

Genesis 12:1-4a
Psalm 121
Romans 4:1-5, 13-17
John 3:1-17

Sermon March 8th, 2020

Jesus Came to Save not to Condemn

When Algebra and later Calculus reared its ugly head during my primary years of schooling my math grades took a huge nose dive. Give me addition. Give me subtraction. Give me multiplication. Give me division. Give me fractions or decimals or even geometry. For the most part I could hold my own when it came to math. Actually, my math grades were always the highest. Then came Algebra. Whenever I was struggling with my math homework, I remember my Father, who was so good at math, trying to explain to me in as many ways as he could how to do Algebra. His frustration that I couldn't get it led to my further frustration of struggling with it. I realized then that some things in life are very confusing, and that maybe we are not meant to know everything that God's creation has to offer. Or at least, it takes longer for us to understand some things. Of course, this doesn't mean we should stop trying to learn and grow.

In our gospel this morning, Nicodemus comes to Jesus at night. Probably to avoid the persecution he would face as a leader of the synagogue, if others found out about his interest in Jesus' teachings. Well, Nicodemus acknowledges that what comes from Jesus is a reflection of God. However, Nicodemus wants more clarification around Jesus' teachings before becoming more invested. So, Jesus starts teaching. He talks about being born again in the Spirit. Nicodemus isn't following. Instead, he thinks Jesus is being literal, in that we are to be born again from our mother's womb. Jesus reiterates his point. Nicodemus remains confused. This leads to Jesus' frustration that Nicodemus can't seem to understand his teaching, even though Nicodemus is a leader of the synagogue.

Now, in Nicodemus' defense. Nicodemus is not the first person to be confused by Jesus' teachings. The Pharisees, the Sadducee's, the twelve disciples, many who follow Jesus, at times struggle to understand what Jesus is teaching.

Even as we hear in Paul's reading this morning, after the dawn of the Holy Spirit descended upon the church, people are wrestling over Jesus' teachings. Is it in what we do that God welcomes us or is it through faith?

Over the years, we have had many struggles trying to understand Jesus' teachings. Christianity wouldn't have so many different denominations if we all understood every thing Jesus was teaching in the same way. Like the church in the time John wrote this

gospel, we too wrestle with whether what Jesus says in some places is figurative or literal. And if his words are figurative what do they mean? If they are literal in what context? We don't have all the answers. We don't have all the knowledge and wisdom in the world. Sometimes we stumble over Jesus' words. Even when we are investing time and energy into trying to understand these words.

Unfortunately, what happens when we disagree over what we think Jesus is saying to us is that we fight about it. We stop talking to each other and form new communities where people see Jesus' teachings in the same way we do. We become self-righteous thinking our way is the only way. We polarize.

We don't just see this division, this polarization, this self-righteousness in our Christian communities. Within interfaith circles we come across similar arguments when wrestling over what God is saying to us in our world. And what we believe God wants us to do about it.

Even in the greater human family we see this wrestling. This fighting and division when we are trying to understand what our knowledge and wisdom is trying to say to us when dealing with global issues like the environment, or politics, or economics, or disease, or any other pressing issue in our time.

We find ourselves standing in Nicodemus' shoes more often than we probably like. Confused. Wondering what God is saying to us. Trying to listen for what God wants us to do.

What Jesus goes on to say after venting his frustration over Nicodemus' lack of knowledge is that Jesus was sent into this world not to condemn it but to save it.

Jesus may get frustrated at us from time to time for not getting it or wrestling with his teachings. Jesus may be disappointed that our church is so divided over ideals he thought should be easy to understand. Like a parent on a long car ride who is sick of hearing the children fighting in the back seat, God is probably getting sick of hearing us fight over this issue or that issue. Yet, God didn't send Jesus to condemn us but to redeem us.

Jesus is a reflection of God's grace for us. We hear about this grace in our Genesis story when God approaches Abram with an invitation and a promise. Abram does nothing to earn God's favor. All Abram has to do is listen and follow. No where does it say Abram has to understand everything God is saying. We see throughout Abram's life that he doesn't always get it. Sometimes he is confused of God's ways. But he is willing to walk the journey. To listen, learn, grow, and even wrestle with God's words.

Our Lenten Journey calls us to be more intentional about our discernment of God's words. To listen and wrestle over Jesus' teachings knowing that Jesus is a reflection of

God's gracious love. We are not judged when we get confused. We are encouraged to show patience. To listen and grow from our confusion. Jesus is constantly reteaching his disciples knowing that it takes time for us to understand.

What my journey through math taught me was humility. That I don't know all the answers. And I am okay with that. It opens my heart up to listen more. This has really helped me interact and work with people from other denominations and religions. As I enter into dialogue I come with humility, respect, and a listening ear. Knowing that as much as they will learn from my knowledge and experience, I will learn from their knowledge and experience. Humility, a willingness to listen, goes a long way in building bridges. In starting to grasp what God is saying to us, and calling us to be.

So, as you continue on your Lenten journey. As you talk with other Christians about Jesus' teachings or talk to people of other faiths or walks of life about the issues that are pressing us today. Remember, that we are all wrestling with understanding God's words and God's creation. We as Christians are all trying to figure out what Jesus is teaching us so that we can live out Christ's teachings in the world. We all have knowledge and wisdom to bring to the table. And Jesus came to save us not condemn us. Jesus came to reflect God's gracious love, not God's judgment. Jesus came to teach us, over and over again, until we get it.

Making it possible for us to love others as God loves us. Not condemning people, because we think they are not getting it, but reflecting the humbling love of Christ, knowing that we are all still learning and growing. Trying to figure it all out together.

Let us pray, gracious God, sometimes we stumble as we try to understand your teachings. Sometimes we fight with one another over what we think you are saying. Sometimes we do the opposite of loving our neighbor, because we can't seem to find common ground. We can't seem to respect each other, and learn from our different perspectives. We give thanks that you sent us your Son who came to save us. Who came to redeem us. Who came to teach us how to love as you love. Grant us humility and patience to love one another even when we are wrestling with what you are trying to say to us. **Amen.**

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