

IN A WEARY WORLD, WHO IS NICODEMUS? WHO IS JESUS?

The Holy Trinity – Year B: John 3:1-17

All my life, I have used the word “weary” as a slightly more poetic way of saying that I’m tired. The use of the word in our Hymn of the Day, however, “Light Dawns on a Weary World” and in the Prayer at the Table we shall pray this morning, “God of our weary years, God of our silent tears...” intrigued me enough that I consulted Katherine Barber of *Canadian Oxford Dictionary* fame. I am that glad I did, since there are shades of meaning in the word “weary” I have never fully recognized. Katherine observes that people who are weary are “unequal to or disinclined to further exertion or endurance,” suggesting that they are not just tired, but quite resistant to any effort at all. She gives another couple of meanings for the word, but this idea of resistance to doing anything at all or refusing to disturb yourself for something or someone helped my understanding of both the “weary world” referred to by Mary Louise Bringle in our Hymn of the Day and the “weary years” referred to by the author of Prayer at the Table VIII.

Julie, Jake, and Daniel, as far as I can tell, you three are the exact opposite of this definition of “weary”. Now, I’ve seen all three of you tired from time to time, but I have never seen you “weary” in the sense that you really couldn’t be bothered to do something for someone who needs your attention or help. But, of course, it is not you three who are remembered in Mary Louise’s hymn; it is, rather, the world around you that is weary, resistant, can’t be bothered – not everywhere, of course, but in enough locations and in enough instances that we understand the reference.

On Thursday evening at the Confirmation Dinner, you received a book on water as a gift from our congregation. It’s a great book, because it explains the delicate balance of our world, including the fact that for all the water that surrounds us, there is very little fresh water that we and our fellow creatures can drink. Most of the world’s water, 97% of it as I recall from the book, is in our oceans, and is not something we can easily use as drinking water. And so, humans have to be conscious of where the drinking water in the world is located, and then take care of it so that it remains available to support life, and support it over the long term when the world population reaches 10 billion. We’re at about 7 billion, right now.

Being careless with drinking water is not an option for most of the people in the world. North Americans, however, and especially Canadians, are inclined to take fresh water for granted – because we can! We have thousands of rivers and lakes and wells and melting glaciers; we have ample rain and snow. We are a favoured land! But if we lived in some of the hottest and driest parts of the world, we wouldn’t be taking long showers and soaking in deep tubs; we wouldn’t be scooping water into our mouth with a toothbrush from the stream of water flowing from the bathroom faucet into an open drain; and we certainly wouldn’t be using 6-12 litres of water to flush the toilet several times a day. Rather, we would have a bucket or a pail which we would fill once a day from a well that might be quite a long walk from where we live. And that bucket would supply our drinking water, our cooking water, the water we use for bathing ourselves and washing our dishes, the water we use for our animals and plants. If we lived in Ethiopia, we might think of *Canadians* as “weary” because we do very little to help the people of Ethiopia with their acute shortage of water – 2.3 million of whom are Lutherans, by the way! So they are not only our sisters and brothers as fellow citizens of the world, they are our sisters and brothers in faith – Lutheran Christians! I wonder if they sing “Light Dawns on a Weary World” with a depth of understanding that we may never have?

And so the question, using today’s Gospel: “in a weary world, a world that cannot, for the most part, be bothered by too much, other than accumulating more money, more power, and more land, who is Nicodemus, and who is Jesus?”

Nicodemus is an interesting character. We only meet him in John’s gospel – something about him captured John’s imagination, I would guess – and it appears as if both he and Jesus are quite frustrated by the conversation they have with one another. According to John, Nicodemus is a religious leader, probably part of the Council at the Temple in Jerusalem, the group that eventually organized against Jesus. But Nicodemus appears to break rank with his fellow councillors. For whatever reason, he is attracted to Jesus and has questions that he needs Jesus to answer. Nicodemus is the opposite of weary, but he seems to be the only one of his gang who isn’t. In their eyes, Jesus is a troublemaker who needs to be done away with: Nicodemus is more of a seeker, interested in more information; and he risks himself – not a lot, he comes to Jesus by night – but nevertheless, he takes the initiative to meet Jesus

and engage him in conversation. In a weary world, Nicodemus *is* willing to be bothered and has enough imagination to be curious. Jesus' frustration with him notwithstanding, it is hard for John's readers not to admire Nicodemus for breaking out of the comfort of privilege and power accorded him as a member of the ruling Council at the Temple.

Who is Jesus? Well, he's certainly not of the weary world that surrounds Nicodemus when he's in session with the other Pharisees. Jesus is the *prophet* who sees Nicodemus's potential and encourages him to play to his strengths as someone whose eyes have been opened wide by a niggling thought – goodness knows where it came from – an idea that the Council may be going down the wrong path concerning their plans for handing over Jesus to the Roman authorities to be tried as an insurrectionist.

Jesus doesn't know what Nicodemus knows about the Council's plans, but he certainly understands that this visit by Nicodemus is significant; and he urges Nicodemus to open himself to the Holy Spirit blowing through him, blowing him *away* from the weariness *that is nothing less than sin*, and blowing him *toward* the One whose love is so gracious that it proclaims justice for everyone and calls people to account for placing limits on the mercy and forgiveness either award or withhold at will. Jesus aches to give Nicodemus a crash course in the gospel, but Nicodemus is not, it appears, a quick study. He's a work-in-progress, and time is running out, perhaps not so much for Jesus as for the weary world that surrounds Nicodemus.

And so, to answer the question "Who is Nicodemus?" I believe Nicodemus is our weary world at its best – *questioning* our need to care first for ourselves, *questioning* short-sightedness, *questioning* the *status quo*, *questioning* the weakness in human nature, fear passing itself off as strength, and then *searching* for something that has the capacity to sustain the human race, rather than to continually choose the dead-end paths of selfishness and greed, power and control. Nicodemus is the chink in the armour of the weary world. Nicodemus is hope for the future.

Who is Jesus in our weary world? Well, I don't want to scare you, but I believe that *we* are Jesus – "we" being Julie, Jake, and Daniel, of course, but also everyone else who has been baptized with the truth of the gospel and has affirmed that baptism! In John's gospel, Jesus tells his disciples, in so many words, that they are *in*, but not *of* the world. It seems to me that he is describing our prophetic call to look for openings such as Nicodemus represents and then widen them. The current version of world economics is not going to solve the world's water problem. As those who are now in control, the wealthy countries in the world, the G-7, are invested in *our* survival, not the survival of the poorest of the poor. We're invested in becoming more wealthy and powerful, not entering into partnerships that might cost us some of our affluence in order to shift the world economy away from burning so much fossil fuel and possibly saving the planet. We are Jesus, and we need to be ready for the inevitable visits to our camp of people and groups of people like Nicodemus who have questions and doubts about the weary world, the world that does not want to change, the world that resists radical justice, sacrificial love, and risking self for the sake of another's wellbeing.

Julie, Jake, and Daniel, this is an important day for you and for our church. We need you to pull with us. We need your gifts of openness and energy and clarity; we need your goodness and love for others; we need your proclamation of the gospel of Jesus Christ in both word and deed. The world *is* weary, but with God's help in the grace and power of the Holy Spirit, it can be refreshed and renewed, perhaps even born again. And we will journey with you and do our part. But we *do* need you; and *Jesus* needs you. Jesus needs all of us!