

March 8, 2020 • Second Sunday in Lent

## “Bridges of Love”

Sermon by Rev. Patricia Farris



John 3:1-17

Now there was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews. 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.” Jesus answered him, “Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above.” 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?” Jesus answered, “Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit. What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit. Do not be astonished that I said to you, ‘You must be born from above.’ 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.” Nicodemus said to him, “How can these things be?” Jesus answered him, “Are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things? 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. If I have told you about earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you about heavenly things? No one has ascended into heaven except the one who descended from heaven, the Son of Man. And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life. 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.”

Just last Sunday, as the season of Lent was beginning, we were out in the wilderness with Jesus where he was tempted by the Devil to turn away from God, to turn away from his true calling and vocation. In that lonely encounter, Jesus was revealed to us as the Bridge, a bridge of many kinds. For our sake, Jesus becomes a bridge between himself and the Devil, the one who continues to tempt us to turn away from our truest self. For our sake, he becomes the bridge to all that God is asking of him, entering into his vocation that will bring life to us and to the world. For our sake, Jesus becomes God’s bridge to us, that we might have life and have it abundantly.

And now today—fast forward. Jesus apparently came out of that wilderness and dove right into the deep end of all that God asked of him. He was out there, preaching and teaching and healing to beat the devil, as the old saying goes. Going all out to do as much as he could in the time he had to help usher in the Kingdom of God.

Evidently, word about him was getting around. Crowds were flocking to him, seeking for themselves his word of life. Which brings us to Nicodemus and the story we heard Jill read for us this morning. Jesus and Nicodemus, bridging the considerable gap between them with respect and integrity.

Let’s start with Nicodemus. He was a Pharisee, a teacher, a learned biblical scholar, especially observant, one who was very serious about upholding the laws of God. He was a ruler of Israel and was said to have been a member of the Sanhedrin, the central Jewish judicial authority, the religious establishment. When we meet him in John’s Gospel he was probably far from being a young man, given his stature and position of authority.

What motivated a man like Nicodemus to go to Jesus? We’re not really told. Perhaps he had heard of this other teacher, another rabbi like himself, and was curious about him. But, remember—a lot of accusations were being made of Jesus at the time by the Pharisees themselves—that he broke the law often—by healing on the Sabbath, by talking with women and refusing to condemn, by eating with sinners, and admiring Samaritans.

Nicodemus was taking a big risk that night. He was an important person, a person of status and respect. I’m sure he was a man very aware of appearances, of propriety, of the role he played. For Nicodemus, a devout man, a Pharisee, a man who lived by all the rules, to meet with Jesus was shocking.

Yet, under the cover of darkness, Nicodemus sought him out. Rather than belittling him, or labeling him or disparaging him or writing him off as a trouble-maker, a traitor or a crazy man, Nicodemus walks right up to his door and knocks.

That’s the first astonishing thing that happens on this night, the second, equally so. It’s what Jesus does next. Think about it. It’s night time. Dark. Was Jesus exhausted from a long day of teaching and healing? Was he having dinner with his disciples? Was he already sleeping? He knew full well that he had offended the Pharisees and alarmed the Romans and that they were out to get him. Was the door locked for fear of those who already sought to condemn and arrest him? We don’t know. What we do know is that Jesus opened the door and invited Nicodemus to come in.

Why did Jesus open the door? Why, indeed?

The scripture itself doesn’t tell us. Many interpretations focus on the “what” of Jesus’ teaching, the words he said to Nicodemus. Of course, some of the most familiar verses in Scripture are found in this passage, about the necessity of being born again, being born of water and the spirit. And of course, verses 16 and 17: “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.”

I have no doubt that Jesus wanted Nicodemus to hear and trust and believe in those words. But, even more importantly, I think that for Jesus, relationship was even more important than what was said.

There are interpretations of this story that want to make Nicodemus out as an ignorant non-believer. Someone who gets tripped up in literal interpretation of Jesus' words, missing the meaning. Some go even further and use this story to condemn Jews for not accepting Jesus as Lord and Savior. The smears can get pretty ugly when biblical verses are misused to condone anti-Semitism and ethnic hatred. And if we want to think "that was then, this is now," consider the documented rise in shameful anti-Semitism going on right now in our country—desecration of Jewish cemeteries, threats to schools and Orthodox Jews on the streets of New York City.

