

“Who Are We Led By?”

Romans 8:12-17

John 3:1-17

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Pastor Norman Fowler

First Presbyterian Church of Moscow

This is Memorial Day weekend and so we think about those who have gone before us, who have sacrificed their life for what they saw as the greater good and the freedoms that we celebrate. I would imagine that for each of those who went into combat, who went to protect their nation, they struggled with what exactly were the right choices? That is not an easy decision to make, especially a sacrifice that could be so large. We honor their decision, and do our best to live up to the vision they have given us of freedom, and a country that might be a place for all to live to their fullest. It also reminds me that we as we live our lives we also have to come to points where we make decisions to do what is good, and sometimes this can be challenging.

I think that is one of the things we hear in Nicodemus, he was a man who wanted to do what was right, what was good. And there was this man that was challenging the religious political tradition as he understood. Through caring for the uncared for, for healing the outcasts sick, and teaching the radical love of neighbor, including the clearly “wrong-headed”, despised ethnic groups, gentiles, and occupiers. He knew because this man was challenging the status quo in so many ways, that going to talk to him could tarnish his own status, his own reputation. So we have Nicodemus coming at night, coming under the cover of darkness, hoping, I think, that nobody would know he has spent this time with Jesus, trying to figure out what was going on. If this Rabbi should in some way effected his decision and his decisions in his life about what was right and good. Whenever I hear a story like this in scripture, you know its easy to just think about this as, well, that’s what Nicodemus did. But it makes me wonder what I would do, what I do when I hear Jesus challenging me. Challenging me with things that don’t seem to fit the ways the world around me suggests I should live - challenging my lifestyle, or my politics, or my religious views. What do I do? We live in a time that feels like it has made a kind of decision about that, and suggested that we really don’t need to listen to God. You know, I’ve already struggled with this a lot, and so reading somebody like Charles Taylor whose talking about the secular age and how we’re in a historical moment that has

decided that God and almost anything immaterial doesn't matter. It's interesting to me that we talk about something as immaterial meaning it's not physical, but we also use that same word to mean irrelevant. And so it is as we come to this passage in which Jesus is inviting us to understand what is going on, it begins by inviting me to think about, how do I decide? What do I know is true? What do I believe? How do I see the world? And if how I see the world, conflicts with how Jesus invites me to live and see the world, what do I do? In an age where we kind of pressed God to the side, where we've denied the immaterial, like the Spirit, how do we decide what is good and what is right?

Charles Taylor argues that we have gone through an age where we thought that if we use reason, rationalism, and basic mutual benefit, that we can figure it out ourselves. Now I am not really against reason and rationalism, I happen to think it's really important, but I also realize that I can take beginning points, assumptions, premises as true, and then create a whole argument, a whole set of reasons and rationalizations on that set of premises and find that I am off base.

We've seen, real world examples of this. I think it was 2016, a man from North Carolina, went to a pizzeria in Washington D.C. because he had come to believe that there was a cannibalistic pedophile ring out of that particular pizzeria. His assumptions were off, his initial view of what was true, his desire to do something good was reasonable in some ways. Perhaps taking it into your own hands is not completely reasonable, but you see the idea. Its easy to get something wrong at the beginning, and find that we have gone astray.

This passage for me, invites me again, to think about where I start. What it's about. Where do I put my faith, and what do I follow? What gives me guidance? What am I led by? Is it a book like Charles Taylors'? Is it something else? Is it a group? Is it an individual? Is it a theory? As I read this particular scripture, and I think about the world in which we live, I struggle, and I have struggled with this particular sermon because it feels like Jesus is inviting us to know the very loving grace of God. To know that God has sent him as the loving son of God, in a way to show us God's full love for the world so that the world might not parish, but have eternal life. And while we sometimes get that far, you know, it's a little easier to think about God. We know we need a Creator, there's a sense it had to come from some place. And we like the idea that we're loved. And that Jesus came to

show us the love of God. But it feels to me, that what Jesus is doing, is saying, I'm going to show you, I'm going to teach you, I'm going to die for you, to show you that your struggles, your sin, are no longer in the way of your relationship with God. I am going to take you to the door of the kingdom.

