

First Presbyterian Church
Cheyenne, Wyoming
July 11, 2010
Rev. Diana Hartman
Worship Theme: KNOWING AND BEING KNOWN
Romans 8:12-17, John 3:1-21

Nicodemus seems to be a man who has seen a glimmer of light. Perhaps you have met someone like Nicodemus. He is an intelligent, knowledgeable, and highly respected religious leader and teacher. Part of his responsibility as a Pharisee is to “check out” the many traveling preachers that show up in town and to judge whether they are preaching heresy or truth.

Apparently, after hearing Jesus preach, the Jewish leaders decide that a follow up interview is necessary. As a person who deals with preachers like this on a regular basis, Nicodemus and his colleagues think they know about “his type.” They have decided that Jesus is a legitimate preacher based on the signs that he has performed and this warrants further investigation. Nicodemus is sent to get more in depth coverage of this “man from God.” He comes with what he knows saying, “Rabbi, we know that you...” But we can sure get ourselves into a lot of trouble when we start with what we think we know.

The story is told about a young medical student who spent his summer vacation working as a butcher in a large supermarket during the daytime and worked as an orderly at the local community hospital at night.

Both jobs involved his wearing a white smock.

One evening he was instructed to wheel a woman from her room down into surgery. He entered the patient's room and said, "Mrs. Johnson, I have come to take you to surgery." The woman, who was already frightened, turned to her husband and said, "Harry, don't let him take me. It's the butcher!"

Sometimes, what we think we know about a person can be a real problem.

In January of 2001, I had the awesome opportunity to travel to Syria, Jordan, and Israel on a travel Seminar arranged through Austin Presbyterian Seminary. We went with what we thought we knew. We knew that the United States Government had issued Travel Advisories for this area, and we knew that there had been an increase in violence and we knew that there was a growing anti-American sentiment in the area. We entered the Middle East with a certain amount of hesitation and caution.

While we were in Jordan, we encountered a family of Bedouins. All of us knew about Bedouins. Most of our understanding went no further than to approach with caution, keep your money safely within your shirt, stay in pairs or small groups, and beware of getting cheated. We thought we knew about Bedouins.

This family invited us to spend an evening at their campsite. About 12 of our group of sixty decided to accept the invitation to travel to the countryside. As we

arrived we found ourselves standing out in the dark of night, the only light in the tent village was the warm glow coming from a large rectangular tent. We made our way toward the light, in the dark some of us stumbled over the ropes that held the tent poles in place.

At the entrance, the family greeted us warmly. Around the edge of the tent lay blankets covering the ground with pillows to lean against. As we took our places, we discovered about a half dozen other guests from the local community had arrived, also. Our hosts offered us glasses of wine, soft drinks, and snacks. As part of their tradition, they offered us water pipes for smoking. NO—it was not what some of you may be thinking. See what I mean about what we think we know? They offered a variety of fruit flavored tobacco for the pipes.

Each family member was dressed in brightly colored traditional costumes. Some unusual musical instruments were carried to the center of the tent and the musicians began to play a sweet melody that was unfamiliar to us.

Those who were not singing, dancing, or playing instruments, sat with us and engaged us in conversation. There were many barriers to overcome. Race, culture, ethnicity, language, politics, religion, and the lack of trust were some of the walls that separated us. As we talked about ourselves, our lives, our relationships, the light in the tent seemed brighter. We were less wary. Where walls once cast shadows, the light began to shine more brightly. We began to get to know one another. We soon realized that the better we got to *know* each other, the less we really knew *about* each other.

We went with what we *knew*; we left with questions about what we did not know. We arrived fairly confident that we had a good grasp of the situation. We left having been encountered by the grace of people we had begun really to know.

In today's gospel, a knowledgeable and prominent leader of Israel came to Jesus in the dark of night. The dialog with Jesus, not only speaking but also listening, moves Nicodemus toward the light.

He begins his conversation with Jesus, "Now, we know that you are..."

Jesus leads the conversation in a different direction. Jesus talks to him about some very intimate relationships—about birth and life and death and God's love and salvation. He speaks of perhaps one of the most intimate relationships, birth, and poor Nicodemus thinks of ordinary birth. Jesus says spirit, and Nicodemus imagines wind. Jesus responds by speaking of a deep, relational, intimate way of living—living and participating in the very life of the Triune God.

Jesus speaks of heavenly things and Nicodemus ponders earthly matters. By the time Jesus gets through with him, Nicodemus is confused, mumbling, "How can this be?"

Perhaps Nicodemus's problem is that from the beginning, he came to Jesus saying, "Now we know that..."

