

## **“Faithfulness in Fragile Times: Truth, Light, Transparency”**

John 3:1-21 – Rev. Rebecca Littlejohn

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*Holy God, bless the speaking and the hearing of these words, that we might be inspired to get up and follow the One who knows us and loves us. In Jesus' name, Amen.*

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This might sound a little weird, but I'm excited to be back with you in time to have three more weeks of Lent together. Our Lenten theme this year, “Faithfulness in Fragile Times,” invites us to explore the values and convictions of our faith that help us through hard times. I'm guessing you probably wouldn't place ambivalence on that list. And I'm not necessarily saying ambivalence – which simply refers to having mixed feelings about something – is a strong support in times of trouble. But for Disciples, to move through Lent without acknowledging ambivalence is to live in denial. The truth is that Disciples have experienced ambivalence about Lent as long as we've had feelings about Lent, which is probably only about the last 40 of our history anyway. We're just not that into somber or penitence, and we're definitely not into fasting. But over these past 40 years, we have come to see some of the benefits of Lent, nicely summed up by writer Kathleen Norris who suggests that Lent is a time when we practice getting through desert seasons together so that we're better prepared for them when they arrive in our own individual lives.

The wonderful thing about being Disciples is that we're congregational and “low church” but adjacent to more liturgical traditions with more regimented rituals,

is that we have access to whichever parts of it are helpful, but no rules or requirements about how we use them. It's possible that another way of interpreting that ambivalence is to see it as liberty – that is, the freedom to practice Lent in ways that are truly life-giving and reviving in this moment, rather than practicing rituals we don't understand whose relevance has dulled over the years. If we didn't approach the season with some amount of critique, we wouldn't be able to tell the good from the bad.

So here we are, acknowledging that Lent has arrived at a moment in history when things are, in fact, pretty hard. And discovering that our faith does, indeed, offer us support for getting through hard times. And not just getting through, of course, but getting through faithfully. Jesus did not come that we might simply survive, but in order that we might have abundant life.

So let's turn to this story from John 3 and the value that is our focus today. Because it's not ambivalence I want to focus on, but transparency. There are such interesting dynamics unfolding in this story. We have Nicodemus arriving, coming to Jesus "by night," and by the end of the passage, Jesus is talking about how people who do things in the dark are trying to hide. Those two things have to be related, right? And yet, it seems like Jesus' chiding of Nicodemus is gentle and kind-spirited, like he's really just encouraging Nicodemus to claim what he already knows in his gut, rather than continuing to pretend he's stuck in old ways of thinking. And the way John sets the story up, the teaching is just as much for the rest of us, as it is for him.

What do we know about Nicodemus? Not much beyond what this story tells us, but enough to tell that he took Jesus' teaching to heart. In chapter 7, John has Nicodemus defending Jesus' right to a trial before being condemned. And then he comes up again near the end of the gospel, helping Joseph of Arimathea ensure Jesus has a proper burial. The arc of Nicodemus' story shows us the first thing we need to know about transparency as a way of life: it requires courage. Faithfulness demands that we set aside our fears and concerns about what other people might think, come out of the shadows, and live our convictions boldly.

The next thing this story can teach us about transparency is somewhat subtle. Jesus leads Nicodemus into a conversation about being "born from above," and Nicodemus gets a little lost. He is stuck in a literal way of thinking, an approach to faith that is about rules and practices rather than the transformation of the heart. Jesus keeps pushing, but refuses to break it down too much. What we see is that transparency is not always the same thing as clarity, especially when it comes to talking about God. God is a Mystery, and while we can be honest and truthful about what God means to us, we can't explain God or chart God or measure God. On the other hand, we know that often those with ill intent use complexity and obfuscation to avoid transparency. They pile up words till the point is lost, precisely because they don't want us to have a clear idea of what they're saying. It's important to be able to discern the difference. Metaphor is not the same thing as fine print, and the two have very different uses.

Finally, the most important lesson this story teaches us about transparency is that it goes hand-in-hand with honesty and righteousness. Did you catch how many times Jesus says “Very truly, I tell you” in these 21 verses? He says it three times, plus one “indeed” later. “Those who do what is true come to the light,” he says. Those who do evil avoid the light because they do not want to be exposed. If we are following the way of Jesus, we can be boldly transparent about our faith because it is rooted in God’s deep love for the world, in the life-changing story of Jesus being lifted up like Moses’ staff and transformed as a sign of God’s liberating power.

We know what Jesus says about this is true, from our own experiences. When we’ve done something we’re ashamed of, something we know wasn’t right or something we did acting out of fear rather than love, we don’t go out and tell everyone. We hide it and hope no one will notice. And then, hopefully, we eventually realize it’s just festering away inside our souls and we need to open our hearts to God’s forgiveness in order to be rid of it. We dig it out and make things right, and we’re ready to live in the light again.

This is true on the scale of society as well. Sunshine, as they say, is the best disinfectant. In these days of non-disclosure agreements and media organizations dedicated to mis-information and videos carefully edited to look “genuine and natural,” it’s so important that we pay attention to whether the people and institutions leading us are committed to transparency or not. Whether it’s the Sheriff’s Department or a 500-page insurance policy and political action committees injecting

“dark money” into our civic discourse, we have to do the work to ensure that the sun is shining. Or as Jesus might put it, to ensure that the Light is still shining in the world, revealing the good and the bad.

I thought I might be coming in a little hot on this topic, because honesty is one of my highest values, and we seem to be living in an age of lies. But I’m not sure it’s possible right now to overemphasize how important it is to hold every part of our society to a high standard of truthfulness and transparency. With so many new and different ways to deceive available, it’s a full-time job to dig through what’s out there to find what’s true and who is lying. It’s just as easy to obscure the truth by covering it up with too much information as it is by not giving enough information.

At the core of this story, Jesus is trying to help Nicodemus – and through him, us – understand that God’s love is the most important thing. And that God’s love leads us to a way of life where nothing needs to be hidden. He’s teaching us to be wary when someone is dissembling or telling us we don’t need to worry about that thing we were curious about or piling up so many words it’s not clear what they’re really saying. There are many ways of hiding from the Light. When things seem hard or confusing or overwhelming, we must return to these truths: God loves us. God wants us to live in the Light. God wants us to spread that Light, and God wants the world to grow in righteousness by seeking that Light and letting it cleanse us. Let us follow the example of Nicodemus and open ourselves to be transformed by this invitation. May it be so.