

03/16/14 - Second Sunday of Lent

“Justified by the Lord” – Rev. Seth D. Jones

Scripture: *Genesis 12:1-4a; Romans 4:1-5, 13-17; John 3:1-17*

Jesus is talking to Nicodemus today. Nicodemus often gets a bad rap by the early Church Fathers and other commentators on Scripture. They see him as not accepting Christ like the disciples in the chapters just before this. Nicodemus comes to Jesus by night, or in secret, because he is part of the Sanhedrin, the ruling authority of the Hebrew religion. He has a lot of questions.

And yet, Nicodemus comes to Jesus with a respectful attitude. He calls him “Rabbi”, “a teacher who has come from God”. It is to Nicodemus that Jesus discloses the entire Gospel in a single sentence: “*For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but have eternal life*” (Jn 3:16).

Nicodemus, for me, is the example of the true seeker. He has reached the pinnacle of the faith in the Jewish tradition - a leader of the people and a teacher of Israel, and yet, he sees in Jesus something that he is lacking, even in his advanced spiritual development. Nicodemus asks questions and struggles to understand. He shows up three times in the Gospel of John: here at the beginning, in John 3; after Jesus’ pronouncement about being the bread of life and the living water of God, when the Sanhedrin is seeking to kill him for blasphemy, it is Nicodemus who argues on behalf of Jesus that he requires a fair trial, in John 7; and at the Cross, he joins Joseph of Arimathea to help tend to the dead body of Jesus, in John 19.

I would like to suggest to you that the Gospel of John is told for Nicodemus’ sake. He is like the invisible observer throughout the life of Jesus and it is he who is being called to faith in Christ. He questions the foundations of the leaders of Israel and he is interested enough to come to Jesus with questions. He is, to use the words of our theme today, seeking to justify why he believes what he believes, or perhaps why he should believe something other than what he already does believe.

Justification is a big word in Protestant theology. It is presented as a legal foundation for the position of humankind before God. Justification in legal circles means determining why a person did what they did and whether the reasons and actions correspond with the situation - was the action justified according to the situation, and **justification also means what it takes to restore wholeness to another who has been wronged** - what would justify the relationship based on the wrong committed.

Abraham Kuyper, the great Calvinist theologian from the 1800s, defines *justification* in this way:

“... justification emphasizes the idea of right.

Right regulates the relations between two persons. Where there is but one there is no right, simply because there are no relations to regulate. Hence by right we understand either the right of man in relation to man, or the claim of God upon man. It is in this last sense that we use the

word right.

The Lord is our Lawgiver, our Judge, our King. Hence He is absolutely Sovereign: as Lawgiver determining what is right; as Judge judging our being and doing; as King dispensing rewards and punishments.” (Kuyper - Work of the Holy Spirit)

The question Nicodemus seems to be asking, or rather, the question that Jesus is answering for Nicodemus, is “*How do we get right with God?*” or, “*How do we become righteous before our Creator?*” The model for getting right with God throughout both Jewish and Christian tradition is Abraham. In our reading from Genesis, we read, “*So Abram went, as the Lord told him*”. Abraham follows the direction of the Lord without question. This is a new thing in the world, this devotion to one God. Later, in chapter 15, we read the words, “*And Abraham believed the Lord; and the Lord reckoned it to him as righteousness*” (Gen 15:6). Paul picks this up to show the Romans that we are justified by faith (as a point of interest, there is no phrase in Scripture that adds the word *alone* to this). How then do we get right with God? By faith in Jesus Christ who was given to us by God.

Faith is a strange thing. I identify with Nicodemus and all his questions. I identify with the slow pace of his conversion. I personally believe, against the testimony of many commenters on Scripture, that Nicodemus does come to believe. I will tell you why in a moment.

First, though, imagine with me how **strange a creature Abraham would have been to the people around him. All around Abraham are tribes of people who believe in all kinds of gods and goddesses. They flourish in the sand dunes and the oasis trees and the animals of the desert. They are in the rain and the sun and the earth. They are everywhere. And then there is Abraham, made a nomad out of the land of Ur, a wandering Aramean, by the Lord. He goes out with his singular experience of a single, one True God. Even if he wasn't sent out to roam the world by God, he would have been made to by his peers because he would have sounded insane to them.** He would have sounded, to quote Kierkegaard, absurd.

