

## **Sermon: Celebrating the Contradictions**

**Scripture: John 3:1-17**

**Preacher: Rev. Will Burhans**

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This is one of the most famous and often quoted passage of the entire Bible - John 3:16 - on bumper stickers and posterboards and billboards and tattoos and shirts. Many Christians says it's the whole Gospel in a single sentence - "For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten son that whosoever believeth in him shall not perish but have eternal life." It's that simple and that clear. If... you believe that that's simple and clear. Ask what it means exactly and the response will usually be "well, of course it means that if you accept Jesus and believe that he died for your sins then you'll be saved... but don't believe and you won't." which is a dense theological explication of a sentence that is simple and clear. The context within which the sentence is placed complicates it even further, because what is clear in the story is that very little of this is clear to Nicodemus. Nicodemus is more a biblical literalist, a black and white thinker, man of the law and logic and Jesus is overriding his logical thinking mind and asking him into a broader, deeper, more expansive mind or heart. Nicodemus tends to see in either-or terms and Jesus is pulling him into both-and terms. Nicodemus is seeing things as contradictory and Jesus inviting him into living amidst paradox.

This life of ours is so full of contradictions, the clash of ideas and people and truths and lies to be solved, addressed, resolved, fixed but and here's where it gets tricky, on a spiritual level sometimes those contradictions turn into paradoxes, meaning you come to realize that what

seems like contradicting points point to a deeper truth and paradoxes aren't there to be fixed but to be held, lived, and they grow us.

The gospel is full of paradox and Jesus loved jammin' on paradoxes. The first shall be last and the last shall be first. Classic paradox. To find your life you must be willing to lose your life. Seems like a contradictory statement on the surface level but there resides the Truth. Or you might say it's contradictory to the mind but is true in the lived experience of the heart. Love your enemy is another paradox because of the nature of what an enemy is and yet there is power and Truth in that paradox.

In our passage for this morning Jesus invites Nicodemus into holding paradox - "To truly know God, you must be born again, born from above, a second time" and to Nicodemus this of course is a contradiction in terms. We cannot be born a second time, what? Do we enter again into our mother's womb, haha? But Jesus is inviting Nicodemus into a deeper truth that runs beneath the contradiction, so Jesus doubles down on the mystery of it and refers to the wind which we cannot see, but we can feel and we cannot know where it comes from or where it is going and he says "this is true of everyone born of the Spirit." Another contradiction of seeming opposites the spirit and the body... Jesus holds them together and says "anyone born of the spirit this second time though in their bodies is like the wind. It's not a promise that they become ethereal spirit eventual in heaven and released from the weight of flesh but they live the spirit in body. It's not an either-or proposition but a both-and equation, a paradox not a contradiction.

The Quaker writer, teacher and activist, Parker Palmer, has a book called *The Promise of Paradox* and he argues in it that one of the more critical aspects of living fully and faithfully with love is to be able to live in

the midst and hold well the contradictions of life. And sometimes as you live into those contradictions you realize that there are deeper truths residing within. If we do not rush so quickly to resolve the contradictions or come down fast and hard on one side or another but live the contradiction, we come to God and God's truth. He says, for instance, that our wholeness as human beings is not a wholeness based on perfection but a wholeness that includes our brokenness. We are whole exactly in our limited frail brokenness. We become less than whole only when we deny those aspects of ourselves. That's the paradox - we are whole in our brokenness.

Law and Spirit is a paradox running through the gospels as well. Nicodemus represents the law and Jesus is trying to grant him a taste of the Spirit. You can't resolve the tension of spirit and law. It's not an either-or, it's a both-and. The law arose from spirit, the spirit was codified in law but not calcified there and must return there. Jesus is fully human and fully divine, another classic Christian paradox, contradictory to the rational mind, True at level of heart or experience. The fact that the Trinity can't be fully understood in the logical mind is not an indictment of the reality but a comment on the limits of the logical mind.

