

**Sermon: March 8, 2020 (Lent II) – John 3: 1-17**  
**Ralph Connor Memorial United Church, Canmore AB – Rev Greg Wooley**

When we were in the Holy Land two years ago, we learned that when a Bible story tells you *where* it happened, it is worth paying attention, as the topography or history of a place makes all the difference to the stories told there. In today's reading about Jesus and Nicodemus, it's not so much about *where* it happened, as *when* it happened. And when it happened, was at night.

Nicodemus, one of the Pharisees on the governing Sanhedrin council, went to see Jesus by cover of darkness, and the gospel of John makes sure we know this, telling us here in the 3<sup>rd</sup> chapter and twice later on when we encounter him again. If we could step into the place of Nicodemus, why would a night-time of this visit be significant? Baptist blogger Norm Olson and Catholic author Raymond Brown both come up with similar answers:

The first, and least likely option, is that Rabbis and other scripture scholars often did their studies at night. Nicodemus came to see Jesus, when scholars discussed such things.

The second, and most commonly cited option, is that Nicodemus, an officially recognized religious expert from the halls of power in Jerusalem, didn't want to be seen engaging in spiritual discussion with an unofficial, un-endorsed, controversial upstart from Galilee.

A third option, which I'd not considered before, is that the reputation being protected was that of Jesus, not Nicodemus. Given how radical Jesus' preaching was, would his disciples have been impressed to see him cavorting with a member of the religious establishment? Probably not.

I'd like to add a fourth option: I wonder, if Nicodemus came to see Jesus by dark of night, not because he was *afraid* to be seen, but because he was *ashamed* to be seen. **I wonder if shame, not fear**, is what led Nicodemus to seek Jesus under the safety of the darkness.

I'm going to pause for a moment, before going any further, to offer what my children's generation would call a "trigger alert." Some of what I'm going to say this morning, might come way too close to elements of your life's story, hard things that you're already dealing with or things that you're not yet ready to deal with. And if that is the case, it may sound like the guy in the pulpit is blaming or victimizing you all over again. Please know that's not my intent. What I do hope for, is to take the encounter between Nicodemus and Jesus, and the hard things in our lives often shrouded by the cover of dark, and to lift them honestly and safely into the light.

My reason for thinking that Nicodemus may have carried shame with him, is that he would have been told for many years what an expert he was, and what great responsibility he carried. For such a person to step outside the authorized circles of expertise, to share or consult on spiritual matters, would have carried a degree of embarrassment. And when Jesus started talking about being re-born, letting go of all wisdom and learning and experience in order to approach God like an infant, Nicodemus struggled to go there. Letting go of all that status, all that ego-involvement, appears to have been humbling, embarrassing, even shameful.

Shame, I learned years ago from self-help author John Bradshaw, is a complex thing. At some point, most of us have done shameful things: mean-spirited things, dishonest things, things completely contrary to our own moral & ethical understandings. At its best – yes, there is an upside - shame can act as a healthy, accurate internal alarm that goes off to alert me that I'm getting close to the line. Healthy shame protects me from crossing those lines that I know, deep in my heart, I do not want to cross. Healthy shame, can play an important role in a well-balanced life, reminding all of us of the kind of people we truly want to be.

But most shame isn't healthy. Toxic shame – the kind of shame imposed on us from outside sources and perhaps internalized into negative self-talk, rather than emanating from deep wisdom – is profoundly destructive. "Toxic Shame" wrote John Bradshaw, "is the motivator

behind our toxic behaviors: the compulsions, co-dependency, addiction, and drive to super-achieve that break down the family and destroy personal lives. It limits the development of self esteem and causes anxiety and depression, and limits our ability to be connected in relationships". When someone else intentionally sows seeds of doubt or limitation in you, trying to convince you that you won't amount to much, that's toxic shame. When you grow up with the message that your sexual identity is an abomination, that your ethnic background is inferior, that a lack of athleticism or math skills or anything else you struggle with should make you embarrassed, that's toxic shame. And when the goals and prizes of a world addicted to achievement sells you the lie that more is always better, and you buy that by working yourself into the ground or always feeling that your efforts are coming up short, that's toxic shame.

Two weeks ago, information was released, revealing that Jean Vanier, a humanitarian beloved by many of us – me included – had sexually victimized at least six women between 1970 and 2005. Last May, upon Mr. Vanier's death, I stood in this pulpit and eulogized his amazingness. And now, his books on my shelf take on a different look, and schools named in his honour and L'Arche programs worldwide are wondering what to do next. And we ask ourselves, is it possible to separate the humanity and wonderful accomplishments of an individual, from this shameful legacy? Is there anything gained by keeping the name, and working through the hard stuff? Within my own family tree a legacy of abuse has come to light in recent years, and having personally had to make those decisions about taking a beloved ancestor's photo off the wall, I know how hard this is and the depth of emotions it evokes. When someone has brought shame on themselves, or saddled others with a legacy of trauma, victimization and shame, what do you do with that? - especially when the perpetrator is no longer able to answer for it??

