

March 12, 2017 – Second Sunday in Lent



“Authenticity/Courage/Compassion: Adversaries Connect”

Sermon by Rev. Patricia Farris

John 3:1-17

Now there was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews. He came to Jesus by night and said to him, “Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God; for no one can do these signs that you do apart from the presence of God.” Jesus answered him, “Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above.” Nicodemus said to him, “How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother’s womb and be born?” Jesus answered, “Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit. What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit. Do not be astonished that I said to you, ‘You must be born from above.’ The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit.” Nicodemus said to him, “How can these things be?” Jesus answered him, “Are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things? “Very truly, I tell you, we speak of what we know and testify to what we have seen; yet you do not receive our testimony. If I have told you about earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you about heavenly things? No one has ascended into heaven except the one who descended from heaven, the Son of Man. And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life. “For 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. “Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.

Our Lenten sermon series continues this morning with our theme of Authenticity, Compassion and Courage played out in the story of Jesus and Nicodemus. It’s a story we might think we know. At least one that we’ve perhaps heard many times. I invite us this morning to consider it anew as an astonishing exchange between two people engaging in deep conversation despite the odds stacked against this ever happening.

It’s a story for a time such as this, the time we find ourselves in, when many of you have lamented to me over the sorry state of affairs in which people of differing points of view, different political persuasions, differing perspectives on critical issues, can’t seem to even try to sit down together and talk, communicate, preferring instead to shout and accuse, shutting out everything but what one already believes. What happens to us when we always assume the worst about one another? What do we become when authentic dialogue is replaced by shouting our monologues louder and louder in rooms and websites filled with people who already agree with us?

Jesus and Nicodemus show us another way. A way of authenticity, compassion and courage. A difficult and demanding way forward that requires risk and faith and a deep conviction that remaining connected is always more salvific than self-righteous isolation.

Back to those two in a moment. First a look at a fascinating movie some of you have perhaps seen—“Arrival.”

Aliens have arrived on Earth in a dozen monolithic spaceships scattered across the globe, one of them in the wilds of Montana. Understandably, the world is terrified, teetering on the brink of war. The Army tags a distinguished linguist to learn the aliens’ language, and find out why they’re here. Although Dr. Banks speaks many languages, nothing in her repertoire of knowledge prepares her for communication with two giant, squid-like beings. Efforts at verbal communication are unsuccessful, but written language proves more promising. From their starfish-like hands, the aliens emit swirling circles of inky gas, each one of them—Dr. Banks eventually comprehends—a fully formed sentence with neither beginning nor end. Communication with the creatures moves slowly, but it does begin as they continue in “conversation.” But now the Army and the CIA become concerned. Since their purpose in landing on earth is not known, what happens if we earthlings aid their cause in teaching more about us than we learn about them? Should we attack, or allow the attempts at understanding to continue? Our linguist presses forward, determined to break through to communication and relationship.

I won’t say too much more here in case you haven’t seen it. The themes of the movie are quite intriguing. Questions remain, not the least of which is an implied challenge back to us. If efforts to communicate with extraterrestrials can yield positive results, should we not make a concerted effort to communicate with our fellow human brothers and sisters here on earth? Our survival—to say nothing of our potential to thrive—is at stake.

So, what of Jesus and Nicodemus? Let’s start with Nicodemus. He was a Pharisee, a teacher, a learned biblical scholar, especially observant, one who was very serious about upholding the laws of God. He was a ruler of Israel and was said to have been a member of the Sanhedrin, the central Jewish judicial authority, the religious establishment. When we meet him in John’s Gospel he was probably far from being a young man, given his stature and position of authority.

What motivated a man like Nicodemus to go to Jesus? We’re not really told. Perhaps he had heard of this other teacher, another rabbi like himself, and was curious about him. But, remember—a lot of accusations were being made of Jesus at

the time by the Pharisees themselves--that he broke the law often--by healing on the Sabbath, by talking with women and refusing to condemn, by eating with sinners, and admiring Samaritans.

