

WORKS IN PROGRESS

Lent 4 – Cycle B: Numbers 21:4-9; John 3:1-21

March 18, 2012 was a Whole Community Sunday for our congregation. On these Sundays, there is no Sunday School: children and youth are present throughout worship. Typically, we have more youth leadership on Whole Community Sundays than on most Sundays; we often mix our styles and instrumentation for the music of worship; and the Sermon becomes an expansion of Opening the Word. The sermon this week was written and delivered by Pastor James Brown, Pastoral Intern Ralph Weigold, and Youth Minister Alicia Becker.

[James] I have often been intrigued by the account we heard Bob read this morning concerning the people of Israel being told to look at the image of the serpent Moses fashioned in order to be healed of their poisonous serpent bites. Given the fact that “many Israelites [had] died” from serpent bites, their fear of serpents was probably acute. Having to fix their eyes on a likeness of the very thing that would probably cost them their life in order to receive back their life would have been troubling for the people, to say the least. But it is an episode that had the potential to speak to the people’s situation on several levels – among them, the fact that they had mistaken the God of their salvation for the God of their oppression. The author of Numbers writes that “The people spoke against God and against Moses.” It is a brilliant dramatic device for God to choose the serpent – something whose value was clearly negative for the people – to become a talisman, the means of their healing and the way of life. I wonder if they learned anything through that experience about the wisdom of God?

If they didn’t, it is clear that Jesus did. We join Jesus today in John’s gospel. It is nighttime, and under the cover of darkness an unlikely visitor arrives for what we now term “pastoral conversation.” The visitor is Nicodemus and, we soon learn, he’s as thick as a plank. Perhaps in an effort to get through to Nicodemus, Jesus likens the cross on which he will be raised on Good Friday to Moses’ bronze serpent. As much as it represents death, setting one’s eyes upon it brings life.

[Ralph] Nicodemus, who is this person? John provides a brief description of him; he was a Pharisee and a leader of the Jews. Being a leader would have meant that he was part of the Sanhedrin Council. It was also believed that he was a scribe, a teacher of Israel.

He comes to see Jesus in the darkness of night. We can assume by this that he did not want anyone to know he went to see Jesus, perhaps as not to compromise his position as a leader of the Jews.

Nicodemus suspects that Jesus has come from God because all the “signs” or miracles that Jesus has done could not have been done “apart from God”. But Jesus then tells him that “no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above” or “born again”. This response from Jesus seems to confuse Nicodemus, and he challenges Jesus with a question regarding being physically born again. Jesus replies by telling Nicodemus that what is born of the flesh is flesh and what is born of the Spirit is spirit. In other words, Nicodemus is being too literal.

Nicodemus is still confused, and says “How can these things be?” Jesus is now exasperated and replies “Are you a teacher of Israel and yet you do not understand these things?” Nicodemus does not get it; he is of the flesh (as Jesus put it), and therefore only knows of earthly things; and even of earthly things, Jesus observes, he does not fully understand: things like the wind – where it comes from or where it goes; for sure he does not understand the heavenly things Jesus is trying to teach him!

In a way Nicodemus wants to know more, but the fact that he comes to Jesus under the cover of night indicates he just cannot take the next step to be with Jesus. It is as if he sits on the fence, not knowing which side to jump off to – with Jesus, or with the Sanhedrin?

We read of Nicodemus two more times. In John 7:50-52, after Jesus was arrested by the temple police, we can see Nicodemus trying to defend him somewhat by stating to the Sanhedrin Council “Our law does not judge people without first giving them a hearing to find out what they are doing, does it?” He does not say anything good about Jesus though. Still on the fence!

The final time we read of Nicodemus is in John 19:39-40 after Jesus’ death, and Joseph of Arimathea has received permission from Pilate to take away the body of Jesus for burial. It is interesting here that John

again writes: Nicodemus, who at first came to Jesus at night, also came, bringing a mixture of myrrh and aloes, weighing about a hundred pounds;" these spices would have cost a great deal of money, indicating Nicodemus was wealthy. It might also indicate he felt guilty for never getting off the fence. Or does his kindness indicate that he has finally made his decision to follow Jesus?

Was Nicodemus a disciple of Jesus? No one knows for sure, and that is the problem!

