

Arvada
United Methodist Church

June 7, 2009

Nicodemus
John 3:1-14

Rev. Rusty Butler

Last week we talked about the birthday of the church and the Holy Spirit coming to the crowd in Jerusalem. Some of you had very kind words to say about that sermon. That's always good to hear...you want to do something that means something to someone at some time!

One person said, "That was about the best sermon I've heard in five years." Well, thank you...my head is getting big. And then another person said, "I didn't know what you were trying to do, it felt like an altar call to me." And I know that those are fighting words for some of us here! Some of us have seen enough religion that manipulates people and we don't like it. If you felt manipulated know that that is not what I was trying to do.

This whole thing with what people say after sermons reminds me of Bishop Willimon, who was greeting people at church after he had preached in the Duke Chapel one Sunday and this nicely dressed older woman passed through the line and said something to the effect, that "That was a very nice sermon." And he stopped her and said, "A very nice sermon? What I wanted was for you to go out and change the world for Jesus." And what you heard was, "a very nice sermon." "I failed." he said.

Dr. Fred Craddock is just an outstanding preacher. He is just one of my favorites and he preached during this latest preaching convention I went to... He preached on the gift. What do you do with the gift? Do you ignore it, or try to give it back, or not use it, or not appreciate it. What do you do with the gift? And everyone there was trying to figure out what the gift was, was it the gift of preaching well, or was the gift the gift of life, or was the gift the gift of love...he had us asking those questions and more during his sermon and he weaved that with stories that touched on all those things and it was just mesmerizing, just awesome.

When it was over, and we were walking home, we all talked about it. "What did you think?" we all asked each other. "Well, it was good," people said, "but it wasn't as good as that sermon he preached in Nashville two years ago."

You've got to be careful as a preacher...it can't be too good you see. Because they won't hear what you said this week, they'll still be thinking about what you said, two years ago.

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A church where science, religion and life are compatible

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Trying to preach the word of God is interesting stuff.

We do have sermons on CD from the last several months, you can let the office know you'd like a copy. Of course, if you'd like to read or hear a sermon, you can always find them at our website, arvadaumc.org.

Would you pray with me, O God may the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts strengthen us for this journey of faith.

Years ago, I took my first New Testament class at Iliff with a professor by the name of Dr. Edward Everding. Ed asked the class within that first week of classes to take a story from the New Testament and to write about what we thought it meant, he said don't look at any research or any commentaries just write about what you think it means.

I can remember how stymied I was by that first assignment, no one had ever asked me what I thought it had meant...what it meant was always a given...by a pastor, or a scholar, by someone other than me. Someone who knew far more than I did. Needless to say, I didn't do well on that first assignment, or for that matter most of the assignments in that first New Testament...I had no confidence in myself trying to uncover what the stories might mean to me.

In time, I figured out that what Dr. Everding wanted us to do was to come to the scriptures and the stories with an open mind and an open heart. He knew that depending on our circumstances, depending on our experiences, we would each see those stories in different ways through the years. That was a gift.

This morning I want to try and do that with you and this story about Nicodemus. This week I have been meeting with Nicodemus. Trying to figure out Nicodemus. He has not been dealt with very kindly through the years. He is characterized as someone who won't go out to see Jesus in the daylight, he works the back channels, he's not a real disciple of Jesus. On the far edge of the circle. He could have been so much more.

But you know what I think? I think Nicodemus got it. It might have taken him some time, but I think he got it. Why do I think that?

Well, Nicodemus is mentioned three times in the Scriptures all in the Gospel of John in Chapter 3, chapter 7 and Chapter 19. Now this we know about

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Nicodemus, we know he is a Pharisee, what William Barclay calls one of the brotherhood of 6,000 who live their lives following the 613 laws found in the Torah. They have made it their life's work to follow the laws. And Jesus is making his mark and Nicodemus wonders.

The first time we see Nicodemus coming to Jesus it is night and he goes to see Jesus who just a few sentences before is called the light of the world.

He goes at night to see the light.

And here is what happens...he enters into a conversation with Jesus and he states, in so many words this leader of the Pharisees, that Jesus you must be from God, these things that you are doing no one can do apart from God.

And Jesus tells him one must be born anothen. Born Anothen? Anothen is the way the gospel writer put it in Greek. If we were to translate that literally it means born from above or born anew. In the King James version of the bible and the new International version of the bible, it's translated into born again.

Now I could do a whole other sermon about born again and about how people have been bludgeoned by those words, have felt not adequate when they haven't had a born again experience, about how during a certain president's term of office one way you could get closer to power was by telling people you had had a born again experience, I could go on and on about Billy Graham and his insistence for years and years that you had to have a born again experience to really be a Christian...oh well I do not want to go down that road.

I want to stick this morning with Nicodemus. In chapter seven we see him for the second time.

It is near the end of Chapter 7. Jesus has been preaching at the Temple. People are stirred up, the Pharisees, Nicodemus's brothers are stirred up, the temple police heard Jesus but do not arrest him and the Pharisees are upset. They complain that the people don't follow the laws...they don't understand, but Nicodemus speaks up and out of the law when he says, Our law does not judge people without first giving them a hearing to find out what they are doing, does it? And the rest of his brothers say, what?!! Are you one of them? A Galilean? A follower?

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Now some people read that text as a kind of wishy washy defense of Jesus, that Nicodemus is trying to protect himself, he doesn't come out strong enough. But I read that text as a strong defense of Jesus. He is trying to protect him even at the risk of losing some of the power and prestige of being a Pharisee. He is trying to use the strongest weapon the Pharisees have which is the Law.

We don't see Nicodemus again until the 19th Chapter...Jesus has been crucified and he has died on the cross. Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea retrieve Jesus broken body from the cross and prepare it for burial. I do not know how many of you have been there with the bodies of your loved ones after they have died, but I know some of you have. And I know how tender and loving those moments can be.

And to be the one to take care of the body of the one who died...it is an intensely intimate act.

I don't know what you see in this story of Nicodemus but for me, when I look at the arc of the character of Nicodemus it asks me the question, will you take care of the body of Christ? Will you?