

Wesley United Methodist Church

March 15, 2015

"Love In Its Purest Form"

John 3:1-21

Sue Monk Kidd was pregnant with her second child. Her three-year-old son, Bobby, was afraid of the dark. Sue tried everything. She tried leaving a light on in the hall and a night-light on in Bob's room. Nothing she did helped; he was still scared of the dark and would cry out in the middle of the night. One night as she held him against her to comfort him, he touched her round abdomen. Little Bob asked, "Mama, is it dark inside there where my little brother is?" He was convinced that his yet unborn sister would be a boy.

"Yes," his Mama replied, "it's dark in there." As Bob thought further her asked, "He doesn't even have a night-light, does he?" "No," she answered, "not even a night-light." Then Bob hugged his mom as she patted his head. Bob had one more question for her that night. "Do you think my brother is scared all by himself in there?" "I don't think so," Sue explained, "because he's really not alone. He's inside of me." It was a very special moment between mother and son. Suddenly Sue had an inspiration. "And it's the same way with you." Sue explained to her son. "When it's dark and you think you're all by yourself, you really aren't. I carry you inside me too. Right here in my heart."

Sue remembers looking into her son's eyes, wondering if he understood what she meant. Having nothing else to say, Bobby went back to bed and was soon asleep. That was the last time he woke up during the night scared.

Children aren't the only ones who are afraid when night falls. There once was a man named Nicodemus. Nicodemus was a high-ranking member of the Pharisees but was confused and frightened. Nothing was making sense to him. The more he struggled to understand, the more confused and frightened he became. Then he heard about Jesus, and he thought that perhaps Jesus could help him. Under the cover of the night Nicodemus set out to find this itinerant teacher. He caught up with Jesus on the outskirts of town.

Unfortunately Jesus wasn't much help. At one point in their conversation Jesus tells Nicodemus, "No one can see the kingdom of God without being born again." Jesus was speaking, of course, of spiritual rebirth, but Nicodemus was thinking of physical birth. "How can anyone be born after having grown old?" Nicodemus asks. "Can he go back into his mother's womb?" Nicodemus was confused. Jesus simply wasn't making any sense.

Then Jesus reminded Nicodemus of the time Moses and the children of Israel were in the desert. Certainly Nicodemus, a high-ranking Pharisee would understand an illustration from the pages of the Torah. Out in the desert some of the people of Israel were bitten by snakes. In fact some of the Israelites had died as a result of snake bites. It was such a problem that Moses sought out God for a solution. God instructed Moses, "Make a poisonous serpent, and set it on a pole; and everyone who is bitten shall look at it and live." Moses did as God had instructed him. He placed a snake high on a pole. When the people looked at the snake they were healed. They no longer even feared snakes. Nicodemus remembered the story Jesus was referring to. In the same way, Jesus tells Nicodemus, people will one day look at the cross and live. "Just as Moses lifted up the servant in the wilderness," says Jesus, "so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life."

That was Jesus' advice to Nicodemus as understood by the early church. Look to the cross. In those moments when fear seems to get the better of us "when the light at the end of the tunnel is an oncoming train" when the only luck we seem to have is bad luck "look to the cross. That is where our hope lies, on a hill called Golgatha. When we are discouraged, when we're down and nearly out, when we're experiencing our own dark night of the soul, look to the cross.

The story of Nicodemus doesn't end with the allusion to the serpent in the wilderness. Jesus has a message for Nicodemus and for us as well. It was to the hurting Nicodemus that Jesus spoke these words from John's Gospel that we all love so well: "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." God so loved the world... Jesus was trying to move Nicodemus from a life of law to a life of love. He was trying to impress on Nicodemus the extravagance of God's grace. He was trying to tell Nicodemus that God's devotion to his children is beyond measure. It is love in its purest form.

There is a story that comes out of the Beduin culture. "Beduin" is the Aramaic name for "desert dwellers." These people live much as the characters of the Old Testament did. During a heated argument, according to this story, a young Beduin struck and killed a friend of his. Knowing the ancient, inflexible customs of his people, the young man fled, running across the desert under the cover of darkness, seeking safety.

He came to a different tribe and went into the black tent of the tribal chief in order to seek his protection. The old chief took the young Arab in. The chief assured him that he would be safe until the matter could be settled legally.

The next day, the young man's pursuers arrived, demanding the murderer be turned over to them. They would see that justice would prevail in their own way. "But I have given my word," protested the chief. "But you don't know whom he killed!" they countered. "I have given my word," the chief repeated.

"He killed your son!" one of them blurted out. The chief was deeply and visibly shaken with his news. He stood speechless with his head bowed for a long time. The accused and the accusers as well as curious onlookers waited breathlessly. What would happen to the young man? Finally the old man raised his head. "Then he shall become my son," he informed them, "and everything I have will one day be his."

The young man certainly didn't deserve such generosity. And that, of course, is the point. Love in its purest form is beyond comprehension. No one can merit it. It is freely given. It is agape "the love of God." Look at the cross. At the cross we encounter love in its purest form. See the healing and life. When we look to the cross we discover a God who loves and cares deeply for each of us "a God who carries each of us near his heart.

Sue Monk Kidd said it well to her three-year-old son Bobby. "I carry you inside me too. Right here in my heart."

So it is with God. When I was a child, first God was only 'up there.' Then God was all around. Next I began to see that God was also 'within me.' And now most shocking of all I was finding that I am and always was 'within God.'