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"Seeing the World through Windows and Mirrors"

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The First Sunday after Pentecost

John 3:1-17

Genesis 12:1-4a; Psalm 121; Romans 4:1-5, 13-17

This summer our preaching theme will be "Walk This Way." It's an invitation derived from the gospels we'll be preaching across the span of the summer weeks, from June to August, from John and Mark's gospels. They both tell the story of Jesus, but in doing so, we are invited to walk with him in these NT stories. Mark has a favorite metaphor to talk about following Jesus on "the way," a phrase he repeats over and over and over.

Two things we can say with certainty is that change is always happening and nothing stays the same. At least they're two sides to the same coin. Our world is constantly changing and evolving, isn't it? No matter what you think about change, you can't hold it back nor can you live as if it doesn't affect you.

Nothing ever stays the same and we're nervous about that. Maybe the larger truth is we're all evolving in way or another. For some, there's a tension around that fact that becomes a cause for concern. Others simply turn that anxiety into an opportunity to grow. What are you doing with the tensions created by the changes happening in your life?

Transformational futurist Alvin Toffler claimed in his book, *The Third Wave*,² things in the realm of the spirit could not be more vital. In a time of unprecedented change, there's a surge of spirituality in our world. Please realize this new hunger for the spiritual doesn't necessarily translate into Sunday morning church attendance. More often than not, it doesn't. That's the first paradox for today. Things of the Spirit are more important than ever and traditional churches don't reflect that with stagnant growth and lower attendance.

Traditional church membership or not, many in our time are spiritual hungry, but not involved in the everyday activities of any particular faith group. It doesn't matter what faith you practice ... liberal or conservative, Protestant or Catholic, Jewish, Muslim or whatever, it's hard to miss the spirituality movement in which people of every persuasion are exploring the life of the ubiquitous spirit. We've become a nation of spiritual seekers, haven't we?

Nicodemus was a seeker of spiritual things, I believe. Listen closely and you'll recognize Jesus had an encounter with this young man and it was clear evidence

² Alvin Toffler, *The Third Wave*, New York: Random House Value Publishing, 1987

Nicodemus came out of a sense of need seeking to amplify his understanding of things too deep for words.

John tells us he came to Jesus at night. Nicodemus is generally presented to us as a sneaky believer flying under the radar, unable to come out into the light of day. When he shows up at night seeking someone with whom he could talk about spiritual things, we condemn him as one who was afraid to talk about such things in the open. [I've been guilty in the past of thinking of him in this way.] There's another way to view this meeting, however. The rabbis taught that the Torah was best studied at night when it was quiet and the distractions of the day were minimal.

So let's consider Nicodemus' coming to Jesus at night as a sign he may have been seeking answers and an indication of his hunger for an authentic spiritual experience. He was a seeker who needed to know and what better time to get an answer than in the moment the questions surfaced. Obviously, he was not a passive seeker because he sought out Jesus impulsively. He got up and went out into the night seeking answers from the one he felt could best talk with him about such matters.

Nicodemus is an interesting character because we know of the politics of his faith before we even know his name. He was a Pharisee, a very bright, articulate, well-schooled man who was powerful in the affairs of the Jewish faith in Jerusalem. His only problem was he tried to unwrap the deep mysteries of the faith using the left side of his brain.

When Jesus says to him that he must be born again, he's befuddled. There's no sense in that and no amount of deep left-brained thinking can help him. The more he thinks about his spiritual questions and the strange answer Jesus gives him, the more his brain hurts.

Nicodemus' problem was he was trying to look through the question as if it were a window. Instead, what he needed to do was to look upon his questions of the spirit as if he was looking into a mirror.³

We look upon the issues of our spiritual quest in objective, analytical terms as if we can remain detached from them. When we do that, we are untouched by them in the deepest parts of our selves as if they are things apart from us. We reify the realm of the spirit as something that can be measured and quantified and coolly described as if they weren't really indescribable. This is what we do in Scripture every time we read the holy story and identify the characters as though the Bible were a window through which we peer as voyeurs detached from their meaning.

The crucial reading of Scripture is an invitation to read it as if we were looking not at others, but at ourselves. We turn the insight of the story back upon our own lives

³ Thanks to Dr. Jeff Rogers, pastor of FBC Greenville SC, for the comparison of images in his sermon, "Born Again ... To Love the World," 2/24/02

seeking to know how and why it applies to us. We open up our deepest and most honest experiences to the illumination we can achieve by viewing it as a mirror.

We're never really told what Nicodemus did with the conversation. Did he become a follower of Jesus? Four chapters later, we find Nicodemus defending Jesus among his Pharisaical peers by demanding they not judge him harshly without first hearing him out (John 7:45-52). Then in the last scenes of the gospels where Jesus has been crucified, two men go to Pilate and get permission to take his dead body down from the cross. They take his lifeless, broken body and prepare it for burial. It's a holy, necessary thing to do. Nicodemus is one of the men (John 19:38-42). Did he ever open himself up so his encounter with Christ transformed him from the inside out? Or did he keep a wall of separation in place that kept his encounter only in his head and separate from the depths of his most honest self?

Spiritual seekers are all around us asking the deepest questions of existence and we in the church have a great many things to say on a great many issues. A part of our problem is that we're answering questions that few seem to be asking.

We look through the windows and wonder why we've lost our voice in the sea of seekers all around us. Maybe looking into the mirrors of the spirit would help us know what the questions are.

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