

“Having the Conversation”

Psalm 107:1-3, 17-22; Ephesians 2:1-10; John 3:14-21

March 11, 2018

Mary Taylor Memorial United Methodist Church, Milford, Connecticut

The Rev. Dr. Brian R. Bodt, Pastor

There’s a recurring conversation between Carol and I that goes like this: Carol says *“We talked about this”* and I say *“No, **you** talked about this and I listened.”* But I don’t always agree or remember.

If today’s Gospel seems as familiar to you as conversations in my household should seem to me, you are spot on: we just read the story of Nicodemus two weeks ago when I opted to use it as the basis for a drama instead of the regular lectionary Gospel. It will appear again at the end of May – Rick, can you find a third anthem on John 3:16? – and this time it ***is*** in the appointed lectionary. Clearly, it is a conversation the Church and preachers want us to remember.

There are conversations we want people to remember. They are sometimes hard but important: conversations with young people about human sexuality and ethical behavior; conversations with elders about end of life care and estate planning; conversations with spouses and families about changes in employment and finances and marriage and life.

Yet about this Gospel conversation there is so much we do not know, except that it was night. Was it in the temple courtyard? The Garden of Gethsemane? The Kidron Valley? We do not know. How was it arranged? Prearranged signals through each other’s disciples? A quick conversation when they were both in the temple, to “meet at midnight? We do not know. We only know that Jesus the upstart, and Nicodemus the great teacher, met at night, having the conversation.

Something was eating at Nicodemus. It had to be. Great teachers of Israel did not meet itinerant preachers from Galilee

at night, like some fugitive skulking off to close some back alley deal. Something was eating at Nicodemus. We don't know what and we don't need to know. He did. That was enough.

"You're a great teacher, Jesus."

"No one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above, Nicodemus."

"What?" How can an old man reenter his mother's womb and be born?

"No, not a physical birth, a spiritual birth."

"But Jesus, how can these things be?"

"Don't you know, Nicodemus? After teaching all the law, all the prophets, all that has been told of God? God has talked to you about this. So let me tell you again: *'For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world might be saved through him.'*"

It shouldn't be so hard to understand. But something is eating at us. Perhaps nobody knows what it is. But we do. That is enough. We need to have the conversation.

Years ago I went to London, taking in the sights and sounds of that great metropolis. As do millions of people every day, I traveled in the mass transit system known as the London Underground. Stepping from the train for the first time, I got caught up in a swirling sea of humanity...people coming and going...everyone but me seeming to know their destination.

Up until that moment, I thought the two most beautiful words in the English language were "I do." But no one had prepared me for that moment of stepping onto the platform, faced with the immediate need to choose which way to go...and not a clue as to which was the right way.

Then I spied it, a rival for the beauty of the two words “I do.” My unspoken question, “which way,” was answered silently from the wall at the end of the platform. With an inaudible shout the lighted sign declared “Way Out.” “Yes, I thought.” “That’s what I’ve been looking for! A way out!” And soon I was on the street and on my way to the excitement of London.

Over the next few days these words endeared themselves to me even more. Time and again the scene was repeated: step off the train...look down the platform...on the wall, a sign...“Way Out” ...all is well. Until the day I rehearsed the familiar choreography: step off the train, look down the platform, on the wall: NOTHING!

It took only a moment that seemed like a lifetime to discover that the sign was still there, but in darkness. The light illuminating it had burned out. But that moment of panic had a strangely-familiar feel...like when I’ve made a mess of things and am desperately searching for a “way out” ...when there are no more tricks in the bag...when I’ve had to admit that if there *is* a way out, someone else has got it.

Whatever was eating at Nicodemus, or us, we are not alone. The writer of Ephesians was unmistakably clear: *“You were dead through the trespasses and sins in which you once lived”...“we were by nature children of wrath.”*

And sometimes that’s where we stop. We assume there’s no way out. We feel dead. We believe our nature is fatally flawed. Yet just when it appears that the “no way out” assessment of life is correct, there is a final set of two even more beautiful words. More beautiful than “I do,” even as beautiful are those words that I will always cherish saying and hearing. More beautiful than “way out,” as beautiful as those words became in a strange and unfamiliar city. In the midst of

being all messed up, no more tricks in the bag, no clue what to do next and dead through our sin, Ephesians says two words:

“But God....”

“But God made us alive together with Christ...raised us up with him....seated us with him in the heavenly places...made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works which he prepared before hand for us.”

I have never completely understood that invitation. Have you? Maybe that’s what was eating at Nicodemus and may be eating at us. From a human point of view, it is totally illogical. What is logical is to let us reap the consequences of our sin. “Behavior has consequences,” I taught my own children.

But *“God so loved the world that he gave his only Son....”*

Clive Staples Lewis, C.S. Lewis, Oxford professor, friend of J.R.R. Tolkien, (Lord of the Rings), agnostic-turned-Christian and author of over 30 fiction and non-fiction books on Christian faith, speaks to this mystery. Using the beautiful mystery of the Holy Communion, and in his usual clipped and direct style, Lewis quipped, “[Jesus] *command, after all, was “Take, eat;” not “Take, understand.”*

“We’ve talked about this,” God says. Don’t be the one to say “God, you talked, and I listened,” without really listening. Hear again these words of increasing beauty: “I do.” “Way Out.” “But God.” May God’s conversation, expressed in persistent, consistent and insistent love, help us and save us. Amen.