

Karen Hollis
John 3:1-17
Lent 2
Jesus and Nicodemus

Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be reflections of your word to us this morning. In Christ's name, we pray, amen.

I looked up what I said last time John 3:16 came up in the lectionary. I acknowledged what I learned about this text as a young person, to push against it and resist the implication people have read into it. Last week we talked about unhooking original sin from the story of Eve in the garden with the fruit. This week I'm asking us to unhook from this text the idea that Jesus is the only legitimate spiritual path, and there is a right way to follow Jesus.

Last time I spoke about Nicodemus and Jesus, I reminded people that this is a story about two people having a conversation. Jesus isn't proclaiming this ultimate truth to a crowd of people or making a billboard. He is talking to a man who comes to him under the cover of night to try and understand why, against his better judgment, he finds Jesus so compelling.

I wonder if Nicodemus was an introvert. Can you see it? He approaches Jesus and enters into this conversation, but as Jesus begins to speak and share about his own experience, Nicodemus begins to fade out of the dialogue, into himself. Have you ever asked someone a question and had no context for understanding the answer they give? It seems the more Jesus speaks the more the wheels turn in Nicodemus' mind as he all but disappears from the dialogue. During his confusion, Jesus pokes at him a bit. "Are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things?" How can *that* be?

In Nicodemus' confusion, Jesus doesn't appear to simplify the message. He still challenges Nicodemus to reach beyond his logical

understanding of religious practice to the Living God, who granted, is much less concrete than the law, but is a more solid foundation.

For John, who wrote this gospel, this encounter with Jesus is a saving event for Nicodemus; for some who encounter Jesus in this gospel, their transformation is immediate, but Nicodemus goes away confused. His heart is perhaps burning, his mind is working like mad . . . from what is he being saved? What is the source of his suffering? The other Jewish leaders have been following Jesus' ministry, but why does Nicodemus come and acknowledge the only way you could possibly be able to do these signs and miracles is if you're legit? What is the source of his suffering and his searching?

I was reminded in this text of the Orthodox theology of salvation. Their perspective is that rather than Jesus repairing the relationship between humans and God, in a variety of ways God shows up for us in our suffering. God goes to the lengths of becoming human and presents God's self to us in our suffering. This is not the stuff of obligatory belief; this is the stuff of love. I'm not able this morning to unpack this scripture in its fullness, but listen to verse 17 again: Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but so that the world might be saved through him." Not to condemn, but to meet us, to see us in our humanity, in our suffering and offer us life.

From what are we suffering? In what areas of our lives do we need to know God's love? Where do we need to experience God's presence? Where do you feel God's initiating presence in your life? Where do you need to let God in?

Nicodemus is confused and troubled as he goes back into the night, but this encounter will continue to work in him, loosening the beliefs he has bound up so tightly within. At the end of John's gospel, Nicodemus reappears as one who prepares Jesus' body for burial; by that time he can see his Jesus encounter with new eyes.