

SLD03.22.09 4th Lent
John 3:11-21
Emory Presbyterian Church
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“Bigger Than We Think”

In the text from the gospel of John we are about to hear, Jesus is speaking to Nicodemus. Remember Nicodemus? The man who came to Jesus by night to ask some questions off the record? Nicodemus was a thinking man, you see, a Pharisee, a leader of the Jews, studied in the ways and wisdom of Hebrew scripture and its application. But he was a lively thinker, was Nicodemus, a seeker, a quester, an alert explorer of the spiritual realm, ever engaging both his heart and his mind to sort through his understanding of God.

My son, Christopher, now 15, had a wonderful teacher in kindergarten named Ms. Chenault. Ms. Chenault had been around a long time, indeed, was reaching the end of her career. And over her years of molding young minds, Ms. Chenault came to believe that just as important as arriving at the right answer was the process of leaning one's mind towards it. The process of thinking, seeking, exploring, gnarling through a question, was just as important, maybe even more important, than arriving at some “right” answer.

So when one of the attentive little students sitting cross-legged on the carpet before Ms. Chenault eagerly raised their hand and gave the...wrong or incomplete answer, Ms. Chenault would never, ever, say, “No, I’m sorry, Johnny, you’re wrong.” What Ms. Chenault would say is, “You’re thinking, Johnny. I like the way you’re thinking. Is anybody else thinking?”

Well, Ms. Chenault would have liked Nicodemus because he was always thinking, always wondering, always exploring new ways to understand God. In fact, even though Nicodemus was fully formed and shaped in a very rich tradition, an expert in it, you might even say, he was still motivated, very motivated, to check out Jesus, whose take on scripture was interesting, if risky.

So one night, under the cover of darkness, Nicodemus sneaks over to where Jesus is staying and says to him, “Rabbi, we know you’re a teacher who’s come from God because nobody can do what you do apart from God.” (Jn 3:2b) And Jesus, recognizing that here’s a man who, however expert in his field, is still willing to lean his mind toward new possibilities, answers encouragingly: “Very truly, I tell you, Nicodemus, that no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above.”

Being born from above. Huh. Now that leaves Nicodemus behind. “Born from above? I don’t get it. How can anybody be born twice? What, we’re supposed to climb back into our mother’s womb and come back out again?”

Taking a deep, patient, messiah-like breath, Jesus makes another stab at explaining the inexplicable.

“Very truly, I tell you, Nicodemus, 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.” (As in, “No, ding dong, you’re *not* meant to climb back into your mother’s womb. We’re talking *spirit* here, not flesh.”)

Nicodemus’ brow furrows.

Jesus goes on. “The wind blows where it chooses, Nicodemus. You know what I mean? God’s bigger than you think. Like the wind. Know how you hear the sound of

the wind but don't know where it comes from or where it goes? That's the way it is with the Holy Spirit, see, and with everyone who's born of the Spirit. Get it?"

Nicodemus: "How can these things be?"

Jesus: "Come on, Nicodemus. You're a teacher of Israel and you don't understand these things?"

Well, in defense of Nicodemus, I want to suggest that surely a part of him *does* understands these things - the part that sneaked out on a hunch in the middle of the night. But obviously there's another part to Nicodemus, too, a rather leaden "logical" that can't quite imagine anything beyond his own limited imagination. He *knows* there's something worth getting from Jesus, and he *wants* to get it...but only if it makes sense, earthly sense, fleshly sense, the kind of sense he's has always relied upon. Only it doesn't. And it not going to. Because, well, God's bigger than Nicodemus thinks.

In any case, Jesus tries yet another tack, which brings us to today's text, saying,

John 3:11-21

Very truly, I tell you, Nicodemus, 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. 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.

Now, that's a lot of information to dump on an inquiring mind, especially an increasingly skeptical one. But what Jesus was mainly saying, so far as I can tell, is that the God is bigger than what Nicodemus might imagine, bigger than the history and tradition of the Jews, and certainly bigger than earthly logic.

So, starting with Nicodemus' tradition, which is based, of course, on the history of the Hebrew people, Jesus references a story about the Israelites who, weary of wandering the wilderness with no destination, water, or palatable food, began to complain against Moses and against God. It wasn't the first time, and God was over it, so to punish the ingrates, God sends poisonous serpents to bite and kill the kvetchers. They promptly repent, upon which God instructs Moses to make a bronze image of a poisonous snake and set it on a pole so everyone who looks upon it will be healed. (Nu. 21:4-9) And so they do and so they are.

