

## *What are you hiding from?*

*John 3: 1-21 Nicodemus visits Jesus*

So we've been spending the season of Epiphany seeking ways to be honest with one another, with God, with ourselves. And what always amazes me and what really shouldn't after so many years in ministry is how when I really pay attention and think about a theme for several weeks there are so many signs and messages that pertain to the theme that we are exploring. In the last month the amount of honesty that has been shared with me is amazing.

But first let's talk about Nicodemus. Nicodemus is a Pharisee. And what is a Pharisee you might ask. Pharisees were considered to be a most devout Jew. Pharisees could be equated to a political party of sorts. Some felt that their teachings were a bit oppressive as anything can be when you become a little too far one way or the other. And many Pharisees saw Jesus as a threat because he questioned the Jewish laws, he questioned some of the teachings, and most importantly Jesus argued that to enter the Kingdom of God it was not enough to simply be born a Jew. There was more required of you.

Now Nicodemus is a leader, a teacher, a Rabbi he is spiritually open and curious while also being very rational. And, Nicodemus is not ready to come out of his closet. He is not ready to proclaim his faith publicly; nor is he ready to have his life transformed and changed. He seeks out Jesus at night; secretly, finding Jesus alone and this had happened after Jesus had gone in and cleansed the temple and had thrown up all the tables which we heard about last week because people weren't doing things the way he thought God would want them to. So, Nicodemus was curious. Nicodemus wanted to discuss with Jesus his teachings, but he was not willing to do this publicly; at least not yet. You might even consider that by doing this in secret and by meeting with Jesus he was being dishonest about who he was and what he believed because he was doing it in secret, hiding from his other fellow Pharisees. Nicodemus wanted though, to determine for himself whether it was worth following Jesus. Was it worth risking everything that he knew, everything that he valued, and who he thought he

was to follow a man that asked him to leave behind all of that and try something more, something new.

This dialogue between Jesus and Nicodemus that we heard today raises the question, what secret questions, doubts and wonderings hold you back from being honest about what you believe and who you are; or, what secrets, questions, doubts and wonderings keep you from being transformed, keep you from growing and finding your true calling and purpose in this world. Nicodemus begins the dialogue very literally. He states, Jesus is a teacher, who clearly comes from God, for no one else can do what he has done; turning water into wine, healing people. He must be from God. Jesus replies to this by saying, in all honesty, no one can see the Kingdom of God without being born from above; no one can enter the Kingdom of God without being born of water and the Spirit. Nicodemus turns to the facts, good Pharisee that he is, and he explores the literal notion of being born again. He goes scientific on us and points out that it is probably impossible for us to enter our mother's womb again and be born once more. Nicodemus in this instance is actually using a rabbinic technique of dialogue, where he presses the impossible meaning in order to exclude it and draw forth true meaning. So maybe he was doing this on purpose so that it was out in the air and we are done with it, now we can move on to the rest of the stuff.

Jesus then challenges Nicodemus by pointing out that even when he saw what Jesus had done; witnessed these amazing things that Jesus had done on Earth, he still questioned him. He still didn't believe. So why then would Nicodemus believe what Jesus told him about stuff beyond that which happened on Earth and what it truly means to live a faith-filled and spiritual life? Now at the end of the exchange Jesus said, "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." I think it's interesting that Nicodemus came to Jesus at night so that he would not be seen. Friends', being honest isn't always easy. In the case of Nicodemus I believe he is struggling with what he has witnessed, what is stirring within his soul, and he is struggling with what he has been teaching other people and what he has been taught. His whole world is shaken. To believe that Jesus as the Son of God means that his beliefs will no longer be fully valid. His way of life will also change and Nicodemus is not ready to come out of that proverbial closet quite yet. He is not ready to be born of the Spirit, to declare his faith publicly; nor is he ready to let it transform his life. Having faith is hard.

I mentioned before that I received a lot of signs. This past Thursday we had a funeral here and the person who had died was not a faithful person anymore, although they had grown up in a denomination, but they really weren't practicing and so, there was this big dilemma about whether or not to hold the funeral in a church. At the same time the family and the extended family were also faithful people, so it brought together this mix of people that believed and people that do not believe. What I found fascinating, was that we had five speakers and out of the five speakers three of them turned to me and apologized because they were going to be honest. They didn't believe in the afterlife. And they felt guilty about proclaiming that in this sacred place and at the same time they thanked me for allowing them to be in a place where they could join together in a ritual of grieving where their thoughts were welcomed, not questioned and they were not thrown out. It was a profound little moment for me as I listened to all of that, but that wasn't the only sign I received.

I also had this moment several weeks ago where a young man entered our congregation, middle of the week, out of the blue, very upset. He came into the sanctuary and sat down and I visited with him; first thing he said to me was I am not Christian. I said that's okay. How are things going for you? He shared with me a moment in his life that had been so profound that he had this moment of clarity that he couldn't explain. In fact he even said to me, you'd probably consider a Divine moment. And then he looked at me and he said now I am not a believer like you, and I don't have the faith that you have; making assumptions about what my faith was, which was interesting. And then he shared that he was a philosopher and that he was trying to figure out what life meant. This person had lost someone and was confronted with death and it was in that moment that things couldn't be explained. He sensed he felt that there was something more out there. In our sharing together, I shared with him that the United Church is not about evangelizing and making sure you are all born again. What we are about here is meeting with one another where we are at, sharing our different faith stories , sharing our questions, our doubts and our wonderings in order to seek meaning and our calling. I shared with him that the reason I got into Theology in the first place was because I wanted to know the truth and that I was still searching for it. At the end of our conversation he said thank you, I think I am going to see you again.

That wasn't the only sign. There are times in our lives where even the most faithful begin to doubt. Those moments where we feel like God's just not there. I believed in God my whole life, but I don't feel it; when you've lost that feeling, that sense of

euphoria. I visited with somebody that I knew I needed to visit with really soon. I showed up at their room in their long term care facility. They couldn't respond but their eyes were open. I took my Bible for some reason, which I often forget, so I read some Scriptures that I thought this person might enjoy. And this person kept trying to talk to me so I thought I can't leave; and so I sang some songs. Now luckily this person wasn't the best at hearing things, but could hear the tune because I kept forgetting the words, but I thought, that doesn't matter, I'll just keep la la la "ing" and it will be fine because the tune will be enough for this person to remember those words. We prayed and still I felt like I couldn't leave and so then I sang two songs that I did know really well, that I had grown up with being a CJIT person and thinking this person probably also was. And I sang "Let There Be Peace on Earth" and ended with "Go Now in Peace" and as I left the room I said, be at peace. The person passed away 20 minutes later. I had gone on with my day, gone to get my groceries and 20 minutes later the person popped into my head again.

To me these are those moments of faith that we can't explain; which are not of the earth, which are not of the flesh. They're spiritual moments that inspire us and bring us closer together. Those are the moments of light. Even in a world that is dark, where we sometimes hide from the things we've done, when we are able to be honest about our faith, about our questions, about our doubts, about our lack of faith, we are going to experience things that are not often seen, not easily explained. And so it is good for us to not be trapped by fear and instead share those honest questions with one another. So, I hope that these examples and Nicodemus, because I am sure there are many Nicodemuses in our midst presently, who are questioning and wondering and aren't quite ready to say I am a believer and I want to follow Jesus. It's not an easy path, but it is a path that can lead towards transformation where our lives can be enriched in ways we never would have imagined. So, go this week and think about what your questions are and share them with one another because I guarantee your questions are very similar to the people sitting next to you and they're important. So friends go in peace this week and share with one another.

Thanks be to God.