

Sermons at Union Congregational Church

Written and Preached by The Reverend Dr. M. Elizabeth Waters

March 12, 2017

Second Sunday in Lent

John 3:1-17

Nick at Night

After the evening gathering of Pharisees, Nick stalls a bit to keep from walking home with the usual crew via the well traveled route. He has a plan, but doesn't want the others to know. So, he makes up an excuse to lag behind. After he checks that the others are almost out of sight, down the road, he takes off in the opposite direction, pausing in doorways to be sure he isn't being followed.

Nick — I know, his official Pharisee name is Nicodemus, but he is Nick to family and friends — and really, this is personal story. Yes, Nick took on the yoke of the Pharisees before he was a teen, trained since he was a boy in their ultra orthodox practices, their understanding of the Torah, and their relationship with the world. Choosing and being chosen for this elite group made Nick's family very proud, especially since the country has been occupied by foreign forces for years.

For more than a generation, Israel has been under the rule of the Roman Empire and step by step, this distant kingdom has placed Jews in leadership roles, expecting them to fulfill the mission and vision of the Romans, implementing Roman values, living into the Empire's vision of Caesar as Lord, organizing and orienting their understanding of truth so it points toward the preferred bottom line for the Empire. By now, the religious leaders of the Pharisees, whether they realize it or not, also live out these Empire values — where money and power is the goal, rather than people and community. These Empire values overshadow the age old commandment — "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and your neighbor as yourself." Indeed, the Empire's bottom line of money and power has changed how Pharisees interpret the Torah — and they don't even notice their adaptation. They, like most people in this time and place, are unaware of how much their culture has been co-opted by the ways of the Empire. It is like they are swimming in the ocean, but don't perceive the water that surrounds them. It just seems natural, like the way it has always been, like anything else is a pipe dream.

And then Nick encounters an unconventional Rabbi from the booneys of Nazareth. The riffraff — you know, the disabled, the immigrants, the poor, the sick — this riffraff of Israel clamors to get close to him as he teaches from soap boxes in the city and heals with a touch. Clusters of his brother Pharisees confronts this Rabbi with questions and accusations. But Jesus always seems to have a calm, unflustered, almost humorous way of responding — answering questions with questions, telling stories, drawing in the sand, using children as models, touching untouchables. It always confounds Nick. Catches him in the paradox between what he's been taught and the part of him that longs for — that feels called toward a compassionate world that lives out the Torah's commandment. As Nick observes Rabbi Jesus, he realizes that he has never seen anyone live with such deep peace, with such generosity, such compassion, so connected to God. It is simultaneously unnerving and amazing.

And so, Nick decides to seek out this Jesus under the cover of night. That night their conversation centers around a Greek word that is best translated perception. Perception is a word that not only includes what we receive and select from our senses, what we call awareness... but also how we interpret that awareness, how it is woven into our world view. So, two people can participate in the same event and yet report what happens in markedly different ways. Our perception shapes what we think, believe, and do. Our perception shapes our way, truth, and life.

So, Nick sneaks through the night to meet Rabbi Jesus, compelled to share his perception. "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."

Let's stop here a moment. It is unclear to me how many of the Pharisees would make this same interpretive leap that Nick has made here. Maybe more than we are told in the biblical text, but I am sure that publicly asserting that Jesus is from God would be a controversial claim among his Pharisee brothers. After all, the crowd we hang out with, the people we listen to, definitely influence our perception and our choices — even when these conflict with our inner knowing. So Nick is caught between group think and this inner knowing that Jesus has awoken in him.

Thus, Nick has come to Jesus **alone**.

Jesus takes the next step with Nick, pointing toward the Kingdom of God, a world view that contrasts with the Empire. Jesus knows this difference is hard to perceive and requires that a person shed the filters of interpretation that culture has inculcated. Some have called this state, "Beginner's Mind." Jesus calls it — being born again.

That metaphor doesn't work. Nick gets caught up in the literal interpretation of this image. His mind floods with questions. How is this possible, returning to my mother's womb? How can this make sense with everything I've learned through my life? Jesus tries a different metaphor, "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...."

Now Nick is really confused.... and a bit out of control. This is not the orderly, certain world of the ultra-conservative Pharisees, and it is not the familiar world view of Empire thinking.

Instead, Rabbi Jesus lives with a different bottom line, a different purpose, a different vision, and freedom the people around him lack. The Kingdom of God is the ultimate goal — But what does that mean — in concrete terms?

Actually, I have a lot of compassion for Nick. It is challenging to unpack this Kingdom of God. But, I have thought about it a lot. Let me share my current understanding in modern language. The kingdom of God is a worldview that counters the centrality of money and power in our world. Empire thinking has the goal of gaining money and power that shapes how we use our time, judges success, celebrates and rewards outcomes. By contrast, the Kingdom of God centers on love, compassion, kindness, generosity, and ethical and ecological sensitivities not only in one's personal life, but also in all the institutions of culture — in schools and businesses, in government and social service agencies. Imagine evaluating corporations, or political parties, non-profits, or family gatherings on whether they foster love, compassion, kindness, generosity, and ethical and ecological sensitivities. I believe that is what Jesus imagines. Sound different? Maybe jarring? Idealistic? Yes ... So, the Kingdom of God is something we work toward NOW, but we know won't be fully realized until God rules the whole planet.

Going back to the story, Jesus challenges, "Are you a religious teacher of the Torah, and yet you do not understand these things?"

I can almost hear Jesus sigh. "Clouded perception." Jesus continues, "My followers speak of what we know about the Holy and testify to what we have seen, but it is hard for you to see this, isn't it. Your perception is distorted by the ocean of culture — what others think and say, what you've been taught, how the power, money and influence has already seduced you into Empire Thinking — and now you fear what you'll lose in God's kingdom. You are caught aren't you? — between what you have and what you long for.

Jesus continues, "For you to really take the kingdom of God seriously, to adopt this new bottom line, to live by the Kingdom's Way, Power, and Truth takes a deep change that can only come by becoming one with God — seeing through God's eyes, embodying God's values, acting on God's practices. This means you have to let go of your Empire Life and start again, growing in God's Presence. That is what I have come to show you, kingdom life."

"But before you beat yourself up," Jesus cautioned, "I did not come to condemn the world, but to save the world from itself, from the seduction of power over and scarcity thinking, from practices that separate rather than unify, from choices that are self-serving rather than community serving, from temptations that meet the needs of the moment rather than invest in long term flourishing.

“Know that God loves the world — the people, the plants and animals, the water and air. God loves the world so much, that God became human, taking on all the joys and sorrows of earth living — becoming a model, a teacher, a presence to show a different way if only the world comes to believe, even if the world does not accept this vision. Continuing to love even when those driven by money and power try to stop this vision with violence and even death. Even then, this love will never die, this vision will continue to grow.”

The challenge, can we perceive this? Will we embrace this vision with our whole beings — for ourselves, for our communities, for the institutions of this world, and yes, for the whole planet?

Can we let go and let God?