This is because, unlike some other things in our world, **faith can only be known from the inside out. Only you and only I can be the seeker of truth.** Only you and only I can come to know the foundation of our souls. We must be led by God and by experience and by questioning closely to a singular understanding, a singular desire, a singular faith to the reality of the One True God.

If we listen closely for spiritual truth, we will be led by God to faith. Or, to put it in Paul's terms, we will be set right with God if we allow the Lord to lead us and if we, like the model of true faith, Abraham, *do as the Lord told us*. From outside, it looks ridiculous. For all the centuries of deep, intelligent and profound reflection on Christ and faith by great minds, it can seem, from the outside, like arguing about how many angels can fit on the head of a pin (which was never an actual discussion, but rather a cynical critique of Scholastic theologians in the Middle Ages).

Once we realize the presence of God and what it is God has done through Jesus

Christ, faith can be the only response. In our faith, we understand that God has set us right through Jesus Christ. Really, there is nothing we can do to heal the breach between us and God. What could ever be enough? How many right things could you or I do, how many good deeds would be enough, how many laws would you or I have to keep for how long to show God we are able, how much favor-seeking would we have to do to set things right with God? We simply can't do it. The cause of our justification before God, the healing of the distance between ourselves and God, the making whole of the relationship can only take place from God's motivation. **This is what is meant by *justification by faith*. We believe that Jesus Christ, by God's initiative, has made us right with God by living, dying and rising again; by God becoming like us so we might become like God through Jesus Christ.**

Nicodemus wants his spiritual work to matter. He wants it to justify his life before God. He believes that if he follows the law to the letter, he will become right with God. But there are cracks in the walls of his spiritual temple. I think we are all like this. **We want our excuses for not believing to matter. We want our actions to matter to the God we want to believe in. We want to believe and believe that our belief is the magic key that unlocks the truth of God. It is, but our mistake is believing we do it, that our work is a trigger for God to notice us.**

But Nicodemus knows something is not quite right. Jesus tells him he must be *born again from above, with Spirit and water*. What? If you and I heard that for the first time, being intelligent, questioning Congregationalists, we would probably respond like Nicodemus. I think Nicodemus wants to understand. He is attracted to Jesus enough to visit him in secret at night. He is moved enough by the works, words and miracles of Jesus to defend Jesus' right to a fair hearing before the Sanhedrin. What Nicodemus is beginning to understand and come to know is that all our works, all our faith, all our justification and righteousness before God is wholly and completely because God acted in us first.

Nicodemus is a seeker. He is willing to ask the hard questions. He seems to be willing to contemplate the hard answers he receives from Jesus. He wants to live in the truth. ***Unlike many modern day seekers, who have simply made seeking itself an end in itself, Nicodemus cares enough to follow the answers he receives to their logical conclusion.*** RR Reno, a devotional writer, says, "*Many so-called seekers do not seek at all; they wait for something worthy of their allegiance and the waiting becomes habitual and comfortable. Our society has far more of these "waiters" than "seekers."* (*Fighting the Noonday Devil*, by R.R. Reno)

Nicodemus is not a 'waiter'. He is a true 'seeker'. I believe he comes to understand what Jesus told him in their night-time talk, that Jesus really was a gift of love to redeem the world. I told you earlier I believe Nicodemus came to faith in Christ. Here is why: In John 19, he comes to the Cross with Joseph of Arimathea. Just like you and I, we can only know what God has done for us by coming to the Cross of Christ.

Only there do we know on the one hand, how far we are from God. Jesus speaks for us, "*My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?*" And only there do we know the love God has shown us through Jesus Christ, "*for God so loved the world*". And here, at the Cross, Nicodemus shares in the sorrow and the care and the love Jesus' Mother Mary has for her

son. Remember, the disciples have abandoned Jesus at the Cross. Only his Mother and the women are the observers of his death and suffering. And it is Joseph and Nicodemus who care for the dead, leaders of Israel who have begun to understand that justification comes from God, and the strange and crazy faith we have in the God who became human for our sake is the source of our faith, healing, hope and love for God and for one another.