



Round Hill Community Church

Sermon: May 24, 2009

Jesus' Night Visitor...And Us, Robert B. Culp

John 3:1-17

In the light of this morning's lesson from John, I want you to imagine a particular scene. Imagine that you are in a darkened theater-in-the-round, and that only the center stage is brightly illumined. A solitary figure, Jesus, stands on the stage looking out upon the audience. The light from the stage spills out over its edges, and it bathes the first few rows of seats in its glow. You are sitting there, and in the light you can make out the faces of some others who are sitting nearby.

To your right, there is old John, the beloved disciple of Jesus, and Terry Graw who runs the Gulf Station just down the road and who helps out in his spare time with the local Habitat for Humanity group that builds houses for the homeless. There is Peter, the blustery fisherman, and Sally who tutors the neighborhood children of day laborers in the English language. To your left, there is Mary Magdalene who found acceptance in Jesus' company, and the man who works at the library and sings in the church choir. Hannah, who teaches the younger elementary children in Sunday School is there, as well as the quiet man with the anxious look who comes to church almost every Sunday and sits by himself.

In other words, gathered in the light spilling over from the stage are the frightened and tentative followers of Jesus – saints who are also sinners, believers who struggle to believe, betrayers who have been restored by mercy ... and who, all of them, get up each new day and put one foot in front of the other in order to do what they can ... not only cloaked in all their humanity, but also wrapped tenderly within the whispers of a love that is truly divine.

Beyond them are the dark shadows of a vast and expansive theater.

Suddenly, though, a man emerges from the darkness and slowly walks out of the shadows and comes onto the stage. His name is Nicodemus, and he has come to have a conversation with Jesus. At first he stands there blinking in the light, somewhat dazzled and holding up his hand to shield his eyes from the glare as he speaks. Nicodemus, as you may know, is a leader of the Jewish people in Jerusalem, a character in the Bible, but somehow we recognize his face.

For, you see, he is a person from our long-ago past who, when we spoke softly about our faith and some of the discoveries we were making, wondered if we were not getting a little carried away by this "religious thing." He is the skeptical neighbor and friend who has no use for the organized church, calling himself "spiri-

tual but not religious.” He is the person at work who smiles at the backwardness of people who pray in times of trouble, expecting God to appear like a magical genie ... and the roommate in college who questioned how anybody could believe all that religious mumbo-jumbo ... and that voice inside us all that sometimes wonders whether faith in the end is simply an illusion or fantasy.

Nicodemus, who emerges from the dark shadows, is found in all these persons and voices. He has the savvy to recognize that Jesus is up to something extraordinary, that faith has a mysterious power, but he comes, nevertheless, as an inquisitor to put the faithful to the test.

“Rabbi,” Nicodemus says to Jesus, “we know that you are a teacher who has come from God.” Ah, we know. So Nicodemus is speaking for more than just himself. He represents a group. But what group? The Pharisees? Perhaps. Or the group of those who had become impressed by Jesus’ signs? Yes, perhaps them, too. But Nicodemus represents an even larger group than these. For he represents all those who, in John’s terms, “belong to the world.” Nicodemus is a symbol of all humanity standing in the shadows, attracted to but threatened by Jesus at the same time, those who recognize something extraordinary in Jesus, but who do not yet believe. “Like a moth drawn to a candle,” as someone notes, “Nicodemus has come to the light, but he is still a creature of the night.”

“We know that you are a teacher,” says Nicodemus, trying to score a gratuitous point with Jesus. And then Nicodemus adds that Jesus must be “a teacher who has come from God.” There is, however, an implied barb or challenge here, a hidden note of sarcasm: How can this be? How could a teacher like you, born in the back woods and lacking the usual credentials, get to such a place of divine privilege and respect? In short, Nicodemus is saying, “Come on, Jesus, where do you get all that, really?”

Now, those gathered around the stage have heard that same question, too. The culture is always trying to break down religious experience into something less than mystery, to something that they can understand and manage and control. The culture observes people who are praying, or serving, and who are thanking God, but is somehow persuaded that when you “go all the way” and become involved in all things religious, it’s really about self-fulfillment, or greed, or deception, or habit, or parental control, or neurosis, or the opiate of the people.

Jesus’ reply would have garnered an “Amen” from the audience. It is not finally, he replies, a matter of self-fulfillment, or status, or learning, or greed, or neurosis, or control, or anything for that matter that can be analyzed in earthly terms. Rather, he says, it comes from above. In order to understand the life of the Spirit, you must experience that life. You must be “born from above.” In other words, you have to be there.

