Trinity Sunday/First Sunday after Pentecost May 27, 2018

All Saints’ Church Year B

Isaiah 6:1-8 Romans 8:12-17

Psalm 29 John 3:1-17

In the Name of the Trinity, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, the one who creates, saves and sustains.

Many years ago, I read a simple meditation by Thich Nhat Hanh, the Vietnamese Buddhist monk, which has lingered with me.

In this meditation, he asks, “You know how you feel when you have a toothache? Think about that for a moment. How it’s all-absorbing; you can’t think of anything else; it takes up your world, and how you’re going to deal with the pain that’s inside your head, your body, your spirit?

“Why, then, when we don’t have a toothache, we aren’t all-absorbed in our gratefulness for our pain-free existence, at least for that wonderful moment, in the present? Why isn’t that peace all absorbing, affecting all the ways we make decisions, giving thanks of being free of pain- in our head, in our body and in our spirit?”

I was reminded of Thich Nhat Hanh’s meditation when I was driving to Concord this week for a meeting with Bishop Rob, and got stuck in traffic- which put me about 15 minutes late, and I became absorbed/worried/even anxious in my lateness. Yet, how many times do I drive in pain-free traffic… Often! Yet, I rarely give thanks for those moments of peace and beauty. I’m too busy thinking of other things. It takes so much intention to be present to all of our moment-by-moment gifts from God.

I think Nicodemus could use a little of Thich Nhat Hanh’s wisdom. Nicodemus’ life has been on cruise-control. He’s rich; he has a high profile as a religious leader; he is respected within his community; and he is a decision-maker with power and influence. I don’t think he was grateful about any of his privileges. His fortunate place in life is just the status quo for him. And he’s a busy man, caught up in doing many important things.

But now, he has a toothache, and his name is Jesus.

And he doesn’t know what to do with the pain; it’s all-absorbing. So he comes to Jesus in the secret of the night and says to him, “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.” Ah yes, Nicodemus has insight! And it’s compelling him to act.

Nicodemus gets Jesus at a very profound level. Something is piercing Nicodemus’ heart, and he doesn’t have a name for it, but it’s real. Yet, because of that turmoil, he instinctively realizes that he will probably need to change his life, and he’s not ready for ***that***.

Nicodemus is in pain; Jesus is rattling his cage; and he is afraid. So much is at risk. What is a respectable person like him consorting with this Galilean riff raff? But he can’t get Jesus out of his mind.

He knows that the ground beneath him is opening up. His safe world doesn’t feel so safe.

As a man of the world, with his place of power, he ***knows*** that ***all is not right*** with his society. He ***sees*** the corruption of his time- that even the office of High Priest is ***bought and sold***. He gets Jesus’ anger at the money changers in the Temple: how the precious faith of his fellow believers ***is also being bought and sold.*** And he could not have been blind to Pilate’s oppressive rule, and his ruthless police-state tactics. And that the marginalized in his society are being neglected, even brutalized, and he’s doing nothing about it even though his very faith demands his care for the poor, the widowed, the sojourner: the lost, the lonely and the left-behind.

Nicodemus is straddled between two worlds- his life of privilege and that other life of despair and injustice….. he probably has been torn most of his life, and his way of coping was to be in denial. To be a bystander. But his doing nothing is no longer working. He feels compromised. Meaning and value are draining out of his life. His words, prayers, actions feel hollow. Rather than feel shalom, he feels shallow, and so he goes seeking Jesus…. Under cover of the night.

There’s only one problem. He wants Jesus to fix things. To tell him what to do- give him a clear road map. That’s why this learned man, who reads scripture every day, who must understand metaphor- (he’s professionally trained in how to read on many levels) is so literal: How can anyone be born having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother’s womb and be born again?”

Give me a break. He came in the dark and he doesn’t see, and he is sealed off in his own tomb of the dying. Jesus is offering to open up his grave, offering a hand to lift him out of his coffin, into the life of the living, to start anew, to give birth to a ***new way of seeing*** ***and living***, but Nicodemus is blind. I think in part he just has too much in the way- too much power, too much privilege, too much education, too much comfort.

You see, he has to let go of all that to follow Jesus. Jesus isn’t just a fix, a hope for self-improvement. What Jesus offers is a way to die to our ego, to our self-chatter, to all those things that are suffocating us, that we are hiding behind. Jesus is a way of death, a path to letting go, a poverty road, a stripping. There will be some crosses along the way. There has to be. Jesus is asking us to stand naked without any shame, and to trust that the one who will hang naked before the world will take us to new life of Love.

Today is referred to as Trinity Sunday, lifting up our way of defining God, as Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

When you throw Jesus, the Christ, (sometimes who appears as a toothache) and the Holy Spirit (compelling you to let your life speak in all of its integrity) into the mix of understanding the Deity, you have what Richard Rohr describes as the Divine Dance.

The Sustainer of all Life, which is beyond understanding yet as close to us as our jugular vein, is asking, inviting, sometimes demanding, for us to dance, to pursue, to interact, to trust, to hope, to respect the dignity of every human being, to participate, to change, to be in mutuality, to make a difference, to bounce off each other in love.

To be in the dynamic relationship of Three. At first, I didn’t understand why we were reading the story of Nicodemus on Trinity Sunday, but now it makes a lot of sense. Nicodemus is a perfect metaphor for those running the world, but often have a blind eye to all the pain and injustice.

Jesus shakes us up, reaches out his hand to all of us and asks us to follow him. Will we see the hand, will we grasp it, will we follow, will we be in the dynamic relationship with the world in Love, with all of its risks?

Then there’s the Holy Spirit! One of the gifts we have received within our DNA is the stirring of the heart when we see Truth. It comes out of nowhere. It’s grace. It’s internal and Eternal. A bit of heaven within our soul: the Holy Spirit, a gift to all of us.

I think that is why the world has responded to our Presiding Bishop’s homily at the Royal Wedding. He talked about the power of Love, in the face of power, within the history of slavery, and the pain of injustice. How did he do that? He rattled a lot of cages- how dare he speak about such atrocities in the middle of a wedding?

My very conservative brother-in-law called me and asked, “That’s your guy preaching at the wedding! Wow, he’s the real deal.”

I think our PB Michael Curry got away with what he did because he is joyful. He has an infectious laugh, charisma that comes from deep down; we are drawn to him, the real deal. He lives what Thich Nhat Hanh invites us to remember- gratitude, generosity, presence, and hope. That peace which surpasses all understanding is what gives our Bishop the courage to walk into the darkest places of pain and turn to us and say, come, “We’re part of the Jesus Movement, let’s follow Jesus.” To follow Jesus is not easy, even painful, but our Bishop is smiling.

One of my favorite descriptions of the Trinity, and I don’t know where I heard this, but I love it. The Trinity: The Mystery of the Dark; the Gift of the Scary; and the Love of All.

A life of Grace and Gratitude and Joy prepares us for that whisper that comes at night, compelling us, and says, “I can’t make this easy or any less scary, but I will be with you, and in the uncertainty, the vulnerability, and the nakedness, there is life, light, and love. Come walk with me.”

AMEN