

Sermon for 3-8-20
Gospel -- John 3:1-17
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In last week's Gospel reading, we heard about the temptation of Jesus in the wilderness. After forty days of fasting, our Lord encountered the tempter, the force we call Satan, the one who "prowls around in the shadows" to entice and ensnare us in our weakest moments. But Jesus did not succumb; he dismissed the prowler, and in doing so he proclaimed his perfect reliance on and trust in God the Father.

In today's Gospel reading, Jesus encounters another surprise visitor emerging from the shadows. Not a prowler this time, but a man - a powerful and important and deeply religious man, a man of God. Nicodemus is a Pharisee, an expert on the Mosaic Law. The Pharisees were the ones who studied and proclaimed and enforced the laws of the Hebrew Scriptures, all those rules and regulations that governed every aspect of life for ancient Jews. Jesus recognized the Pharisees for their knowledge of Scripture and their devotion to God, but he also railed against them for their hypocrisy. Jesus said that the Pharisees made sure to follow the letter of the law, but often neglected the spirit of the law - doing justice, loving kindness, walking humbly with God. To put it simply, the Pharisees were too strict and unfeeling for Jesus, and Jesus was too flexible and compassionate for the Pharisees.

Nicodemus is a Pharisee, and he comes to Jesus under cover of darkness because he cannot do this in the light of day. What would his colleagues say if they knew he was having a heart-to-heart with this controversial troublemaker? It's also fair to wonder what Jesus's followers would say if they saw him shooting the breeze with this man who's part of the religious establishment. Nicodemus is not one of us, they might say. He's exactly what we're fighting against!

But Jesus and Nicodemus do not see each other as enemies. Each of these men has a reputation that precedes him, of which the other is well aware, and this nighttime encounter seems to be their first face-to-face conversation. But this conversation is more than just face-to-face, isn't it? It seems more fitting to describe this as a heart-to-heart, or mind-to-mind, or even soul-to-soul encounter.

Nicodemus has questions, and Jesus has answers - but they're the kind of answers that only lead to more questions (Jesus did that a lot). And although Nicodemus doesn't understand all this talk about "being born from above" and "being born of water and Spirit" and "the wind blow[ing] where it chooses," he keeps asking questions. We can't blame Nicodemus for his lack of understanding. After all, Peter didn't understand Jesus sometimes. James and John and the other disciples didn't understand him. His crowds of followers were confounded by him. Those he healed of disease and infirmity were confused, and sometimes even afraid of him. His closest friends, like Mary and Martha and Lazarus, and even his own mother, didn't always understand him. Here we are, two thousand years later, with the benefit of centuries of tradition and scholarship and insight, and we still don't understand Jesus! So Nicodemus is not to be maligned or dismissed for not understanding Jesus. After all, he's in good company.

Although he may not entirely understand Jesus, Nicodemus displays a profound openness and humility and respect toward this man he recognizes as a holy teacher and fellow journeyer. And Jesus respects Nicodemus as well.

There's something deeply compelling about this encounter between the Pharisee and the Rabbi. They did not agree on everything, they did not fully understand each other, and yet they treated each other with dignity and respect. They saw wisdom and possibility and value in each other. They

recognized each other as children of God, and fellow journeyers on the spiritual quest for true faith and freedom.

We are all on this journey, whether we realize it or not. We are all searching for meaning and truth and liberation. We are all also yearning to be seen, to be recognized, to be treated with dignity and valued as uniquely gifted children of God. Jesus demonstrated ultimate, perfect, generous love for all of humanity in his ministry among us, his suffering and death, and his gift to us of eternal hope in the Resurrection. It is our task and our responsibility to make this journey well, to engage in the timeless human quest for meaning and truth and liberation fully, and consciously, and mindfully.

When I think about Jesus and Nicodemus, I cannot help but think of two other fellow journeyers, two men of our time who show us how to make our spiritual quest well. You may know about one of my spiritual heroes, The Most Reverend Desmond Tutu, 88-year-old Archbishop Emeritus of Cape Town, South Africa, outspoken opponent of apartheid and advocate for global human rights. Likewise, you may know about His Holiness Tenzin Gyatso, the 14th Dalai Lama, 84-year-old Tibetan Buddhist monk and spiritual leader, and human rights activist. You may know that both men have received the Nobel Peace Prize, and are revered by many as icons of justice and human dignity. However, you may not know that Archbishop Tutu and the Dalai Lama are good friends. The Christian priest and the Buddhist monk call themselves “mischievous spiritual brothers.” In April of 2015, Archbishop Tutu flew from his home in South Africa to Dharamsala, India, to celebrate the Dalai Lama’s 80th birthday. They ate birthday cake with a group of Tibetan children, and the Archbishop stayed in Dharamsala with his friend for a week, sharing stories and experiences and wisdom. A book resulting from their conversations was published the following year, and I highly recommend it. But that’s not why I’m telling you this.

I'm telling you this to lift up the beauty and importance and necessity of finding fellow journeyers. Our spiritual quest is not a solitary one, although it must certainly include times of solitude. We worship together, we pray together, we walk together, we work together. We live together. None of us can even begin to approach an understanding of God without the insights of our fellow journeyers. Archbishop Tutu and the Dalai Lama understand this. Jesus and Nicodemus understood it too.

We need each other - we need to challenge each other, and affirm each other, and comfort each other, and sometimes carry each other. We need fellow journeyers, and the church is a great place to start - but remember that sometimes those heart-to-heart, mind-to-mind, soul-to-soul connections show up at times and in places where we least expect. Sometimes our fellow journeyers do not look like us, or sound like us, or even claim the same tradition we do. If we live our lives with a spirit of openness and engagement and humility, our fellow journeyers will recognize us. And if we live with a spirit of isolation and superiority and judgement, we miss out on the possibilities of learning from and journeying with others.

So maybe Nicodemus didn't 'get it;' maybe he didn't understand what Jesus was trying to tell him. Still, I want to be more like Nicodemus. I want to be a seeker of truth, and I want to be open to transformation, and I want to find wisdom in unexpected places.

During this season of Lent and always, may we all be humble enough to recognize and honor the dignity of our fellow journeyers. May we all be willing and able to ask questions, and listen to one another. May we all be more like Nicodemus. Amen.