We know. We are modern, intelligent folks who know so much. If in doubt, tune in one of the morning shows, or special primetime interviews. The commentators often

lead the interview with that same phrase, “We know that,” or “I know that,…” In fact during one interview when Katie Couric was covering a controversial subject with a political candidate, after the fifth or sixth time she began a question with “I know that…” I became so annoyed turned the TV off.

We know. Perhaps, then, it is only natural that we should approach God in the same way. God is to be understood, investigated, explained, and questioned. When we know so much *about* God, right from the start, well then it can be difficult to know God, really know God. When we know so much about one another, right from the start, well then it can be difficult to know one another, really to know our brothers and sisters in Christ.

Wil Willimon once wrote, “Our salvation is not that we know but that we are willing to be known. Nicodemus came to Jesus with what he knew (“I know that…”). He ended with questions about what he did not know. He arrived fairly confident that he had a good grasp on who Jesus was; he left having been encountered by the mysterious, majestic God in the flesh.” (Willimon)

Nicodemus is encountered by Jesus and his unique way of salvation in this dialog. He is enlightened, as light enters a darkened room. Jesus says, “We speak of what we know and testify to what we have seen.” Nicodemus sees, *not* through his own efforts, his own earnest struggle, but rather as a gift, through revelation, through the eyes of God—not a lofty aerial view, but a view through the eyes of Jesus.

Do you know a Nicodemus—an intelligent, knowledgeable, respected leader who thinks she or he knows all about God, and the body of Christ—the church and you? Perhaps we would do well to respond by entering the conversation as Jesus did, with the intent of sharing who we really are and how our being born from above and living in Christ has changed our ordinary lives into extraordinary living in the life of the Triune God.

As our evening in the Bedouin Tent drew to a close, with the music in full swing, the light burning brighter than ever, the family formed a circle shoulder-to-shoulder arm over arm and began a folk dance unknown to us.

Moving in a circular motion with rhythmic footwork, they swirled around us then opened the circle and reached out to those who were on the margins of the tent and invited, “Would you like to dance?”

Some of the group declined the invitation; others hesitated and joined in only after several invitations and still others joined in immediately. Those who could share themselves with others, those who had let down their defenses, those who were known were those who joined the dance. For a moment and eternally we were adopted into this family as full participants in the dance, each according to our own talents and abilities.

The music was lively, the joy was evident, the laughter contagious as we moved round and round in the tent—a swirling blur of one and yet many. When the music stopped, we lingered on and as the hour grew late, we finally said our goodbyes. It was

like the end of a family reunion that comes all too soon—each of us wishing they could get to know those cousins a little better. With smiles and blessings, blessed by having been known and having gotten to really know this Bedouin Family, we made our way back to our hotel.

Through the Incarnation of the Son, God extends an invitation to come out of the dark and into the light. The Triune God invites us to participate in the very dance of life with God. An invitation to a leap from what we think we know about God and one another into a new dance where we allow God and others really to know us. In the intimacy of being known by God and one another the barriers that block relationships fall. This is Christian community; this is the family of God; this is my hope for you and I.

Our God who knew us before we were knit in our mother's womb, our God who knows us more deeply than we know ourselves, our God's invitation is for all who are led by the Spirit, for we are all children of God.

"For you have received a spirit of adoption. When we cry, "Abba! Father!" it is that very Spirit bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children then heirs, heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ." There are no partial heirs, my brothers and sisters. All of us are full heirs with Christ and no one has the right to treat anyone as if they are any less.

The point is not that we know, but that we are willing to be known as children of God and heirs in union with the church in heaven and on earth through Christ, with Christ, in Christ in the unity of the Holy Spirit one God, and one people of God. For God so loved the world, all of the world, that God gave the Son and Jesus came not to condemn but to save.

Jürgen Moltmann wrote, "This trinitarian community is so wide and so open that the Church and the whole world can "live" within it. The prayer of Jesus that "you may be one in us" is a prayer that is answered. Whether we know it or not we not only believe in the triune God, but also "live" in the triune God."

We are here this morning in this Tent of Meeting. The light burns bright, the joy is explosive, the laughter contagious, and the children of God have gathered. The music plays and the Triune God—Abba Father and Christ and, the Spirit—begin the dance. The Trinity throws open the circle, a circle wide enough for all of creation. Christ extends a hand; we hear the invitation, "Would you like to Dance?"

And all God's children said: Amen. Let us be so.

Let us pray: Beloved God In you we live and dance and have our being. Jesus, Liberator, with you we walk the way of love. Creator Spirit, through you we are made one. God, trinity of love, you seek us in the dance of life. We embrace your love. We dance. This is the meaning of the resurrection that we all can dance together. Alleluia. Amen.