[Alicia] You know, it *is* a problem. I don't know how I feel about this guy. John makes it easy for us to judge Nicodemus, but if I'm honest with myself, I have no trouble at all relating to him.

Flesh, spirit, it's so easy to separate our spirit life from our life in the flesh. Jesus challenges Nicodemus to be reborn, to live a full life in the light of the gospel. So many times in these stories it seems like Nicodemus knows the truth about which way he should go, but either doesn't understand, or chooses to continue in both his cushy Sanhedrin seat *and* his quiet discipleship of this incredible man, Jesus.

I'm not always particularly good at living the call Jesus issues either. Take stewardship for example: time, talents and gifts. I know the gospel calls us to "proclaim the good news to the poor, proclaim release to the captives, and the recovery of sight to the blind. I know we are called to let the oppressed go free." When I hear those words I feel God's call, but responding is different. In a city where homelessness, poverty and injustice are right at our doorstep every day, I struggle between the desire to live for others in Christ's call and to live for myself. It seems easy to read statistics like "over 47, 000 people in Waterloo Region are living under the poverty line" and not act; but it becomes harder to walk down the streets of down town Kitchener without knowing what that means.

Organizations like Supportive Housing of Waterloo rely on inconsistent government funding and the donations of community partners to continue their important work. Out of the Cold relies on the gifts and presence of people from our community to continue offering a place for displaced people.

Advocacy, financial support, partnering with those in the world who are already *doing* good work, walking with those who are struggling – all of these things require me to look straight into the reality of Christ's crucifixion and decide whether I believe with my heart or with my whole self what it all means. Do I continue to put my pocket change in the offering plate Sunday to Sunday, or should I be taking a look at that "disposable" income I have through the lens of Nicodemus' what-not-to-do lesson?

I can't imagine the emotion felt by Nicodemus as he laid the expensive spices at the side of Christ's lifeless body. Could it be possible to be faced with these choices again and again, *challenged* by the very life of someone so different, only to see the end of that life without having made any move one way or another? I think you may be onto something with that guilty feeling Ralph; I think I'd feel pretty terrible too. But I'd like to think that after we stop hearing about Nicodemus he may have finally jumped off that fence into the "light" that Jesus refers to in today's Gospel.

[James] Not knowing how the story ends is, of course, its power. If we are really like Nicodemus, it means that like him, we are works-in-progress. I agree, Alicia, that his presence at Jesus' burial is a hopeful sign, but John still refers to his secret discipleship. And it may be that "secret discipleship" is precisely the darkness Jesus calls us from, precisely the darkness John sees in the church of his own day. Some years ago, people used to challenge church members with the question, "If people charged you with being a disciple of Jesus, would there be enough evidence to convict you?" In telling the story of Nicodemus, John is essentially asking that same question of the church; of all of us.

At the heart of this account is Jesus' teaching about the cross. He says, "...just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up,¹⁵ that whoever believes in him may have eternal life." Our life in Christ, in other words, is related to our ability to stand at the foot of the cross with Jesus. Ralph said at the beginning of the week that the cross of Christ shows Jesus' solidarity with all who suffer in this world. Today's Gospel asks, "Are we in solidarity with Jesus?"

So many of our churches place crucifixes in their worship spaces so that we might never forget the question, "Are we in solidarity with Jesus?" But our artistic traditions and our love of beauty often prevail in how the crucifixion of Jesus is depicted and keep us from confronting the cross as an instrument of execution with a real human being dying a horrible death hanging on it until he suffocated. Perhaps the most engaging crucifix I have ever seen was in a church in Ravenna, Italy. The body of Jesus was life-

size and within reach of the floor – I could reach up and touch Jesus' foot; and wherever I walked in that church to look at its remarkable mosaics, when I glanced back at Jesus, it seemed as if his eyes were fixed on me.

Today's Gospel and today's reading from Numbers form a call to fix *our* eyes on the very gifts God provides for our life and wellbeing. Inherent in those gifts are sights we do not want to see; but it is in giving ourselves in love to the One who has made possible this living relationship that we find our true life and our true health as children of God and disciples of Christ. Christ loved God by loving our neighbour; and he calls us to do no less. This sacrificial love is the eternal message of Christ's cross, for us and for the world he was given to redeem. It calls us down from the fence. It calls us into the light. It commissions us as works-in-progress in the life of discipleship.