'Okay,' says Jesus, "so *that* God, Nicodemus, the One who healed the pesky, poisoned people of the desert, is now lifting up the Son of Man (i.e. Jesus) so that *anybody* (not just Jews) who believes in him may have, (not just healed snake bites) but *eternal life*. Get it? God's bigger than you think!

You see, the God of your tradition, Nicodemus, so loved...not just Jews, not just the Jesus Movement, but the whole *WORLD*. And that God sent God's Beloved One, so that – *who* might not perish but have eternal life? The Jews? The Christians? The Muslims? The Atheists? – oh yeah – *everyone!*

Yeah, but just as not everybody looked on Moses' lifted serpent, not everyone will look on the risen Christ. Some will ignorant of him, some will reject him, some will simply look away. Surely *they* are condemned.

No, Nicodemus, God didn't send Jesus into the world to *condemn* the world, but so that the world might be *saved* through him.

Even those who don't look or believe or behave like us? Even people of other traditions? Even plants and animals and stones and toasters? Even other worlds? Even other galaxies?

Well, someone after me (Paul), says Jesus, will say that "in Christ *all* things in heaven and on earth were created...in Christ all things hold together...and through Christ God is pleased to reconcile to God's Self *all* things." (Col 1:15-20)

Can you imagine a God that big, Nicodemus? Can you imagine a God that big, Emory Church?

A God who, despite our darkness, keeps sending Light? A God who, despite our deafness, keeps whispering the Word? A God who, despite our wandering, keeps inviting our return? A God who, despite our sin, keeps dreaming our redemption? A God who keeps dying and rising, and leaping from ashes, and springing from winter, until we've lost all track of what on earth we might have done to deserve such Love? Can you imagine such a God?

I'd like to confess that neither the church universal nor the church particular has always been so handy at imagining such a God. In fact, we faithful probably have the worst history of all of condemning others who do not believe as we believe. Of assigning to damnation and even death those whose doctrines disagree. In the history

of Christianity, one side's orthodoxy has often been another's heresy. In the history of our own denomination, John Calvin instigated the burning at the stake of one Michael Servetus for denying the doctrine of the Trinity.

Although we tend stop short of such extremes today, some Christian traditions continue to exclude others from the Lord's table. Some do not recognize others' baptism. Some will not ordain women. Some waffle endlessly about whether or not to ordain gays and lesbians. In the eyes of some disciples, ordination itself is an unnecessarily and exclusionary practice, creating as it does a class of "professional Christians." How big does sectarian doctrine allow God to be?

16th century prophet of religious liberty, Sebastian Castellio, who himself was denied ordination because of his rejection of Calvin's notion of double predestination, made the observation: "Oh,...sound doctrine! How Christ will despise (theologians) on the Day of Judgment for their sound doctrine!"¹

What I hear Jesus saying to Nicodemus is that however much he or Calvin or Castellio or Aquinas or Wesley or you or me try to lasso God with our beliefs and practices, our doctrine and structure, our programs and prayer, the Wind blows where it chooses, defying all efforts to tame, define, direct or confine it.

And you know, one of the things I value most about this particular worship community is that we often behave as though we know that. That we often seem to recognize that God is bigger than our doctrine, greater than polity, riskier than our present, wilder than our vision.

¹ All Saints, Daily Reflections on Saints, Prophets, and Witnesses for Our Time, Robert Ellsberg, The Crossroads Publishing Company, New York, 1999. pp126-127.

Okay, not all of us and not all the time. But generally speaking, the Wind blows among this rabble of earnest Presbyterians and former Baptists, Methodists, Catholics and closet pagans, ever reminding us that questioning, doubt and disbelief often accompany an honest journey of faith, and that whatever we think we know, the God we worship through Christ Jesus is a whole lot bigger than we think. Which yields, in my observation, both a seriousness of seeking and a tolerance for God's serpentine leadings, an enjoyment of the present and an optimism about a future we are confident is in God's hands (even if we can't imagine how exactly we're going to get there.) The identity statement of this church reads, "Wherever you are on your spiritual journey, we invite you to travel along with us." And with all trust and with all humility, we mean it.

For we here at Emory Church know that the God we worship is bigger than we think. And thank goodness. For when we love darkness, God sends Light anyway. And when we love sin, God sends Love anyway. And when we love death, God sends Life anyway. And when we love definitions and boundaries and goals and programs, the Holy Spirit blows where God chooses. Which doesn't make any sense whatsoever. Right, God?

And God says, "You're thinking, Jill. I like the way you're thinking. Is anybody else thinking?"

To the glory of God. Amen.