

Sermon Sun May 30 2021 by *The Rev. Mary Bell-Plouffe*

There's a term I first heard about 10 years ago.
Many of you have probably heard it as well.
'spiritual; not religious'
'Spiritual, not religious' is likely something with which we're all familiar.
We all have friends, family, who have no use for,
just aren't interested in organized religions.

Maybe they've been part of a worshipping community in the past,
and had a bad experience.
Maybe what happens in worship just isn't relevant to them.
Maybe what they've been taught in their religious community
is so foreign to what they know from their own lived experience,
that they just can't accept it.
And so they look elsewhere to meet their spiritual needs.

Maybe they go canoeing, or snowshoeing, or hiking or boating,
getting out into nature, into the living cathedral of earth sea and sky,
sensing through the wonder of creation,
something of the Creator.

Maybe they turn to yoga, or something else entirely.
Everyone has spiritual needs, but for many people
established religions, and not just the Christian religion
aren't meeting those needs.
And so they look elsewhere.
I remember speaking with a Yukon elder about 10 years ago.
She said to me
'I used to be Anglican; now I'm Christian'.

All of us have spiritual needs. To quote Teilhard de Chardin –
**'We are not human beings having a spiritual experience;
we are spiritual beings having a human experience.'**
We are all spiritual beings,
It's part of our dna, regardless of how much or how little
we are in touch with that spiritual part of ourselves.
We are spiritual beings, and our spiritual dna needs to be fed.

This issue of 'spiritual not religious' is really important,
because if we as a church aren't meeting the spiritual needs,
what's our purpose? What are we here for?
This is something to which we need to pay attention.
I don't think we need to start some new program.
I think the answer is for us to go back to our roots
- to go back to the teachings of Jesus

- to go back to the experience of the early church
-and to be open to the wisdom of other traditions.
I think that's the way forward.
And our gospel this morning can help us with that.

If you're like me, you've probably thought that
this issue of 'spiritual; not religious' is a recent phenomena.
But I think our gospel story shows us that the issue goes back 2000 years.
We have Jesus, who is a religious leader
and we have Nicodemus who is a religious leader.
Nicodemus is a pharisee, a teacher of the law, the establishment, the authority.
Jesus himself refers to Nicodemus as a teacher of Israel.
They are both religious leaders of the same religion,
but they have different understandings of the spirituality of that religion.

For Nicodemus, as a teacher of the law, Judaism is centered in the Temple.
The Temple in Jerusalem is the holiest place on earth;
it's where God is present.
The presence of God **is always** in the Temple.
And even if you go to Jerusalem today you'll see signs about that.
God is here in this place.
A theology of place.

Our passage this morning comes from chapter 3 of John's gospel.
Nicodemus says to Jesus they've seen the **signs** Jesus has done.
We're all familiar with the first sign in John's gospel,
where Jesus turns water into wine at that wedding in Cana.
The second sign in John's gospel immediately precedes this morning's passage.
It's where Jesus goes into the Temple and creates havoc:
driving the sheep and cattle out of the Temple
turning over the money changers tables
ordering the dove keepers to leave
and saying - 'Destroy this Temple, and in 3 days I will raise it up.'

Two diametrically opposed understandings of the spirituality of their religion.
For Nicodemus, the presence of God is found in this physical place.
For Jesus, the presence of God is found in community, in table fellowship,
in love of neighbour.

I think this is a cautionary tale for us as Anglicans.
We need to make sure we don't make idols of our churches.
We need to not succumb to 'God is only in this place.'

Nicodemus is the establishment,
but he's seen that something's going on with Jesus.
He recognizes Jesus as someone who's come from God.

But how does Jesus fit with Nicodemus' understanding of religion?
How does Jesus fit with his understanding of the Law?
How does Jesus fit with his understanding of God?
Nicodemus doesn't understand.
He knows something's going on, but he's unclear.
So he comes to Jesus at night.
Coming at night is more a type of time; than a point in time.
Nicodemus is in the dark --
we can't see clearly in the dark -
there's mystery, there's misunderstanding
in the dark.