Ian Brown, writing in the Globe and Mail, has written a very heartfelt, insightful piece on Vanier's changed legacy. Ian knew Jean Vanier, and had been deeply moved by an interview they'd done together a dozen years ago. So after the abuses were revealed, Ian went to a L'Arche community that had direct experience of Jean Vanier, a place where Vanier's photo was on the walls of the home and in the rooms of many of the community members. Ian recounts one person's response: "when he learned the bad news about Mr. Vanier, he had wanted to pray – 'especially for the women'". When Ian asked him if all the pictures of Mr. Vanier should come down, he replied "Yeah, they should, because it's still shocking. And especially for the women." But he drew a distinction, between pictures in public places, which he thought should come down, and the private photos that many of the residents had, arm-in-arm with Jean. Those photos, he wanted to keep, saying "I want to remember him, but he did a shameful thing, and you want to remember that he did it."

I so appreciate how that was teased out: extending sorrow, prayers, and love to those targeted by the abuse; remembering the humanity of the perpetrator, while still holding him accountable; and allowing one's own memories to remain what they are, even though the person's larger legacy has changed. Last year, I came across a similarly helpful recollection in a book by Steve and Valerie Bell which detailed the stories of those who had dealt with deep hurts. One of their stories was about a woman whose father had abandoned the family when the author was just a child. Forty years later, the father briefly re-appeared and the daughter was forced to ask herself, "can I forgive him? Should I forgive him?" And the answer was yes, she would hear her Dad out, and forgive him – but she was also clear that "forgiveness does not excuse the actions. Our relationship was never restored, but I'm confident that my heart is right before God." (p.102)

When someone abandons us or hurts us deeply – when someone injects toxic shame into our lives – or when we internalize the toxic shame into our personhood – a wound results. We seek forgiveness, but we also know that even when forgiveness is found, we need to keep ourselves safe from further harm. We know that in Christ, woundedness and forgiveness travel closely together, but that does not lessen our sense of broken trust or our need to stay safe.

So what about Nicodemus, and this possibility of shame playing a role in his approach to Jesus in the cover of dark.

- Was he embarrassed by the privilege of his own life, compared with the truth spoken by this modest, unlettered man? If so, he came to the right place, hearing of God's unbounded love for the world and all who dwell therein.
- Was Nicodemus feeling trapped by his life, and wanted to start afresh, and had no safe place to share that without being shamed or shunned, other than opening up to this outsider? If so, imagine what it was like to hear Jesus tell you that you could begin again, so thorough a re-set that it's like being born a second time.
- Did Nicodemus have a sense that the strength in Spirit exhibited by Jesus, could help him truly embrace the holy power in his life? If so, his ongoing allegiance later in life to Jesus, suggests that he found what he was seeking.

When I see Nicodemus tip-toeing through darkness toward Jesus, I think of those times in my life when I have been wrestling with shame – either the healthy kind or the toxic kind – and have wanted the safety of darkness, of talking with Jesus alone and unseen. I think of shameful times in the history of the Church, with Indigenous populations in many nations disrespected, the role of women trivialized, people of sexual minorities demonized. In those times, like Nicodemus, the place I have found rest for my soul, is in the presence of Christ Jesus, where I can speak my shame, and cry my tears, and seek new life, knowing that the receiver of that hard stuff is all loving, all gracious, my source and my destination. In Nicodemus, I see just enough courage to step forward, and in Jesus, there is a welcome of that step, offering illumination in the dark of night, pouring the soothing balm of forgiveness onto the aching wounds of shame, unlocking with love the shackles of hopelessness and unproductive anger and self-defeating words or behaviours. To be honest, I have no way of knowing if Nicodemus carried shame or if that's just me layering a 21<sup>st</sup> century Northern hemisphere concept on top of a Biblical story, but I do know this: his encounter with Christ released him from something that needed to be released.

In our personal lives and in our gathered life, there will not come a time when life is free from challenges, but we live in a perpetual state of hope and promise. We know that when that which is hidden sees the light of day, when the hurts and disappointments are spoken, when the secrecy of me meets the openness of Christ, new life is possible. As we walk with Nicodemus, away from whatever locks us in shame or diminishment, and toward God's own care and love in Christ, may we be born each day into love and life and light. Amen.

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