

“Strangers In the Night” John 3:1-17 February 17, 2008 Rev. Joyce Kirk-Moore

I want to thank Ed Yonan, one of our retired ministers and teachers for spending time discussing with me John’s gospel and in particular this text. I found I had more than enough topics for one sermon, so I may preach on more of John’s themes next week. And NOW, I even have a title for today’s sermon: “Strangers In the Night.” Today’s text is about two strangers meeting in the night: Jesus and Nicodemus. Nicodemus was a person of position. As a Pharisee, he was a religious leader of standing within the Jewish community. He was a teacher who understood Jewish laws and customs. The Pharisees to whom Nicodemus belonged were the “watchdogs” of the community, making sure people kept to the straight and narrow. Their judgments counted more than those of other folks; they were the “super delegates” of John’s social-political world. Palestine was a country occupied by the Romans, and the Pharisees had a level of respect and recognition with the Romans which they had every intention of keeping. When you’re an oppressed people, it’s good to have friends in high places. But this Pharisee, Nicodemus, had been moved to visit Jesus (not in daylight when he might be spotted by his colleagues) but in the night. He wanted to learn more. And even though the night obscured his actions, no doubt there was some risk involved in what he did, and so he is a man of courage.

In the gospel of John the “signs”, the miracles of Jesus are very important, and these “signs” represented to Nicodemus the evidence that Jesus had a special connection with God. Nicodemus says *“no one can do these signs that you do apart from the presence of God.”* Sounds good; yet, Nicodemus bases his affirmation of faith about Jesus on what he observes as factual evidence. But Jesus doesn’t receive this as a compliment; Jesus responds in such a way to suggest faith is a thing of the heart, not just intellectual observation even if what is observed is miraculous signs. Jesus changes the topic and says: *“no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above.”* Jesus’ comments throw Nicodemus completely off track; Jesus’ words don’t make sense to Nicodemus. They are strangers from two different worlds. The commentaries say the Greek word for “above” in the phrase born from above has a double meaning of “above and anew.” How does one get born anew? And it is this passage that has become, only in the past couple of centuries, the source of one definition of “salvation.” People want to know: *Are you born again?* But what does being born again mean? What can we recover from what was meant by these words so long ago.

Today I want to talk about three themes from this wonderful story: 1) What does it mean to be born again, 2) John’s expanded understanding of eternal life, and 3) light and darkness as symbols used in John. To be “born again” has sometimes been limited to saying a few words, such as “I accept Jesus as my personal savior”, and being immersed or sprinkled with water. But being born again is a life transformed by the presence of God dwelling within us and influencing all we are and all we do. Being born again is process; it happens over and over as our faith deepens and grows. Sometimes people have come to me worried because after they were baptized, they didn’t feel much different. Baptism does not have magical powers in that sense; baptism’s power comes in a ritual that says to God and also to the community that we want to share with you the journey. We are born into a family of faith. The water of baptism was a rare resource in Palestine; to use water in ritual was to emphasize the value of what was taking place.

Similar to the rich symbolism of wedding ceremonies, baptism is a declaration of love for God and God’s love for us, and very importantly, the love of the community for the one being baptized. As a result of this ancient ritual combining water and Spirit, one declares his or her life to be oriented towards loving God and neighbor. The accurate translation of the Greek here

implies being born again and being born from above. We are in process of being born from above all the time as we allow the Spirit from outside of us to touch and teach our hearts. We may have occasional “ah ha” moments, and these are wonderful when they happen. But life is mostly about putting one foot in front of the other and keeping on keeping on. The life of faith is the same; it is giving our hearts to God daily; some days more and some days not so much; yet we’re always moving in the same the direction.

The second theme I’d like to talk about is John’s expanded understanding of “eternal life.” John is not only talking about heaven; here John is describing what happens when God and the creation God loves so much that he sends Jesus is joined together. As one commentary describes it: *‘Eternal’ does not mean mere endless duration of human existence, but is a way of describing life as lived in the unending presence of God....Eternal life is not something held in abeyance until the believer’s future, but begins in the believer’s present.* One reason it is important to expand the definition of eternal is that if we *only* focus on what happens after we die, we devalue these moments, this life, and this world that *God so loved*. We might say that eternal life is living with the awareness that there is so much more than ear can hear or eye can behold. Today we celebrate the 85th birthday of Marion, as well as the 78th of Garth, and for Doris “the year who shall not be named”. Since Marion’s birthday is actually today, I’ll pick on her a little. Marion often tells me “she’s ready” and by that I know and you know she’s referring to death and what comes after. But one of the reasons we admire Marion so much is because she shows us *eternal life in the present*. She is spirit-filled. She was born of water and the womb 85 years ago; but she also has been born of the spirit, from above. In her life *now*, we see eternal life which is living in the presence of God that transcends time and space as we humans know it.

It was hard to limit this sermon to only three themes from this text, but I felt an urgency to address the symbolism of light and darkness as used throughout John. About 6 years ago I began to be aware of what it might feel like to persons who skin was darker than mine, to hear darkness used as the negative juxtaposed to light or white. Since we know that John was darker than I am, we must assume that the darkness he talks frequently about is not to disparage dark skin color. Yet, words DO matter, and racism and prejudice can co-opt images, take them out of context, and then act upon them in evil ways. Being aware of our words and images is important because they teach, and sometimes they teach prejudices.

This week we mourned for two families who lost their sons; one family’s junior high son shot as he struggled with his sexual identity, the other family’s son may be in prison for life. As faithful people we must counteract words that teach prejudice and words that can kill and replace them with words that bring life, eternal life. Sometimes we teach by saying the right words out loud. When my daughter was in junior high, she would stop classmates whenever they began to tell “gay” jokes. It was very important to me as I looked at this church’s profile a little over three years ago, that you had voted in June of 2004 to adopt these words: *San Dimas Community Church, United Church of Christ does not discriminate in employment or membership based on gender, race/ethnicity, physical ability, sexual orientation or age.* I’m not sure I could have come here without your courage to put those words in writing. Words DO matter!! As I thought about two families, two young boys, and as I thought about our children, I promised myself anew to work everyday so that our children be taught the true light of Christ. It is Christ light that illuminates God’s love for *all* people no matter what, and it is in God’s love that we are born anew, that we live life that is joy filled, abundant, and eternal. And if we are fortunate, perhaps we will reach the age of our cherished elders who have shone a light for us lighting the path that leads to eternal life. May we follow their light!