Then he says goodbye, in a way. And introduces the Spirit. And invites us to be born of that Spirit. I think in some ways that's Jesus' more poetic way of saying the same thing that Paul says in Romans, "Be led by the spirit". Led by the Spirit, let the Spirit guide you into the kingdom, into the life God has created for you. The way God has made this world so that it works in a way that you'll find the wonder of living in it. The Spirit will help you discern what is real and right so that you can truly live.

So there are a couple challenges. The first is hearing Jesus give us that Spirit, and begin to think about the Spirit as the essential nature to our life of faith. But really, the second challenge is, not only to think about the Spirit as essential to our life of faith, but to give it priority, to begin to think about how we engage. I think I grew up in a church, I have probably said this before, but I grew up in a church where it wasn't the Spirit that led, it was my learning that led. It's what I learned about. And while I think that all that learning is important and valuable, that's not what Jesus is asking me to do here. Jesus is not asking me to simply pay attention to what I have learned, or to think that I can figure it all out. In fact, in some ways, it feels like Jesus says you won't figure it all out. You need to hear the one that is blowing from here and going to there. Because in that hearing, we get the direction. We get the voice of God. We get the gift of grace. We get God at work in our lives.

What do we trust? Can we trust that God made the world and all that is in it? The son brings God's love to the world and sacrifices himself for us, and for it, and can we follow or be born of the Spirit? You know, it's Trinity Sunday, so there's this perspective of how God is at work. But we know the Trinity is more than just about how God is at work, we see in this passage an invitation to see the fullness of who God is, a God who comes to us and is present with us through the work of the Spirit. And so as we read this passage, we have to wonder, we're invited to think about what it means to be guided by the Spirit, led by the Spirit, born of the Spirit. Now, it feels to me like we have struggled with this, particularly in our time, my lifetime anyway.

How do we approach the work of the Spirit? We have different approaches, and too often we see the other approaches as not being quite right, some see those who've kind of jumped in with both feet as too enthusiastic. And those who are more enthusiastic see those who don't, as being too dead to the life of what God calls us to. And I think, and I wonder if there isn't something where those two meet, because we do worry at times about whether, and we can do this it's so easily, to begin to hear a voice that we want to hear. I know for myself it's so easy to convince myself of the very thing I want to be convinced of, rather than recognizing God's voice that doesn't always tell me exactly what I want to hear, and sometimes encourages me to do things that I struggle with.

I thought it was God's humor at work when God first invited me to become a pastor, because I didn't enjoy getting up and speaking before people, and yet, it felt like a calling, it felt like the spirit at work, it wasn't comfortable. And so as we think about this passage we recognize the fullness of God in it. A God who gave us our lives, gave us creation, and has throughout history invited people to be in relationship with Him.

As God is at work in our lives, He brings us the fullness of his Grace through the coming of the Son who brings the love of God into our world in a way that is seen more fully. Not to condemn the world but to save it. God in the Son then invites us to recognize God's love, as we experience the wonder of what the Son does. The Son's actions offers us a new life. It's like being taken to a trailhead, and he tells us that it's not going to be a trail we can follow on our own, but he gives us a guide. He gives us the Spirit to engage us as God's children, helping us overcome the fear of that new way, and all the fears that the world throws at us. Jesus gives us a certain grace in offering to have the Spirit lead us.

As we conclude, the one thing I want to remember is, as I hear this passage again, it feels to me like the main challenge I am hearing at this point, is to take time to listen and to hear. Sometimes when we go somewhere, and there is a guide, we say, "oh no, we can do it ourselves". God is giving us a guide, and our part in that is hearing that guide. And taking time to listen, to notice, to experience. Its an invitation to be led by the Spirit.