But Nicodemus holds onto his categories, and he tries to make Jesus make sense in the world’s terms. “Okay. Right,” he says incredulously. “What are you supposed to do? Crawl back fully grown into your mother’s womb?” The challenge, you see, is not just to Jesus, but to his followers, to us, as well. Every day we hear the voice of some Nicodemus saying to us, “You claim to have a changed life, but how can this be? You say you are a new person, but that’s not really possible. A leopard cannot change its spots. Born anew? – my foot! You’re just the same old person but with a little piety lathered on.”

In other words, the experience of the Spirit, or at least so our culture is claiming, is really a complicated, religious way of talking about ordinary experience with another label. It could better be described in psychological or sociological terms without all the theological fog.

The story is told about the salty, radical, and provocative Baptist preacher Will Campbell, who was at-

tending the trial of a Klansman who had been accused of murdering a black man. A reporter who was covering the trial noticed that, during recesses, Campbell incongruously seemed to be on close personal terms both with the accused Klansman and with the family of the murdered man. Indeed, he spent a great deal of time speaking with both parties.

“How is this possible?” the reporter asked Campbell, and as he asked the question, he sounded a lot like Nicodemus. “How can you be on such positive terms with both the man accused of such a hateful, racist murder, as well as the victim’s family?” Campbell muttered something about every person being a human being, but the reporter was not satisfied. “This is just not logical,” he insisted. “You can’t care for both the Klansman and the victim. Why do you think you can?”

And Campbell exploded, “Because I’m a (blankety-blank) Christian! I’m a follower of Jesus!” The reporter, using the framework of how the world is supposed to operate, could not account for the reconciliation that comes from another plane, could not comprehend the possibility for human interaction that is born of the Spirit and reflects the mystery that turns the world upside down.

So back-and-forth the debate rages, with Nicodemus and Jesus continuing to speak out of very different frames of reference. Jesus is speaking of the “Spirit,” but Nicodemus hears only “flesh.” The world cannot comprehend what has happened to the followers of Jesus. And parents, friends, religious authorities, and others from the community constantly badger them: What’s happened to you? How can you justify this strange behavior? Why do you no longer believe what the rest of us believe, what your family taught you to believe? In many ways, the climactic statement comes when Jesus says, “We speak of what we know and testify to what we have seen.”

Probably no better statement could be made concerning faith as it was understood in John’s Church than that: “We speak of what we know and testify to what we have seen.” For John’s Church, their experience of Jesus in the Spirit was their only defense. In arguments with the religious establishment, those early Christians did not advance airtight philosophical theories or theological arguments for the rightness of their doctrine. They simply spoke of what they knew and testified to what they had seen. The Samaritan woman at the well does that, as well as the man born blind, as well as the lame man who positioned himself beside the pool of Bethesda for 38 years and then rose one day in the presence of Jesus.

So why does Terry Graw from the Gulf Station build Habitat for Humanity houses, and why does Hannah teach Sunday School for elementary-age children, and why does the beloved disciple fall on his knees at the site of an empty tomb, and why does Sally tutor Hispanic children in the English language? It is not because of wrinkles in their psyche, and it is not because of ontological proofs for the existence of God. Rather, it is because the Spirit has spoken to them from above and their lives are a witness to what they have experienced.

I wonder ... do you think the world ever fully understands this? In the short run, no ... perhaps not even in the long run. For realistically, the experience of the Spirit will be a constant source of irritation, a confounding impossibility. “The light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light,” as Jesus says in John. And sadly, our daily headlines seem to confirm this. Ultimately, though, “The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.”

Do you want some proof? There is none, really, but you could ask Terry or Sally or Hannah ... or you could ask the women who cook and serve at St Luke’s every month, or those who sing in our choir or teach our young people, or those quiet souls in our midst who deliver flowers and visit those who are homebound or write letters on behalf of those experiencing discrimination, or reach into their pockets and share some money to

ensure a fair trial for a prisoner.

Or ... you could ask Nicodemus, a leader in the old way, who nevertheless shows up later in John's Gospel as a follower of the new way, as a disciple of light. "How can this be? How can this have happened to you?" someone surely must have asked him. And with a shrug of his shoulders, Nicodemus probably replied, "I can now speak only of what I know and what I have experienced. The wind blows where it wills, and so it is with everyone born of the Spirit