So then it shouldn't surprise us with all of this paradox popping all over the place that the symbol that sits at the very heart of our spiritual tradition is the cruciform shape, the cross that is the symbol of paradox par excellence: an instrument of torture and death AND a symbol of God's victory of life over death. The cross is a sign of gruesome suffering in this world and it is a sign of grace and healing. It is a sign of the world's hatred and of God's love, both and. Even its very structure speaks of the contradictions and paradoxes of life. The arms of the cross reach left and right and up and down and signify the way life pulls us between conflicting

claims, on the horizontal, person against person, nation against nation, human against earth, and on the vertical axis human against divine, spirit against material, earth against heaven. And we at times feel crucified on those tensions and yet the arms of the cross converge at the center, symbolizing as Parker Palmer puts it “the way in which God can act in our lives to overcome conflict, to unify opposites, to contradict the contradictions. The cross calls us to recognize that reality itself has a cruciform shape.”<sup>1</sup>

Our temptation is to rid ourselves or fix the contradictions and tensions, that are better actually being held and lived rather than resolved. Take up your cross and follow me, at least in part means to not rush to resolving or fixing or eliminating the tensions and contradictions of life but to hold them trusting that something, someONE bigger than us can do what we cannot which is lead us into growth, change and hope a new way.

Our lives are riddled in paradox and those places are where we are invited to hand it over to God. We are limited beings but can imagine the infinite and unlimited. We are sinful beings who know for the most part the difference between right and wrong. We are fallible and deceived people who know what is true and what is false. We are all of that and must live amidst such paradox, not rush to fix and resolve but holding, painfully at times, the tension of contradictions. I am good and full of light, my life can be a blessing to others...and I am sinful and can be a black hole of need at times and my life sometimes curses others. The law-man Nicodemus insists - we must become all light, we must become better, we must become perfect. And since we really really can't do that, that advice, that logic turns in on itself and becomes dangerous to ourselves and to others

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<sup>1</sup> Palmer, Parker, *The Promise of Paradox: A Celebration of Contradictions in the Christian Life*

as we project that pain out onto others. The way of the cross, the taking up of our cross, is to live humbly into the contradictory realities of who we are - sinners beloved of God. Children of light who have moments and times of being children of darkness. And we find ourselves torn apart in that but we also find there our companion Jesus holding that cruciform shape with us and for us, in us and around us.

Let me close with another paradox that came to mind as I was snowboarding on Friday this week with this theme of paradox running through my mind. There was this moment when I was first learning to snowboard many years ago that it really clicked for me. My instructor was watching me lean back on my board as I was making my turns and he said - "Will, lean down the hill, not back up the hill. It's counter-intuitive but it'll make all the difference." And it did. Finally when I over-rode my instinct to lean away from the direction I was falling and let go into it I found a flow. As soon as I relinquished my control and management of the situation, I could control and manage things SO much better. My willingness to live in that paradox saved my butt - quite literally - from more bruising!

Where are the contradictions and tensions in your life that you are wanting to resist, to lean away from, to resolve too quickly? How might you lean in and trust God and trust reality's cruciform shape that while you cannot resolve or solve this, while you might not be able to fix the situation, you can hand it over to God and live within the tension of it humbly. It's not yours to get right, it's only something to live into as best you can with the inevitable failure and success that comes with that. Don't lean away from that thing, that situation, lean in with trust, let go and let God even if for a moment. Sitting in the tension, leaning into the direction of the fall is where the truth will be revealed and the flow of Spirit will be found.

I wonder if Nicodemus ever leaned into his fear of what Jesus was inviting him into without knowing how in the world it all made sense? Can you imagine what liberation was awaiting him there? Or did he lean back and walk away to relieve the tension for himself. The last we hear of him after this intense encounter with Jesus is at the very end of the Gospel, at Jesus' death, when Nicodemus helps Joseph of Arimathea wrap and anoint Jesus' body. No words are spoken, just this act of love. Apparently Nicodemus continued to live in the tension of the contradiction between his tradition and Jesus Christ, and maybe he was transformed in that paradox and maybe it led to his redemption in the end.