

Holy Trinity Sunday May 30, 2021

John 3:1-17

Nicodemus. What a fascinating character. A Pharisee- One well-schooled in the Hebraic law and scripture, part of a group that wielded political influence and perhaps power, well respected. Think middle class.

Nic comes at night to see Jesus. Why come at night? Was he afraid of being seen together with Jesus? Possible. There were tensions between Jesus and the Pharisees already. Was this just when he was free? Is this another of John's uses of the contrast between darkness and light? Nic, comes to see the light of the world in the middle of darkness. We don't know, but it is worth asking.

Right off the bat, Nic honors Jesus. He gives him the title of Rabbi and acknowledges that God's presence is with him, because with these signs how could God not be!? Is Nic being real here? Or is he making fun of Jesus? Is he feeling out whether Jesus can be brought into the fold of the Pharisees?

One commentator wondered if Nic assumed Jesus would be bowled over by this high praise from the... Pharisees! Regardless, Nicodemus is certainly acting as someone who knows how the world works. Is looking at things through the rock-solid lens of a Pharisee, someone who has studied scripture and the law and knows God's will.

Then Jesus throws a curve, "You know this, do you? Maybe so, but you can't see, you can't perceive, the Kingdom of God without being born from above." The language Jesus uses here is a bit different from Nic. Nic has said that he and his mates "know" Jesus is a teacher from God, the word used implies they have

physically seen him do this work. Jesus here says, you can't perceive, you can't find the Reign of God, pick it out in what's happening, without being born from above.

Nic shakes his head. What? How can a grown man be born again? You can't enter into your mom's womb and have another go, can you? Now, most commentators have assumed, from his response, that Nic takes Jesus' words literally. But what if Nic gets what Jesus means- that to see the reign of God, to perceive that... requires still more work. Nic is presented with a mystery, a conundrum that forces him to think in new ways, to question old assumptions, to learn more. He appears to wonder if he can do that. Can reach out of his privilege, the comfortable, the known and... change his way of seeing.

Jesus' response ends with, "You're a teacher of Israel and you don't know these things through personal experience?" Now, you could hear that as a bit of an insult, or is it a direct question, meant to prompt further thought and growth in Nic. Jesus takes Nicodemus' identity and frame of reference (teacher of Israel, Pharisee, the years of study and hard work) and points out a blind spot in that knowledge.

Jesus moves on, chiding Nic a bit, but also speaking truth, "We speak of what we know, testify to what we have seen, pointed out to you where the reign of God is and yet you don't receive it- take hold of it." Dude, if you can't handle this stuff here on earth, how could you handle the real mystery of what the reign of God is like?

Then Jesus moves on and our view of Nic fades away under the glow of the goal post scripture, John 3:16.

But Nicodemus shows up in John again.

When the Pharisees try and arrest Jesus a little bit down the line Nic speaks up on his behalf. Defending the rights of Jesus. Perhaps something is at work here? This is no visit under the cover of darkness, speaking up like that would risk some of his power. Would place Nic at a disadvantage among his peers. Challenges their world view. Their understanding.

Finally, at the end, Nicodemus comes with Joseph of Arimathea, a secret believer in Jesus, to remove Jesus' body from the cross and bury it. Comes in the daylight to the dead body of Christ and lays him in the tomb.

What are we to make of Nicodemus? Was he a believer? Who knows? But Jesus challenged him, and he responded. Jesus caused him to look at the world that he thought he knew and to see it again- to be born "from above".

And the only way to do that is through water and the Spirit. Is through the washing of baptism that drowns our old ways of seeing and opens our eyes to new things.

Things like the fact that God so loved the whole world. Not just the righteous. Not just those who go to church on Sunday. Not just those who are "good". Are we ready for that? What are we so sure we know? That we see the truth of things. Are we ready to have those fundamental understandings tested?

I hang with the Christians who happen to be Lutheran because we have built into our very understanding of ourselves and the world a degree of... mystery. A knowledge that, as the Apostle Paul puts it, we see things now dimly. We know now, in part. Incompletely.

It is Holy Trinity Sunday. If there is anything more mysterious and unknowable than the very nature of God, then I don't know what it is. We understand that this trinitarian expression of God is incomplete, a weak grasping of our human minds to comprehend that which by definition is incomprehensible.

This does not mean we don't do it. But it does mean that the knowledge we hold as certain, unshakeable, is narrow. The rest is open to further exploration. We know through constant testimony about God's steadfast and unchanging love for all of creation, of God's mercy and goodness. We know the best expression of God is to be found in Jesus Christ. We know that the Spirit of God still moves in and through the world today. Beyond that... it's a mystery. One that we only get glimpses of.

And that only happens when we are open to new understanding. When we dip daily into those waters of baptism and the gift of the Holy Spirit to drown our old certainties, privileges, and prejudices and see with new eyes. Eyes born from above. From God.

This past weekend the Southeastern Iowa Synod of the ELCA (of which we are a part) met in assembly. The Rev. Carmelo Santos led several of our sessions on being Baptized and Set Free and he talked about this as a way of seeing.

What do we see, and does it describe what is? An illustration. What do you see in this picture?

That floor is completely flat. They painted it that way to stop kids from running in it. That knowledge gives you a new way of seeing. Which changes how you act.

Martin Luther's theology of the cross says that in looking through the cross, we can see the truth of a thing. The reality is that we live our lives curved in on ourselves. Through our dying and rising in baptism we can begin to look elsewhere. To see the neighbor.

We can be like Nicodemus who was told a story about how the world is that did not fit his view, his training, his bias. And instead of rejecting it out of hand he listened. Took that as a lived truth and sat with that knowledge. Let it work on him over time and it shaped his own understanding and view.

When we are baptized and set free by the Spirit we are given new way of seeing. Seeing our neighbor, God, and ourselves with truth and loving kindness. Given the ability to see the world through another's eyes.

At the assembly, our "edutainment" for Friday night was Joe Davis and David Scherer. Both live and work in the Twin Cities. One is black and one is white. Part of their work is to provide tools, so participants can develop a shared language as they dive into the challenges of seeing, appreciating, and adapting to all of the "differences that make a difference."

One way they encourage folks to do this is to both tell their stories and listen to others. Which they did that night. In David's story the constant refrain was that he grew up surrounded by people who "look like me". Doctors, teachers, tv stars, politicians. Joe, by contrast, spoke of the difference his skin color made.

They then asked us how we felt about these testimonies to their lives. What emotions did they raise? What questions? And to begin to think about how we might incorporate those into our lives now. To help us see in a new way.

As we get ready to have our own assumptions about who God is challenged with our hymn of the day, I invite you all- baptized children of God, bearers of God's image, born of the water and gifted with the Holy Spirit- to ponder how we can better train ourselves to see things from above. To see the reign of God at work in this world and to work for it to come in our own lives.

What ways have you found helpful to see things from perspectives different from your own? How do you encounter stories of the lives of others and incorporate their truth into your life?

Where in your life are you less able to admit you see things "dimly" or in part? Why do you think that is so? What is at stake there? What might need to be "crucified" so that you might better see the reign of God?

Baptized children of God bearers of God's image, born of water and gifted with the Holy Spirit, may the God who knit you together in your mother's womb, who is Mother, Lover, and Friend; who is Creator, Redeemer, and Sanctifier; who we have named as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit gift you with a certainty of God's love, grace, and mercy and also gift you with a profound unease with anything beyond that. So that you may better see the reign of God at work in this world and in your lives.