

March 14th, 2021 • Fourth Sunday in Lent • Online Worship

“Opening Our Lives: God’s Love Opens the World”

Sermon by Rev. Patricia Farris



John 3:14-21

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. 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. 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. For all who do evil hate the light and do not come to the light, so that their deeds may not be exposed. 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.”

The passage Dan just read for us is excerpted from a longer conversation between two religious leaders: Jesus and Nicodemus. Nicodemus 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.

Jesus, as we United Methodist like to say, was an itinerant preacher, travelling through all the villages and towns of the region teaching, preaching and healing. It had no doubt been another long day for him and the disciples. It was dark now when there came a knock on the door. This time, it’s Jesus who opens the door from the inside. Jesus opens the door, sees Nicodemus, and invites him to come in.

Why did Jesus open the door? Why, indeed?

The scripture itself doesn’t tell us. Many interpretations of this passage 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—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 I think that for Jesus, relationship was even more important than what was said.

Jesus was not about bludgeoning people over the head with words or dividing people into camps of “us” and “them”. 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 love for all, God’s new creation. This story shows us clearly that for Jesus, right relationship was the goal, the purpose of incarnation.

Jesus and Nicodemus were potential 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. The larger framework of a love so great, so expansive, so inclusive, poured out on the entire world.

You may have seen news recently of similarly unlikely meetings and conversation between religious leaders. Pope Francis travelled to Iraq, the first pope ever to do so. And it was just about as unlikely an encounter as the one we hear today between Jesus and Nicodemus.

To be sure, Francis went to bind up the wounds and shore up the spirits of the minority Christians that remain in Iraq, following the near decimation of their community, their homes, their families, their churches under the scourge of ISIS rule. He met with them and presided at Mass. They stood for hours to have a moment in his presence, to hear his voice, and to hear him say to them and show them: “You are not alone.” He toured the skeletal remains of what had been their churches, now being rebuilt by international, interfaith teams of Muslims and Christians together.

He did all that, as you might expect of the pontiff. But he did much more as well. He met with various leaders of the Iraqi government. He met with them as his Muslim brothers. In photos, they are seen conversing and smiling, clearly delighting in this all-too-rare moment of boundary-crossing exchange. Pope Francis “stressed the importance of cooperation and friendship between religious communities for contributing—through the cultivation of mutual respect and dialogue—to the good of Iraq, the region, and the entire human family,” as one reporter noted.

“For God so loved the world...” the whole world, a world made new through the love of God. God’s love opens the world.

Perhaps it was, for Francis, homage to his namesake, Francis of Assisi. During the Fifth Crusade, Francis of Assisi, who early in life had been a soldier and wounded in battle, had come to abhor the carnage of war. In a first in Muslim-Christian relations, Francis of Assisi traveled to Egypt to meet face-to-face with the Muslim ruler of Egypt, Palestine and Syria, Sultan al-Malik al-Kamil.

The two men were the same age, and both devoted to their faith. The two discovered in each other kindred spirits, recognizing one another as wise adherents of their faith, both men of sincerity and deep faith in God. Francis stayed a week, a guest in the home of his enemy, and the Sultan offered him safe passage back to his own home in Assisi.

What a story for a time such as this, an extremely polarized time, 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 our first reflex is conflict rather than dialogue? What happens to our souls when we shut out others whose faith, whose point-of-view, whose culture, whose language...differ from our own?

Jesus and Nicodemus, Francis of Assisi and Sultan al-Malik al-Kamil, Pope Francis and the Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani show us another way. A difficult and demanding way forward, that requires risk and faith and a deep conviction that respect and remaining connected, that love is always more salvific than self-righteous isolation, more holy than harmful polarization. This is a moment we live in, a precious moment, when people of faith, people of humility, compassion and love, have a special opportunity to model a more genuine and fruitful way forward for us all.

For God so loved the world, so loves the world, the whole world, that God is always ready, always standing by to seize the moment, to open the world through love, in love, for love.

Thanks be to God. AMEN

Notes:

Trystan Owain Hughes. *Opening Our Lives: Devotional Readings for Lent*. The Bible Reading Fellowship, 2020.

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