Jesus was not about bludgeoning people over the head with words. God did not send him into the world to condemn the world, but to point the way to the fullness of life, the promise of healing for all, God's new creation. This story shows us clearly that for Jesus, right relationship was the goal, the purpose of incarnation. As the American writer Pearl S. Buck, daughter of missionaries who lived most of her life in China, put it: "The person who tries to live alone will not succeed as a human being. [The] heart withers if it does not answer another heart. [The] mind shrinks away if [it] hears only the echoes of [its] own thoughts and finds no other inspiration."

Jesus and Nicodemus were adversaries who sought each other out and sought to know one another, mind to mind, heart to heart. Admittedly, they spoke the same language, they shared the same culture and customs. They knew one another, maybe too well. Maybe it was that very familiarity that made it so hard to connect once they had chosen different paths and their group began labeling the other as the problem. This is why their nighttime conversation is so important for us now, the going up to the door, the opening of the door, the dignity of meeting.

Over the years, many artists have depicted this scene. It is fascinating to see how many of these portraits show Jesus and Nicodemus seated at a square table, not across from one another locked in debate, but adjacent, turning in their seats to see one another and talk face to face, equal to equal, brother to brother, dare we even say friend to friend. They model for us authenticity, compassion and courage.

It's a story for a time such as this, the time we find ourselves in, when many of you have lamented to me over the sorry state of affairs in which people of differing points of view, different political persuasions, differing perspectives on critical issues, can't seem to even try to sit down together and talk, communicate, preferring instead to shout and accuse, shutting out everything but what one already believes. What happens to us when we always assume the worst about one another? What do we become when authentic dialogue is replaced by shouting our monologues louder and louder in rooms and websites filled with people who already agree with us?

Jesus and Nicodemus show us another way. A difficult and demanding way forward, that requires risk and faith and a deep conviction that remaining connected is always more salvific than self-righteous isolation, a way of building bridges of love together. Nicodemus and Jesus are both bridges in this amazing encounter.

Something similar happened on Thursday this past week, just three days ago. A first of its kind conference was held on the campus of the University of North Carolina. Now it's probably not going to sound all that new or ground-breaking to us here, being a congregation that opens our doors every week to Friday Muslim prayers. But on that campus, this was indeed a first. The conference was co-sponsored by the school's Muslim Students Association, two evangelical Christian campus groups, and Neighborly Faith, an organization focused on transforming evangelicals' attitudes toward Muslims.

The moderator of the discussion explained: "Most of the attendees will be deeply conservative evangelical students who likely have never held a conversation with a Muslim before and do not have Muslim friends...they probably don't know how to have a mutually beneficial conversation with a Muslim in a way that feels faithful, so we're hoping to show a model of charitable discourse that maintains conviction." Imam Omar Suleiman, the Muslim speaker at the event, said such a public event, with a Muslim leader on stage beside a significant evangelical figure...sends a critical message of hope to both communities about the "possibility for dialogue." And get this. He goes on to say: "A lot of times we [Muslims] shy away from spaces where we think we won't be welcomed in the fullness of ourselves as Muslims, but if we speak to the beautiful themes in our religion then that will resonate with people. If we want to be *bridge builders*, we need to be *consistent in our call for bridge building*. We can't only build bridges with people we're comfortable with. We have to get over this apprehension that if we talk to people that we don't agree with on everything, then we'll lose what makes us unique as Muslims."

Evangelicals and Muslims. Jesus and Nicodemus. Re-making the world through the truth of their encounters, making the impossible possible in their very lives, building bridges mind to mind, heart to heart. Here are grounds of hope, God opening the door to a new and bright future for all. As Mr. Rogers would have said: it's a beautiful day in the neighborhood!

May God bless our Lent with as yet unimagined opportunities to be the bridge.

Thanks be to God.

Notes:

Aysha Khan. Religious News Service. March 3, 2020.