And so Nicodemus comes to Jesus by night.
I've heard people criticize Nicodemus
because he didn't have the courage
to come by day to see Jesus.
But the important thing is that he came.
He had questions and so he came.
And he had an openness to new understandings,
even though we may not see that in this passage.
But at the end of John's gospel,
after Jesus has been killed on that cross
Nicodemus is there, bringing a 100 lbs of myrrh and aloes
for Jesus' burial cloths.

Too often with established religions
we're closed to new understandings.
Too often, we have a limited view.
We have our own understanding of God
and aren't open to other people's understandings.
It's like we have this revelation,
and we don't acknowledge that God reveals God's self
in other ways and other understandings.
We need to remember that
we don't have the corner on God.
We need to remember that
we don't have the corner on Jesus.

Imagine what this country would have been like
if, when the European settlers came,
they came with the understanding that
they could learn something from the
First Nations peoples that were here?

God so loved the world that he gave his only son.
We heard that verse again this morning.

Think about that word **world**.

It doesn't mean just Anglicans or Christians or white people or even just people.

The word **world** means animals and trees and insects.

The word **world** means the earth and all of her creatures and all of her people.

That's who God so loves.

Jesus declares that to Nicodemus

And Jesus declares that to us.

God loves and gives life to the world.

Bishop Andrew Asbil has designated this Sunday Refugee Sunday.

He writes:

I am designating Trinity Sunday, May 30, as Refugee Sunday in our Diocese.

As it is also the first Sunday after Pentecost,

that time when the early Church first awakened to its calling

to be a place of welcome for all nations,

we can be reminded of how our welcome

transforms the world...

When the Syrian refugee crisis first captured the Canadian consciousness in 2015,

our Diocese was quick to step up,

with 80 parishes undertaking refugee sponsorships

between October 2015 and May 2017.

Those sponsored refugees have put down roots in Canada

– working, studying, starting businesses and building our communities.

We can be proud of our efforts to support these new Canadians.

Yet the need has not passed – indeed, it is greater than ever.

This Refugee Sunday, I invite you and your parish

to take the time to reflect on our call to welcome the stranger.

How can you be part of this life-changing ministry?"

We are witnessing the highest levels of human displacement in history.

According to the UN High Commission on Refugees,

by mid-2020 there were 80 million forcibly displaced people worldwide

– just over 1% of the world's population.

26.3 million of these are refugees,

and about half of these are under the age of 18.

Welcoming the stranger is an integral part of our Christian faith.

In the Old Testament, the people of Israel are frequently reminded

of the obligation to care for those who are strangers or foreigners,

because of their own history as foreigners in the land of Egypt.

Jesus, and his family fled from Bethlehem to Egypt

to escape persecution by Herod.

Jesus says to his disciples and to us

“I was a stranger, and you welcomed me.”

Working to take steps to live out our mission in this way
can deepen our faith, and bring parishes together.

Working to take steps in this way can show the wider community
that Christianity **is relevant** today.

We need to welcome the stranger.

We need to lobby on their behalf.

And we need to be open to learning from them.

We need humility as an established church.

Early in this pandemic, in the first weeks of March 2020
we were still allowed to gather for worship
but we weren't allowed to shake hands or share the common cup.

I remember standing at the door of St. John's Peterborough
greeting parishioners as they left after the service.

We couldn't shake hands as we normally would do,
but I found myself instinctively offering the Hindi greeting
Namaste -folding my hands together and bowing to them.

Namaste means -- 'that which is of the one in me
greeted that which is of the one in you.'

Wisdom we can learn from another tradition.

This whole gospel is talking about rebirth and new birth.

We know we need this.

We know we're not meeting the spiritual needs
of the vast majority of the population.

The church is in a time of transition.

We know we need to change

but we're not quite sure how.

Like Nicodemus, we're in the dark.

Transition is painful

Transition hurts.

But we go through transition and something wonderful is born.

The question is -- do we have the courage
to go through with this birth?

Are we willing to let go of the past
and be born into something new and more wonderful
than we can ask or imagine?

Are we prepared to allow that wind of God to blow
in and around and through us
and build this kingdom of God we are called to be?

Amen.

