

May 31 2015

Scripture Lessons ~

Isaiah 6:1-8, p. 622

John 3:1-17, p. 970

Sermon *The Long Way Home*

I don't want in any way to perpetrate the stereotypes that workers on our state, county, and local roads are not hard workers. I could, however, tell you some pretty good stories about the three summers I spent between the years in college working on the county road department. I was a flagman. I made signs and I worked on the survey crew. And in any one of these areas the crew that I worked covered the entire Whitman County and we might in any given week range from one end of the county down to the other end. Of course as college students but also for the more seasoned regulars Fridays were obviously our favorite day of the week. And if we weren't working on a big job, our favorite procedure formed the title of my sermon for today, *The Long Way Home*. Even if we were only five miles from shop one of the guys would say right after lunch time, "Hey, let's take the long way home. So we can quit on time" and sure enough no matter where we were in the county, it would take us all afternoon to get home. I like to think of it as your tax dollar at work, of course, but doesn't it seem like some people in life like to take the long way around when a simpler way would do. Ask that of whichever of you are as spouses who were navigators in the car?

One reason the compilers of the lectionary choose this passage from John for the Pentecost season is because it contains John 3:16 which I think summarizes in one simple verse the entire Gospel lesson for this morning. Martin Luther in fact called it; the Gospel in miniature because it simplifies something which many of us try to make very complex. That is how to have a healthy relationship with God, how to have a healthy relationship with our neighbors and it simplifies it in this way by tell us that the only way Christians can have this healthy relationships with God and with our neighbors is by focusing on the love God showed us so much when He sent Jesus into the world. Like the person who wants to take that long way home, Nicodemus, who was a Pharisees and a leaders and a teacher is sincerely searching for answers in this passage that Susan shared with us. Yet he complicates this very simple message of love which Jesus gives him here and he does it three different times in the conversation that he has with Jesus in this passage.

First like many Christians, Nicodemus tries to draw the conclusion that being born again, having that healthy relationship with God, having that healthy relationship with our brothers and sisters must somehow be demonstrated by some

miraculous act or it is not valid. Many Christians have come to expect perhaps a lightning bolt conversion experience, perhaps a miraculous healing, perhaps the phenomenon in speaking in tongues perhaps some catastrophe historical event as evidence of God's power in their lives and maybe as we have discussed in Bible study and other places some miraculous thing might happen in conjunction with establishing this relationship with God and others but it need not, in order for us to be a healthy relationship with God and our brothers and sisters in Jesus. All though the Gospels Jesus tried not to let these things get in the way of his simple message. In fact many times he downplays them even keeps them secret. Instead saying, to be born again we must simply believe in the power of God's love and forgiveness to turn our lives around. I will give you a little line that I always give my confirmation kids one day when they are confronted by people who ask, "Have you been born again?" "Have you ever been cornered by someone who asks you that question? My friend Patrick took this to heart one and I can actually use it. He said, "Yes" and the person asked the question, "When were you born again?" and Patrick said, "In 30 AD when Jesus died for my sins." And the person didn't ask him any more questions after that. He said Pastor Russ you are smarter than I thought you were.

A second, Long Way Home, that Nicodemus takes in with conjunction with this passage when he is still not satisfied with Jesus' answer. You cannot help but feel that he feels there is something more that he must do in order to be born again; in order to be empowered to receive God's love into the midst his life. Of course he gives that strange answer, "Do I need to back into my mother's womb and be physically be born again". Often times we do this by suggesting that what we do as work in the church or confirmation or membership in the church, our prayers or church attendance all of which are very important things but are what, creates that important bond between us and God and between us and others around us. But Jesus pokes holes into this Nicodemus' argument which is rather tongue and cheek if we read it in its context by saying "That the work of God through the spirit of baptism in our daily Christian walk are in fact the things that draw us to God, not any of things that we can do ourselves so eventually all we have to respond to this, but it is God' Spirit who rules in our lives first of all.

I don't know if you picked it up in the passage but by this time Nicodemus was not only puzzled but he was probably ready to tear out his hair in this discussion with Jesus. He can't figure out the catch is here.

The third try in the long way home, is to throw up his hands and say there is got to be more. And we, sometimes are the same way, we have been deceived often times in life. We have been hurt in life. We have been taught that life is lot more complicated than that and in order of us to have a relationship with God of trust and faith. We might be engaging in some kind of foolishness engaging some

kind of naivety. Jesus gets a little testy but patiently uses an analogy that Nicodemus would understand from the book of Numbers Chapter 21 he refers to a bronze serpent on a pole in the wilderness which Moses and Israelites had to trust in order to survive their ordeal in the wilderness

Well we don't know until much later in Gospels if any of these things sink in for Nicodemus or not but as it turns out, he appears later in the Gospels. Nicodemus even supports Jesus during his trial, and through his crucifixion. But unfortunately at this point he refuses the simplicity of a creating a healthy loving relationship with God and our fellow human beings. It is the difficult and complexity of living a Christian life day by day that is the tough part. Being a follower of Jesus is a very complicated kind of thing because guess what you have to forgive and be forgiven. You have to spend some time seeking God's will for your life. You have to spend some time watching out for the welfare of others around you. You have to be concerned and active in the world around us dealing with all kinds of issues that come our way. We have to be good stewards of your time, talent and treasure; we pray, we study, we share God's love with others. We have to make difficult decisions every day about the way that we will live our lives but before we have to focus on any of those complicated things that we must face .we are called to let the love of God and Jesus begin to come into our heart and change our very lives. We are called to have faith in what God has done for us. We are called to be born again to accept the love and grace that God has given to each one of us and to take line from other Scriptures, "And all these other things will be added unto us."

I want to give all of us a small opportunity to continue to process what Jesus is teaching us in this passage by using John 3:16 as a kind of statement that we can end our time together today. More importantly I am going to give you a few moments of quiet to reflect on Nicodemus' struggle and how you might be struggling in your life today. Join with me in saying those words in John 3:16. "For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son that whosoever believeth in him should not perish but shall everlasting life."

Dear God hear us as we come before you with our joys, with our struggles and with our hopes, you will show us your way of love.

And we say AMEN