

05 March 2023—The Second Sunday of Lent: John 3:1-17

Everyone carries wounds. Perhaps when children or as adults we had to protect ourselves from physical and/or emotional abuse. Some had to always prove their worth and could never quite measure up to impossible standards. Maybe we have felt rejected because of a physical, intellectual, or emotional incapacity. Many suffer from low self-esteem, trapped in depression or overcompensating, being workaholic, controlling, ego-driven. Some were damaged by the specter of a false god: merciless, wrathful, eager to pounce at every mistake or failing. Some are wounded by the Church, by lack of understanding and compassion, by power-mad ‘authorities’ lording it over the unsuspecting and desperate. We were hardly told of the humble Lamb of God, who will set us free from the past, bringing healing and wholeness, who will not snuff out a low-burning candle or snap off an injured branch. We were told to believe as they do, act as they do, accept repressive domination. We are told to accept unbending certainty as the mark of faith. Some rebel to the other extreme, resolutely certain religion, faith, Church, Christianity, are evil—certain they and the world are better off without such nonsense. Yet, certainty is not faith. Indeed, the opposite of faith is not doubt but certainty.

Nicodemus was a person of certainty: a member of the Sanhedrin; a Pharisee, meaning well-versed in the content and application of Jewish Law. Pharisees did not shilly-shally; those who wanted answers got them in buckets from the Pharisees. He said to Jesus, *...we know you are a teacher...come from God; for no one can do these signs...apart from...God.* He thinks he knows all about Jesus. Jesus’ response to Nicodemus’ seems like a non sequitur: *Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above.* Nicodemus is certain. However, with God nothing is certain, not because God is inconstant, but because we are inconstant. We are mortal, we see as in a mirror dimly (I Corinthians 13:12). Is this not why Jesus tells us not to judgment, lest we be judged? This is why Paul wrote: *...therefore no longer pass judgment on one another, but resolve instead never to put a stumbling block or hindrance in the way of another* (Romans 14-13)

We are in the process of being healed from blindness and deafness, our self-centered obsessions, and self-serving idolatries. We are being healed but are not yet fully healed, nor shall we be this side of God’s kingdom. In Philippians Paul wrote: *I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection...if somehow I may attain (it)...Not that I have already reached the goal; but I press on to make it my own, because Christ has made me his own...* (3:10-12).

Living God’s wisdom and not the world’s lesser ‘wisdom’ is not reactionism against the world or human thought and experience. Clearly, there is a use for theological certitudes, for ideals of thought, conduct and speech. We need to know the Scriptures; we need teachers and the Church’s rich Tradition; we need a community of faith in which to learn and grow, to safely fail and be helped up. All such things give us a solid foundation, enable us to recognize and love the Truth, incite us to live deep, spiritual, mystical lives of prayer, worship, and service. All such things are good but can become evil if we twist them into closed-mindedness, self-satisfaction, superiority, and fear.

The New Testament reveals the tension between certainty and power on one hand, and humility, openness, and love on the other; the contrast between smug authoritarianism and disciples who are open, eager to learn and grow; the divide between those who must control, rebel, prove themselves and those willing to die to self and live in, through and for Christ. How dissimilar are those who must have certainty regardless of consequence from those falling into the fathomless depths, dizzying heights, and unspeakable holiness of God.

As we come into relationship with Jesus, we receive the life that is his, from the Father. As we grow in oneness with Jesus we willingly, joyously turn from the idols of money, power, and certitude. We come to see others as Jesus sees them, we begin to love others as Jesus loves them; we come to see and love ourselves as Jesus sees and loves us. We *want* to do God’s will in the world, the Church, in others’ lives. We become people for whom these words are lived day by day, wherever we are, with whomever we are: *For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.* And may all the people of God say, “Amen!”