

3 Now there was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews. 2 He came to Jesus by night and said to him, “Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God, for no one can do these signs that you do unless God is with that person.” 3 Jesus answered him, “Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above. 4 Nicodemus said to him, “How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother’s womb and be born?” 5 Jesus answered, “Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit. 6 What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit. 7 Do not be astonished that I said to you, ‘You must be born from above.’ 8 The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit.” 9 Nicodemus said to him, “How can these things be?” 10 Jesus answered him, “Are you the teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things?

11 “Very truly, I tell you, we speak of what we know and testify to what we have seen, yet you do not receive our testimony. 12 If I have told you about earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you about heavenly things? 13 No one has ascended into heaven except the one who descended from heaven, the Son of Man. 14 And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, 15 that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.

16 “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.

17 “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. (Common English Bible)

Nine years ago, on Kevin’s 44th birthday, I stepped into this pulpit for the first time and read this passage from the Gospel of John. I shared with you that day a revision of a sermon that I wrote in my senior year of seminary, the one sermon I ever preached for my seminary community. As we are coming to terms now with the ending of the call that began officially in March of 2017, I thought we could revisit that sermon. It was then a sermon for the first Sunday in Lent. Today let it be a sermon for the first Sunday in a new phase of transition.

Thanks to an atonement class I took in seminary, I can no longer approach Lent without seriously contemplating what it is that God has done in Jesus Christ. I can no longer read scripture in these holy weeks without wondering what it reveals about the meaning of the cross and the empty tomb. We call Christ, Savior, and have long understood the cross and empty tomb to be symbols of salvation, but what does that mean to us today? What is salvation? What is the nature of Christ’s saving work? And

the particular question that this week's scripture raises is- who is saved and who is not? Who is in and who is out?

Now this is not a question about which progressive Christians spend much time thinking. We get a bit creeped out by people who talk about being saved, and ask strangers, or even people of other professed religious belief if they are saved. We're more likely to talk about liberation than salvation. But here I stand as transition and Lent approaches, thinking about salvation, and here we stand at the beginning of transition thinking about salvation, and this is the question that scripture has called forth.

Who is saved and who is condemned? Are some in and some out? Could it be that all are in? The lyrics of singer/songwriter Ani Difranco come to mind. She sings, "Their eyes are all asking me, 'are you in or are you out?' I think, 'oh man, what is this all about?'"

Indeed we may wonder with Ani, what is this all about? You speak through Christ of your wondrous love for the kosmos, for the universe, the love that willed salvation for that kosmos and not condemnation, BUT at the same time you underline the necessity of belief in Jesus Christ and birth in the Spirit. What is this all about?

A friend of mine once told me that he thought that after he studied the Bible diligently with a community of believers for seven years he would have surely found answers to all of life's questions. But what he found instead was that he ended this seven years of study with MORE questions than when he began and thus he went to seminary.

Here, in these passages of scripture we too find more questions than answers. We stand with Nicodemus puzzled, questioning. Nicodemus, a teacher of Israel, we, disciples of Christ, cannot understand.

John is a fairly unambiguous gospel. If you look at the material immediately following today's passage you can see this. The question of who is in and who is out appears to be answered, if you believe in Christ you are already saved, if you do not believe you are already condemned. Perhaps it is tempting to say, "See there is an answer in scripture if only we keep reading."

But I believe that if we CONTINUE to read, scripture ultimately keeps us questioning. For example, let's return our attention to Nicodemus. The Gospel of John may be fairly unambiguous, but the character of Nicodemus in the Gospel of John is anything but. Is Nicodemus in or is he out? If this were the only mention of Nicodemus in all of the gospel we would probably be left with a pretty clear picture that he, the one who approached Jesus by night, was one of those whom John would call a lover of the darkness and not the light. He does not understand. He is included in the plural you of those who have not received the testimony of Christ and committed their hearts in belief. He does not believe. He is out.

Or is he? Nicodemus appears twice more in John's gospel. Mid-Gospel we see him step up to Jesus' defense advocating for a fair trial for Jesus when his fellow Pharisees were fighting to see Jesus thrown in jail. At this time his peers openly question him about where his allegiance lies. We are left wondering, with the Pharisees, where Nicodemus stands. Then, near the end of John's gospel he appears one more time. Now Jesus is dead, and Nicodemus joins Joseph of Arimathea in his burial preparations and he comes bearing a substantial gift of a hundred pounds of myrrh and aloë. The picture painted of Nicodemus is clearly quite ambiguous. Is he in or is he out?

