


John 3:1-21

1 Now there was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews. 2 He came to Jesus by night and said to him, "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." 3 Jesus answered him, "Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above." 4 Nicodemus said to him, "How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother's womb and be born?" 5 Jesus answered, "Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit. 6 What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit. 7 Do not be astonished that I said to you, 'You must be born from above.' 8 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. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit." 9 Nicodemus said to him, "How can these things be?" 10 Jesus answered him, "Are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things? 11 "Very truly, I tell you, we speak of what we know and testify to what we have seen; yet you do not receive our testimony. 12 If I have told you about earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you about heavenly things? 13 No one has ascended into heaven except the one who descended from heaven, the Son of Man. 14 And 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. 16 "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that



everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. 17 "Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him. 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."

"By Night or By Light"

Rev. Leanne Thompson

First Presbyterian Church of Willmar, MN

January 28, 2018

We are uncomfortable with nakedness. And well we should be. In our current climate we are all too aware of the human propensity toward violation of the personal space and dignity of other human beings. We are bombarded by images of scantily clad individuals on social media, in advertising, in movies and prime time television. We live in a culture where sex sells, and love is a commodity to be bartered or sold.


And still, we are uncomfortable with nakedness. When I was a college student - in the days before cell phones and selfies, when I hadn't yet had an abundance of exposure to R-rated

Why was it, exactly, that Jesus was expressing this righteous anger? A bit of explanation is in order to help us understand. A few points: First of all, the animals and sellers were performing a valuable service to the temple worshippers. It wasn't their presence there per se that caused the problem. Faithful Jews were taught in the Torah to make period trips to the Temple in Jerusalem to make sacrifices to God. For instance, when Jesus, a first born male child, came into the world, Joseph and Mary were to go to Jerusalem and offer a lamb sacrifice to God. Being a poor family from the sticks, they would not have been able to afford a lamb, so would have substituted a pair of doves instead (this is all recorded in Luke 2: 22-24). By having a livestock for sale in the temple courtyard, the sellers enabled travelers to dispense with the trouble of carting animals from the country into Jerusalem. Instead, the problem had to do with the money. Isn't it always about the money?

History tells us that business that could be conducted in the temple could only be done in a specific Jewish currency, the shekel. Offerings could only be made in shekels, and animals purchased in shekels. The problem is that the coins of the land would have been Roman mint, and most certainly not Jewish shekels. So, a pilgrim to the Jewish temple would need to make a currency exchange before buying an animal. And what we gather from this text and the other Gospels is that they were taking advantage of their captive audience, who had trudged scores or hundreds of miles from the country to make a sacrifice. These pilgrims often would have been the poorest of Israel's poor: shepherds, farmers, and tradesmen – some making a once in a lifetime trip to the temple. It's a fine line between the law of supply and demand, and between taking advantage of a vulnerable population.

So, the people were being exploited by these money changers. Not only that, but it is as Jesus says, this is his Father's house. Imagine if you came home to your living room to find it filled with a Payday lending operation. You'd be a little upset. As a result, zeal for the Lord overcomes Jesus (v. 17), and he cleans his house. Both literally and figuratively. Jesus is overcome with *righteous anger*.

This is the positive side of anger that we overlook. Anger is a connection to a deeply held conviction in our heart. When this deep conviction is violated, anger can open a pathway into an energy, which when properly channeled, brings about



discomfort of the taboo and had made it their own. They had adopted, as the slogan for their chapter, "Pray Naked." It was certainly a slogan that garnered them some attention. But it revealed a deeper truth they were trying to embrace in their life. The truth that before Jesus our hearts and minds are exposed, and if we are going to truly be transformed by our relationship with Jesus Christ, we need to let Jesus in to all the parts of us that need transformation; we need to expose the best and the worst of ourselves to the light of Christ's transforming love; we need to live lives of honesty and authenticity.

I don't know about you, friends, but that is lesson I am still trying to live into. Isn't there some part of each of us we would like to keep hidden, some corner of our hearts we fear bringing into the light, some element of our lives and our struggles we don't want others to see? Because they might judge us, or condemn us, or reject us.

I don't know how Nicodemus felt about nakedness, but we know he was anxious about being exposed. That's why he goes to Jesus under the cover of darkness. He doesn't want to be seen. Nicodemus is an esteemed religious leader; it is risky for him to be seen with Jesus. The dominant opinion of the religious elite is that Jesus is trouble: he is drawing too much attention from the crowds of people who follow him; he is drawing too much attention from Rome; he is threatening the precarious rights of the Jewish people to observe their religion in the Roman empire; he is challenging their traditions; he is breaking their holy laws. Nicodemus has deviated from the

majority opinion and recognized something powerful and compelling in Jesus.

You see, Nicodemus was also a human being with a hunger - a hunger for knowledge, a hunger for wholeness, a hunger for hope. Whether he could admit it or not, there was a question driving him, and uncertainty about whether the path he was on could give him what he needed...what the people he was leading needed. It could be problematic for Nicodemus to be seen with Jesus. It would be even more problematic if it was revealed that he had doubts and questions he couldn't answer. He doesn't want to be seen. He doesn't want his doubts to be known.

But Jesus sees. Jesus knows. Jesus meets Nicodemus where he is - spiritually, emotionally, and physically. Jesus stays with Nicodemus in the darkness and begins to reveal to him the power of the light. Admittedly, he does so in explanations that sound like riddles - some of the words Jesus speaks befuddle us to this day - but Jesus begins to demonstrate for Nicodemus the heart of the matter: that love had come to do what the law couldn't. With the flawed laws and interpretations of the law stripped away, what was left was the beating heart of God who longed to be in honest, authentic, meaningful relationship with God's people. "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him."

Exposed before Jesus, Nicodemus found no shame, no condemnation, no judgement. He found only love and acceptance. It would be awhile before Nicodemus was willing to step out of the shadows and fully acknowledge his devotion to Jesus. But when he did, he was all in. Further on in John we read about Nicodemus defending Jesus, advocating for him to the Pharisees. And it was Nicodemus who brought the expensive myrrh and aloes and helped Joseph of Arimathea prepare Jesus body, wrap him in cloth, and lay him in the tomb. Which he did openly, exposed, his devotion on display for all to see.

This is true for us as well, friends. With our hearts and minds - our true selves - exposed before Jesus there is no shame, no condemnation, and no judgement. There is only love in Jesus. I'm afraid we who call ourselves Jesus followers have a ways to go in that department. We still cling to the shadows where our own doubts and fears fuel our judgment of other people. But we are learning to come into the light. We are learning, more every day, how to be loved by Jesus - learning how to trust that his grace is sufficient for us. We learning, more every day, to love like Jesus loves - extending grace and dignity to every human being we encounter.

It may take a while, but I believe, by the grace of God, we can grow into shameless, authentic, passionate Christ followers, no longer seeking out Jesus by night, but living lives devoted to him in the light.

Alleluia! Amen.