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Bethel UCC
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John 3: 1-17, 2nd Sunday of Lent

The Path to God

So, I feel there's something I have to say right off the bat. The conversation with Nicodemus doesn't end at verse 17.

There is more that is left out of the lectionary and once you hear them, you may believe that the lectionary editors really are trying to help us preachers out occasionally.

After that great and reassuring line that Jesus does not come to the world to condemn it, but to save it, he goes on to say,

¹⁸ Those who believe in him are not condemned; but those who do not believe are condemned already, because they have not believed in the name of the only Son of God. ¹⁹ And this is the judgment, that the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil. ²⁰ For all who do evil hate the light and do not come to the light, so that their deeds may not be exposed. ²¹ But those who do what is true come to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that their deeds have been done in God.”

Any of you feeling any feelings about these verses? Any kind of reaction?

Good. Let's pray.

Creator God, Sacred Mystery – you whose love for us is shown through Jesus – be with us this morning. Sooth our anxious minds, open our hearts to your Spirit, and help us to hear your Still-speaking voice. May the words of my mouth and the meditations of these gathered hearts be acceptable to you, O God, our Rock and our Redeemer.

Yea, this conversation is a little tough. However, you land with it – bedrock of your faith, or something you'd prefer to not consider – it can seem like John 3 is the get with it or get out form of Christianity.

But however, you may be reacting, it's an important passage. And it's one that some of us, especially those of us who call ourselves Christians, must grapple with.

Because God shows up here.

Doing what God does – calling us to Her, asking us to open our minds, suspend rational thought for a minute, prepare to be surprised by the Still-Speaking, always moving Spirit. And when God shows up, it's good manners to at least attempt to listen.

So, over the next few weeks, we'll be spending time in the Gospel of John, particularly with stories in which Jesus gets into some deep conversations.

It will be a good and difficult thing to listen in and glean what God is saying for us now. It was difficult enough with God sitting in the room.

You know, some people say if they could have anyone living or dead over for dinner, they'd have Jesus.

I have to say, based on his typical conversation style, Jesus would be a frustrating dinner guest.

He rarely says things that make sense. Nothing gets laid out in clear, literal terms.

Sometimes the people he's talking to get it right away. It seems like a miracle – especially because it's rarely the people you think should get it.

Others, the ones you might MOST expect to get it, like the disciples, or a wise Jewish leader called Nicodemus, don't seem to get it at all.

And yet, Jesus continues having the conversations. All throughout this Gospel – Jesus is having conversations.

Perhaps there's something important about the conversation.

Caroline Lewis – one of the most-respected living scholars on John – I say all that not to make myself sound smart, but to point out that she's a woman, writes,

“There is something theologically important about dialogue.

Revelation, understanding, possibility, and openness happen in conversation.”

The Gospel of John and Jesus throughout it, urges us into conversation.

And in a time when we shy away from conversations where we can't predict the outcome, where we know the going is going to get rough, where the topics just seem too hard to talk about – it's GOOD to remember that we follow a God who likes to talk.

Not necessarily a God who is telling us exactly how or what to believe when he talks, but a God who likes to converse with subtlety. Leaving space for many meanings to be determined. Leaving space for his conversation partner to come to their own conclusions.

He also seems to be a God that gets exasperated, even irritable, in some of his conversations and I have no doubt that he interrupted people more than he should of –

but conversation is critical. And it may lead us right to that unpredictable Spirit of God.

In this particular conversation, the one that happens under the cloak of darkness, Nicodemus, a Pharisee, a powerful and learned leader of the Jewish people, comes to visit Jesus.

Nicodemus knows there's something about this man – something God-sent about this man – but he doesn't quite know how to engage Jesus.

And so, he goes at night to see what he's all about.

Now, I love Nicodemus' questions in this conversation. He's stuck out in literal land, which is probably where I'd be too, after hearing Jesus speak.

“How can anyone be born after having grown old?? Can one enter a second time into the mother's womb and be born?”

In the midst of his more literal stumbling blocks about having to be born of the Spirit, there is an underlying meaning in one of his questions.

How can we be born anew after having grown old? More to the point, why would we want to?