Nicodemus was taking a big risk that night. He was an important person, a person of status and respect. I'm sure he was a man very aware of appearances, of propriety, of the role he played. For Nicodemus, a devout man, a Pharisee, a man who lived by all the rules, to meet with Jesus was shocking.

Yet, under the cover of darkness, Nicodemus sought him out. Rather than belittling him, or labeling him or disparaging him or writing him off as a trouble-maker, a traitor or a crazy man, Nicodemus walks right up to his door and knocks.

That's the first astonishing thing that happens on this night, the second, equally so. It's what Jesus does next. Think about it. It's night time. Dark. Was Jesus exhausted from a long day of teaching and healing? Was he having dinner with his disciples? Was he already sleeping? He knew full well that he had offended the Pharisees and alarmed the Romans and that they were out to get him. Was the door locked for fear of those who already sought to condemn and arrest him? We don't know. What we do know is that Jesus opened the door and invited Nicodemus to come in.

Why did Jesus open the door? Why, indeed?

The scripture itself doesn't tell us. Many interpretations focus on the "what" of Jesus' teaching, the words he said to Nicodemus. Of course, some of the most familiar verses are found in this passage, about the necessity of being born again, being born of water and the spirit. And of course, verses 16 and 17: "For 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. Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him."

I have no doubt that Jesus wanted Nicodemus to hear and trust and believe in those things. But, even more importantly, I think that for Jesus, relationship was even more important than what was said.

There are interpretations of this story that want to make Nicodemus out as an ignorant non-believer. Someone who gets tripped up in literal interpretation of Jesus' words, missing the meaning. Some go even further and use this story to condemn Jews for not accepting Jesus as Lord and Savior. The smears can get pretty ugly when biblical verses are misused to condone anti-Semitism and ethnic hatred. And if we want to think "that was then, this is now," consider the documented rise in shameful anti-Semitism going on right now in our country—desecration of Jewish cemeteries, threats to Jewish Community Centers and schools. Talk with a parent of a child in a preschool in one of those community centers and hear the fear in their voice. Should they send their child to school today? Will they be safe? The church is called to do all in our power to stand with them and to build bridges of understanding, respect, and love.

Jesus was not about bludgeoning people over the head with words. God did not send him into the world to condemn the world, but to point the way to the fullness of life, the promise of healing for all, God's new creation. This story shows us clearly that for Jesus, right relationship was the goal, the purpose of incarnation. As the American writer Pearl S. Buck, daughter of missionaries who lived most of her life in China, put it: "The person who tries to live alone will not succeed as a human being. [The] heart withers if it does not answer another heart. [The] mind shrinks away if [it] hears only the echoes of [its] own thoughts and finds no other inspiration."

Jesus and Nicodemus were enemies who sought each other out and sought to know one another, mind to mind, heart to heart. Admittedly, they were not as far apart as extraterrestrials and humans. After all, they spoke the same language, they shared the same culture and customs. They knew one another, maybe too well. Maybe it was that very familiarity that made it so hard to connect once they had chosen different paths and their group began labeling the other as the problem. This is why their nighttime conversation is so important for us now, the going up to the door, the opening of the door, the dignity of meeting.

Over the years, many artists have depicted this scene. It is fascinating to see how many of these portraits show Jesus and Nicodemus seated at a square table, not across from one another as adversaries but adjacent, turning in their seats to see one another and talk face to face, equal to equal, brother to brother, dare we even say friend to friend...they model for us authenticity, compassion and courage.

In her beautiful book, *Hope in the Dark*, Rebecca Solnit writes: "the grounds of hope are in the shadows, in the people who are inventing the world while no one looks..."

Thankfully, Scripture give us eyes to see this transformational encounter between Jesus and Nicodemus, meeting in the night, in the shadows, inventing the world through the truth of their encounter, making the impossible possible in their very lives, mind to mind, heart to heart. Here are grounds of hope, God opening the door to a new and bright future for all.

Amen

Notes:

Rebecca Solnit. *Hope in the Dark: Untold Histories, Wild Possibilities*. Haymarket Books, 2nd edition, March 2016.

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First United Methodist Church • 1008 Eleventh Street Santa Monica, CA 90403
www.santamonicaumc.org ■ 310-393-8258