There are suggestions of devotion to Christ in all three of these stories and these suggestions grow progressively stronger and speak progressively louder which suggests an evolution or transformation in his character. First, in the story we are considering today, Nicodemus approaches Jesus and honors him by acknowledging that he is one who has come from God. In the second story he defends Jesus at some potential risk to himself. In the third he offers an expensive and substantial gift to Jesus. What at first may seem clear becomes less and less clear as we continue to read and to reflect. So is he in or is he out? What is this all about?

We, with Nicodemus, should not be astonished when we cannot understand. For Jesus speaks to us of mystery when he affirms that wind blows where it chooses and we hear the sound of it, but we do not know where it comes from or where it goes. We do not and cannot know where the spirit blows, how the spirit works, who is saved.

But we are here in church seeking to know, seeking to connect with Christ. We are on a quest for knowledge and understanding. On this quest, when we encounter uncertainty, ambiguity, and paradox, we are tempted to flatten what we find, to make it malleable, make it digestable, make it understandable. We are tempted to pick one dimension of a paradox and lift that dimension up as truth.

But on this quest for certain knowledge when we encounter scripture, we trip. When we encounter the cross and empty tomb, we stumble. When we encounter Jesus the Christ, we are stopped in our tracks. For the truth revealed in all of these places, in these central elements of our faith is not the product of an either this /or that. It is a both this/and that. It is not simple and straightforward. It is paradox. And we cannot understand.

And it is exactly to this place of mystery, to this point of tension, that I believe our scripture calls us today. We ask, "is God's saving work in Christ for all or only for some?" And the answer we receive is somewhere in the middle. My leaning, and I suspect that it's the leaning of many, though surely not all, in this room, is to affirm that God's love is broad enough, deep enough, and wondrous enough to redeem ALL of creation. Whether you are poor or rich, educated or uneducated, straight or gay, cis or trans, liberal or conservative, documented or undocumented, whether you believe in Jesus or not. I want to believe that the God that I give my heart to is so wholly good and so powerful that all can and will be redeemed. And I can find support for this leaning in John today. In John, we hear that God's love was for the *kosmos* and that God's intention was to save and not to condemn the *kosmos*, the whole universe. There is truly a message of universal potential in the words from God we have received today that could seem to make irrelevant the question of who is in and who is out.

But we would not be faithful if we limited our reading to that which confirms our leanings. There is a specific criteria for determination of who is in and who is out that is identified in John 3: 1-17. Belief in Christ is lifted up as crucial. Try as we might we cannot escape this clear message. This is an uncomfortable message for many of us as we seek to honestly engage the increasingly complex and pluralistic world in which live and in which we have been called to serve. Some leaders of

interfaith movements suggest we speak more about God and less about Jesus to smooth out our relationships with our religious others. It is so tempting to focus on that which unites us to others as opposed to that which potentially divides us. But today's scripture does not allow us to make such a move. Belief in the very particular being of Jesus Christ is crucial.

In her book *Encountering God*, pluralist Diana Eck offers helpful reflections on the meaning of "belief". She shares that the word belief comes from the Old English, *belove* and thus that its original meaning reflects giving one's heart to something. Belief is not merely a matter of intellectual assent to a proposition, rather it is a matter of intimate relationship. And do we not know the power of intimate relationship? We see mothers nursing babes, and see that power revealed. We watch people fall in love, and see that power revealed. We connect with one another in Christian community, honoring our baptismal promises to guide and nurture one another, and feeding one another with God's own love and life, and we see the power of intimate relationship revealed. We know the power of intimate relationship. But can we even begin to fathom the power of intimate relationship with Jesus Christ? In the story of Nicodemus we are offered a glimpse into the nearly unfathomable transformative potential of relationship with Christ. As Christians when we confess belief in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior, as most of us have done and will likely do again, we express a trust and commitment that we too are willing to be transformed.

So belief in Christ does matter. We cannot brush it aside. It is significant. But questions remain. Who is this Christ that we believe in? What is he all about? This very particular being is God's LOVE, GOD'S love, and as such is ultimately mystery. This very particular being ate with sinners and loved the unloveable. This very particular being challenged expectations. This very particular being died a gruesome death and then rose from the dead. This very particular being lives still and is our source of hope in a hopeless world. When I confess belief in the very particular being of Jesus Christ, it opens me to the universal potential of God's saving grace.

So as we journey further into this transition, let us not seek to indulge our hunger for understanding; rather let us be fed by mystery. Let us not choose easy answers;

rather, let us choose wonder. Who is in and who is out? Does Christ save some or does Christ save all? What is this all about? We cannot know. And we are not called to know. But we are called to believe. And we are called to be transformed by our belief. May we journey to our goodbye and beyond giving our hearts to Jesus the Christ.

Sources Cited in this Sermon

Ani Difranco, "In or Out" on the album *Imperfectly*, 1992.

Diana Eck, *Encountering God*, Boston: Beacon Press, 1993.