outside the temple.

For Nicodemus and his brethren, the cultural system of religion produced power and profit for a chosen few. In our time, perhaps an apt parallel is the scourge of white supremacy that pervades our culture and provides benefits for one group over another. We're steeped in it, and we don't

consciously choose to perpetuate this system, but it persists. I see many of you answering the call of our church members who are leading us toward a greater understanding of this societal sin.

Just last week the Tree of Life room was full of concerned members listening to and asking questions of our visitor, Professor Joshua Tom, trying to understand white supremacy and what we can do. That series continues today. But perhaps some of you, like me, don't always know how to live as one who benefits from racism but feels the call toward a better way. This tension is similar to where Nicodemus finds himself after this first conversation with Jesus. He's drawn to the person of Jesus, but not sure what to do with the threat to his way of life. Will the cost be too much? Will he lose relationships and influence if he speaks out? Yet, something must be done. Those in oppression are under threat too.

In talking with some of you this week, I was reminded how Jesus's strong words, when removed from their context, do sound very threatening. They sound like a dividing up of society. Some are in the club, and some are out. I encourage us this morning to continue to challenge those teachings we may have grown up with. You know the ones. They reduce God's love to a game show-like quiz, where one wrong answer or one catechism mis-remembered means you lose. That is not the love of a God who sent his son to suffer so that humanity may live free of death forever. Jesus is an opportunity, not a test. There is grace beyond what we know from human love... and then some more grace.

The apostle Paul writes well of this opportunity we have in Jesus: *"For we are what God has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life."* The opportunity is nothing less than a **way of life**, a calling, a place in the Kingdom of Love. We are not saved by these good works. We are saved by grace long before the good works *and* the bad works. But we draw from this vast reservoir of LOVE to find the stuff to love more. Our cup overflows with God's free love, and we can't help but share with our neighbor far and wide. A risk to love is really no risk at all. It's becoming who God created us to be. It's saying yes to the way of life prepared for us.

Of course, sometimes we say no to that life. We all do. Sin occurs as a society, but also as individuals. Sometimes our heart is in the right place, and sometimes it's just not. And from those moments we carry shame and a feeling of separation from the life around us.

One of my unique opportunities as Minister of Outreach is to meet with dozens of people every month in extreme circumstances asking for the help of the church. I hear story after story of desperation and horrible circumstances. Some of what I hear is true, and I know some of it is not. If an odd little man in a baseball cap were all that stood between my children living in an apartment or on the streets, the truth might be less important than getting the help. Regardless of what I hear, the faces I see tell the real story. Some people I meet are clearly caught in the destructive cycle of addiction. Eye contact is difficult. There may be an alarming darkness to their face, or a deep abiding sadness to their

demeanor. They have a very hard time telling the truth, and a harder time accepting kindness, because it challenges the core consequence of addiction: the feeling of being entirely unlovable.

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Our struggles may not be this extreme, but I believe our process is the same. We all carry the shame that *self-separates* us from God and from one another. God doesn't condemn, we condemn ourselves. As Jesus put it, *"those who do not believe are condemned already."* The separation is not from God, it already occurs from within us. And it is painful.

We need to know that **this exact painful place** is where God longs to meet us. Right in the middle of our shame, *unfazed* by the choices and actions we'd rather forget. God has **kindness** to offer in the places we know *for sure* we deserve condemnation. God has a way of life already prepared for us in which we're free to love more and more and become the community of the Kingdom of God. What sin separates, God brings together. Paul uses this beautiful phrase: *"made alive together with Christ."* We are made alive again, and drawn back into community and relationship.

On this Lenten journey, as days get longer and flowers begin to bloom, we wait for the light of Christ to find full expression in a resurrection over death. As a society, we wait for lasting healing that comes only after the light can shine in all the hidden places of racism in our time. And as people of God, we wait with Nicodemus to understand the confusing times we live in, where previous cultural norms feel farther and farther from reach. Unlike Nicodemus, we know the end of the story, and we wait not in vain, but in the hope of the assurance that Jesus is with us to redeem and not condemn. To bring freedom where we know bondage. And to always offer a way forward to be loved and to love in greater measure. *"For we are what God has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life."*

Amen