

God's Gracious Love

A sermon notes for the sermon given by Rev. Dr. Gregory Young Presented on Sunday, March 20, 2011

Have you ever just wanted to get away from the pressures of daily life in a effort to find peace and quiet? Maybe you found yourself in the early evening exhausted after a very difficult day at work; or, maybe it was the demands of your family members and their various schedules that have just pulled you in too many directions. Perhaps it was one of those days when the phone wouldn't stop ringing, your boss kept piling on the work, or your children had just gotten out of control and all you wanted to do was find a quiet place where you could rest, regroup and pull yourself together.

Following his baptism by John in the River Jordan, this was daily life for Jesus. Every day he was pulled in many different directions. People needed his blessing and kept asking him for it; every town he visited he would draw a crowd and they called for him to teach; his people wanted hope and they looked to him every moment of every day for a message or a sign that God cared enough to bring changed for his people. At the end of each day Jesus looked forward to a time when he could just get away from the crowds and the demands. At night he would retreat to a garden or some other quiet place where he could be alone with God in prayer. Jesus understands the pressures of our lives and he knows our desire to find peace. In his own living he offers us a way to find it – to go to that quiet place and be in prayer with God.

Our Gospel reading today finds Jesus in just such a quiet place when out of nowhere Nicodemus interrupts the peace and solitude. It was the end of the day for Jesus, nighttime had come and he was alone

and probably in prayer. We do not know where exactly this encounter with Nicodemus took place – perhaps it was a hillside on the outskirts of town, maybe it was a garden or even the Garden of Gethsemane. All we know it in the cover of night Nicodemus came to Jesus; he broken into the solitude that Jesus so needed. We are not sure why Nicodemus visited with Jesus. It might have been out of curiosity or out of a desire to better understand the man behind the message. Nicodemus might have been on a mission of Israel's ruling council in an effort to uncover Jesus' motives and to see if he had any plans for leading a revolt against the Sanhedrin. We do not know why Nicodemus approached Jesus at night but we do know that Jesus' quiet time for renewal was disturbed by this night visitor.

Have you ever longed for just a few moments of quiet, found it and just as you were settling down you realize you forgot to turn off your cell phone? It starts ringing and the peace and calm is broken. Do you answer it, let it keep ringing or just turn it off. Of course you have to see who it is before you know if you can ignore it. Maybe it is a friend who needs help or one of your family members trying to track you down. Even if you stop the ringing and turn the phone off the damage has been done and your solitude is gone. If you have been in this situation or something like it then you can imagine how Jesus must have felt that evening when Nicodemus showed up.

"Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God; for no one can do these signs that you do apart from the presence of God." Those were Nicodemus' opening words. It makes me wonder if Jesus thought to himself, "Is Nicodemus for real? Does he really believe that I am a rabbi sent from God? Has he come to me at night in a effort to find out for himself if I am the real thing?"

Perhaps he is secretly trying to ascertain whether or not he wants to become one of my disciples. Or, maybe he is a spy sent by the Sanhedrin, the ruling council, in a effort to determine if I have a plan not only to challenge their authority to rule over Israel but also to see if I am leading a revolt of the people against the Sanhedrin.” Did Nicodemus come to Jesus in the darkness as a personal act of faith or did he come to Jesus as a spy for the ruling council? We will never know. We do know, however, that even after another exhausting day of teaching and healing, Jesus took the time to help Nicodemus understand the Kingdom of God.

Those of us studying the book 24 Hours that Changed the World by Adam Hamilton have been reading about the events of another night in Jesus’ life. Following the Last Supper Jesus travelled with his disciples east out of Jerusalem, across the Kidron Valley to an Olive Grove on the Mount of Olives overlooking Jerusalem. Sometime between midnight and 3 AM Jesus was in prayer and wrestling with God’s will and what lay ahead for him and all humanity. He had asked his closest friends, Peter, James and John to come into the garden with him and stay nearby and awake while he prayed. Just as Nicodemus did not understand Jesus during his nighttime encounter so Jesus’ friends did not understand what was expected of them. Peter, James and John fell asleep and left Jesus all alone with his struggle; Nicodemus might as well have been asleep. Both episodes leave us with the understanding that Jesus is alone in his mission to redeem humanity. At the end of Jesus’ meeting with Nicodemus the two of them part but it is Jesus who continues on the journey toward the cross. At the end of Jesus’ prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane, the disciples all desert him and Jesus again is left all alone to continue his journey toward the cross.

There are times in our lives when all we want is to be left alone.

Sometimes life becomes overwhelming or difficult or confusing and we just need some space to gain a little perspective. Other times we find ourselves bending under a crushing load of responsibility and we just need a break where we can set it down and regain our strength. There are those times in our lives when all we need to do is get alone with God, fall on our knees and pray. We do not want to spend the rest of our lives alone, we just need a break for a little while to recharge our spiritual batteries and regain a sense of purpose and meaning.

Jesus on the other hand had to travel the road to the cross alone with God. It was his work to do and his mission to accomplish.

Nicodemus, Peter, James, John and all the others would only have the chance to understand after Jesus' mission was accomplished. Were we in their shoes we would have found ourselves in the same position as they. Even those of us to stand on this side of Jesus' journey and now find ourselves looking back at these events struggle to understand the meaning of Jesus' ministry and mission. Like Nicodemus, Peter, James, and John we find ourselves lurking in the shadows of the night, asking our questions and falling asleep only to find that Jesus has moved on ahead. His voice cries out, "Follow me."