Nicodemus lived in a time and in a position where his age, his wisdom, his experiences all made him into the leader that he was.

Why would he want to be born again when his whole life had been moving towards a position of more knowledge, more clarity, more certainty??

Why would he want to begin again?

It doesn't make any kind of sense – much less any literal sense.

We spend our whole lives learning, growing, becoming more fully the self that we are. Why – just as we reach adulthood, as we reach conclusion, would we want to begin again?

Perhaps, because that person we've become, isn't actually so close to the Kingdom of God. Isn't actually so close to the Spirit of God.

The Kingdom of God in the Gospel of John isn't synonymous with heaven as we might imagine it today – it's not about salvation after death.

It's much more present than that. Entering the Kingdom of God is about being in relationship with God.

And in order to be in relationship with God, all of us: Nicodemus, me, you, will need to be open to being our full human, born of water and flesh selves, right alongside with being open to having our ears, souls and minds attuned to the work of the Spirit.

Because God doesn't finish with us when we start our first job. When we retire. When we become grandparents. When we get told that we've officially reached at-risk age.

God does not finish with us and send us off to the nearest nursing home.

God is always, ALWAYS, still moving, still calling, still in conversation with each and every one of us. No matter how old or how young we are.

There are some cautions I want to offer with this text, because this text – even one which explicitly says, “God did not send the Son to condemn the world” – this text has been used to do a lot of condemning.

The Gospel of John is historically and currently the text most commonly used as a tool of anti-Semitism.

It remains a text where we read that with baptism and belief we enter an exclusive sort of salvation club.

I don't want to stand up here and pass judgment on Christians who read this text as proof that the only way into salvation, or a relationship with God, is through baptism and the confession of Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior.

I respect people who can stand so firmly in their beliefs – especially those that can stand firmly in those beliefs while still loving and respecting and standing up for their neighbors who don't believe the same thing.

But it's not how I read this text.

I know, I know – some of you have been waiting for me to tell you exactly what this text means. What else was that seminary education for??

And some of you are shuddering thinking that's exactly what I'm about to do.

However, since Jesus is never exactly clear about what he means, preferring to leave space for the Spirit to work, I'm going to tell you 3 things I believe.

1. God wants to be known and can be known through Jesus Christ.

I am a Christian because I am utterly astounded and in love with the idea that God loved US – humanity – so much that God becomes one of us. I am moved by the belief that our God has experienced our human lot, has suffered our human pain, and has time and time again surprised us by doing exactly the opposite and loving exactly the opposite kind of people that we think He should.

I believe God being known through Jesus is an expression of God's deep and abiding love for humanity. Not judgment, not condemnation, but an incredible call and path for entering the Kingdom of God – which is, of course, an abiding relationship with God.

These verses about turning away from the light may be hard to swallow, but for me, they are a critical reminder about how hollow life is when I believe I am - my life, my worries, my priorities - the most important thing in the world.

2. I believe God is mystery.

We may know parts of God, we may be in intimate relationship with God, and even then, our God is a mystery.

Humans cannot know all there is to know about God. The Spirit blows where it chooses – we do not know where it comes from or where it goes.

And so, I cannot know, and do not know, all the ways our God is active in this world and in creation. I know the way, I come to know God – through Jesus, through these scriptures, through my faith community – but I cannot pretend to know or judge how others come to know God.

3. And finally, # 3, I believe deep faith requires deep humility.

Anne Lamott says, "The opposite of faith is not doubt, it's certainty." I recently heard an interview with two Jesuit priests who work as astronomers for the Vatican. Their distinguished careers in science, in exploring the universe, leave them with more questions than certainties about God. Take it from them, "I don't know" can be a holy statement.

Church, I do not believe there is only one path to God.

But I do believe that belief held in rigid parameters limits our exposure to God.

Because it prevents us from being open to being born of the Spirit.

And as Bob Dylan says, "He not busy being born is busy dying."

God is busy in you. Calling you to new horizons, new awakenings, new belief, new birth.

So, don't limit the grace of God by assuming you know it all already.

Be like Nicodemus – show up. Ask questions. Stay in the conversation.

And God may just grace you with enigmatic, frustrating, life-changing answers.

Amen.