

## ***Reluctant Guests***

A sermon shared with the congregation of St. Andrew's United Church

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First of all, look at this depiction of Jesus' deep encounter with Nicodemus on screen. Created by Jesus Mafa, it is a wonderful, and probably more realistic depiction of Jesus.

In this art piece, Nicodemus appears not at all to understand Jesus. Jesus gives what might at first glance seem to be a command, "Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above." But maybe, just maybe, it is more like an invitation.

Debbie Blue, a Minnesota pastor, unpacks this passage, and particularly Jesus' *born from above* metaphor, as so out the realm of what can physically happen that it seems irrational.<sup>1</sup> But, hey, is irrational all that bad? Theologian Deborah J. Kapp picks up on this line of thinking, when she wonders if Jesus, according to the Gospel writer, is being intentionally provocative here. Could Jesus be inviting dogmatic Nicodemus into an imaginative space.<sup>2</sup>

Nicodemus, who came to Jesus in the dark of night and is afraid to be seen by his influential peers visiting Jesus, is:

- invited to imagine the world in an entirely different way;
- invited to let go of the theological dogmas and embrace a vision that defies the rational;
- invited to be born from above.

It seems as if there is little hope for poor Nicodemus. Actually, there is *no reason to hope*, but there IS hope. Hold onto this sense we have, for a moment.

So Nicodemus was a Pharisee, a person with authority, and obviously a very thoughtful person who asked questions. Jesus seems to have invited him *outside* of his left brain - you know, logical, methodical thinking – and into a more right-brain mode of thinking, the imagining part of our brains.

Can you relate to Nicodemus – deeply locked into his rational, logical, methodical thinking process? Of course, we blend both left and right brain processing, but doesn't following this Jesus who requires of us that we learn some things and to unlearn other things? You know, the sense of what is *factual* that is embedded in our thinking? Jesus, according to another Gospel writer, says that, "unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven."<sup>3</sup>

Doesn't it seem like our humanly manufactured culture indoctrinates us, and our children, with skewed values from a very early age; values preached by our culture that are anything but loving?

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<sup>1</sup> Debbie Blue, "Laboring God," in *Sensual Orthodoxy* (St. Paul, MN: Cathedral Hill Press, 2004), 31-37.

<sup>2</sup> Deborah J. Kapp, "Pastoral Perspective." *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary - Feasting on the Word – Year A, Volume 2: Lent through Eastertide.*

<sup>3</sup> Matthew 18:3 (New International Version)

In Church School, a child was drawing a picture. The teacher asked what she was drawing. The girl replied, "God."

The teacher responded, "Nobody can draw a picture of God. Nobody knows what God looks like."

The child replied, "They will when I'm done!"

Jesus invites Nicodemus, the reluctant guest, to venture out to the edge of his logic, and beyond, to a place where he might imagine how God sees the world. God's perspective, a vision that makes no sense, and might feel irrational. Think of the story our Bible asks us, followers of Jesus, to take seriously, that God's unconditional love for this world was so great that God sends the Beloved, the Child Saviour, to live a very human life. Jesus embodies God's very irrational, extravagant, love for the world. Here is where it all seems particularly irrational, Jesus in this story from John's Gospel alluding to Moses lifting up the serpent, his holy staff, referring to the journey Jesus will make, lifted up in crucifixion. God in Jesus loving the world so much that God loves and forgives even crucified on a cross.

Make no mistake, this is a profoundly irrational invitation, to be born from above. Nicodemus, you, and I, allowing ourselves today, and tomorrow, and in fact every day, opening our hearts and minds to be completely transformed in God's love. That sounds too abstract, so, how might this transformative, holy love, look in concrete, real-life, terms?

Well. Perhaps we might begin by paying attention, to where *love* seems *absent* around us. Fear seems often to be strong where love fades. I don't know about you, but I have great difficulty finding love where fear prevails in my life, in the world around me:

- fear builds walls;
- fear feeds ignorance and hatred, and misunderstanding;
- fear foments within our conflictual family dynamics;
- fear insinuates itself within our neighbourhoods wherever we resort to dividing the space into "us" and "them";
- fear feeds ignorance and hatred;
- fear undermines our politics, our community, and yes, it can threaten the delicate balance within the Body of Christ, the Church.

Fear has no chance, though, if we, doubters and overthinkers, accept the invitation of Jesus to adopt another way, to be, as the irrational metaphor describes, "born from above." Wherever we see fear fomenting, Jesus invites us, modern disciples, to bring love & mercy. It seems as simple as that, but, oh is this ever not so simple.

Drawn into negative, gossipy conversations, or rants – you know what I'm talking about, we have all been there. Or, when we're online, observing those trolls who love to inject the virus of cynicism and finger-pointing. Or, seeing someone on television that you just loathe. So often the virus of fear or self-righteous sentiment *is within us*; you, and I.

In those moments where fear seems to prevail, remember: God loved the world so much that God sent the beloved, Jesus.

God's love cannot be contained or packaged.

God's love defies parameters or logic – it is irrational.

Oh, and remember how it looked like Nicodemus was a lost cause? He just didn't get it? Well, he must have gotten it, because we see him again, twice, later in the Gospel of John. We see him as part of the powerful Jewish Sanhedrin – the authorities are establishing a case against Jesus – and Nicodemus advocates for Jesus. The last time we see Nicodemus is after Jesus' crucifixion, and he is bringing spices to the tomb with Joseph of Arimathea. In each case he, Nicodemus, is described as the one who first came to Jesus by night. Nicodemus, though a reluctant guest, in fact did accept Jesus' invitation to embrace a very *right brain* approach to what the world considered "just the way it is". Imagining God's perspective helped Nicodemus to go to the far edges of his logic to a place where all there is, is Love.

With that, I'll let the imagination of the Rev Martin Luther King Jr bring this message to a close, these words from his Nobel Peace prize acceptance speech in 1964:

In spite of the tensions and uncertainties of this period something profoundly meaningful is taking place. Old systems of exploitation and oppression are passing away, and out of the womb of a frail world new systems of justice and equality are being born. Doors of opportunity are gradually being opened to those at the bottom of society. The shirtless and barefoot people of the land are developing a new sense of "some-bodiness" and carving a tunnel of hope through the dark mountain of despair... every crisis has both its dangers and its opportunities. It can spell either salvation or doom. In a dark confused world the kingdom of God may yet reign in the hearts of [humanity].<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Text taken from *Les Prix Nobel en 1964*.