

**3.1.26 Sermon**  
**St. John's Tappahannock**  
**Rev. Nanette Woodworth**  
**John 3:1-17**

Wendell Berry, from This Day, Sabbath Poems 1979-2012 1

XII

Learn by little the desire for all things  
Which perhaps is not desire at all  
But undying love, which perhaps  
Is not love at all, but gratitude  
For the being of all things  
which perhaps is not gratitude at all  
But the maker's joy in what is made  
The joy in which we come to rest

These are the themes we read in the poem:

*Desire,*  
*Love,*  
*Gratitude,*  
*Joy.*

I am reminded of Ukrainian nesting dolls, which can represent the many levels of meaning of a poem (in this case – we could say the same of a painting or a song, etc.)

(show an actual nesting doll)

We go from an outward meaning, the idea that comes to mind first, and then we keep looking, or listening, or perceiving, and discover more layers of meaning, gradually coming to some pure thought.

In the poem which we read by Wendell Berry, from our Lenten reading, and which is offered to complement today's lectionary in which we read about Nicodemus, and the famous scripture we see often on large posters at football games, John 3:16 - we see a relationship in the making.

Nicodemus starts with the desire to understand this man of God, Jesus, because he recognizes that Jesus' actions come from a divine source. This leads to Jesus saying, "God loved the world so much that..."

Everything that came into being has its source in divine Love.  
Once in relationship with Christ we gradually grow in deep gratitude for his unconditional love for us.  
And this gives us great joy.

We cannot but hear the echo of what Jesus said in his last address to his disciples at the Last Supper, "These things I have spoken to you, that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be full". (John 10:10) This promise signifies that true, abiding joy comes from a relationship with Him, not from temporary circumstances.

*In the last stanza of another poem by Wendell Berry*

*Here is what has always been  
Here is what will always be  
Even in me,  
The Maker of all this  
Returns in rest, even  
In the slightest of His works,  
A yellow leaf slowly  
falling, and is pleased. 2*

Like a yellow leaf drifting down from a tree, lit up by the morning sun, and in its drifting and twirling you see the beauty of it, a glimpse of heaven on earth. It makes joy spring up within you, washing away all the anxieties of the day, and you know God is nigh.

This beauty of God's presence in all things is always available to us. It is for everyone.

The whole world, all people, all of creation.

## **Nicodemus**

So let's talk about Nicodemus. Why did he come by night? Practical reason: He is Pharisee, a temple leader, who would endanger his reputation if he were seen with Jesus, who is the teacher who has done miracles and is highly respected as a divine healer and not of the Jewish leadership although born into the Jewish faith. On a symbolic level, he is in the dark. He is drawn to Jesus, drawn to his Light.

Nicodemus simply states that he knows Jesus must be from God because of the signs – “So could you be the Messiah?” seems to be the unstated question.

But Jesus cuts to the message that Nicodemus needs: “Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above.”

To be born again. A brand new start.

Rev'd Sarah Irwin of the Creative Writing and Public Theology Doctor of Ministry program at Pittsburgh Theological Seminary spells it out. “For Jesus, being born from above means being born of the Spirit, claimed by the Holy One, the Lord. Being born from above is about releasing the assumptions of the world, receiving eyes to see and ears to hear a reality bigger than what's right in front of you. Born from above, you see the longing of God for liberation and healing for all people. Born from above, you see how the categories and judgments of the world have no ultimate sway. Born from above, you are changed and given the gift of God's true freedom.”

In the Gospel of John, belief in Jesus Christ simply means having a relationship with Jesus Christ. Jesus came—and comes to us still—to make visible God's love and forgiveness. This truth comes through in story after story. Like the pattern we began with of Desire, Love, Gratitude, Joy...it does not happen all at once but over a lifetime. Over and over again, in ways particular to our own circumstances.

So was Nicodemus converted? All we know is what scripture tells us.

After meeting Jesus, Nicodemus, a Pharisee and member of the Sanhedrin, perhaps remained in his public role but privately had deep respect for Jesus. What we do know is that he defended Jesus before the Sanhedrin (John 7:50-51). When the Pharisees and chief priests wanted to arrest Jesus, Nicodemus intervened by asking, "Does our law judge a man without first giving him a hearing and learning what he does?".

After the crucifixion, Nicodemus brought a mixture of myrrh and aloes, weighing about 100 pounds, to help Joseph of Arimathea to prepare Jesus's body for burial. They wrapped him in strips of linen with spices in accordance with Jewish custom. Then they took Jesus' body to a nearby garden where there was a new tomb and they laid him there (John 19:39-42). This was a significant act of devotion and sacrifice .

### **John 3:16-17**

So Jesus last words to Nicodemus the night he came to visit Him were:

“For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.”

As was said earlier, Jesus knew what Nicodemus had in his heart, and he tells him in this most famous Biblical verse that he is Emmanuel, God with us, as foretold in the Hebrew scriptures (Isaiah 7:14)

One of the most useful phrases which I first heard in the Episcopal Church was this idea that we can hold two conflicting ideas in tension – this is a both/and situation. I was a member of the Community of Julian at St. Andrew's Episcopal Church in Trenton, NJ. At the time I was married, a young mother, a teacher and commuting to NYC twice a week attending seminary at Union Theological Seminary.

I remember when I was in high school, and some of my best friends included Jewish youth. All of us in “my crowd” either attended the Protestant churches, the Catholic church or the Jewish temple. We never talked about it, but we all knew that we were of different faith traditions, and that we could still be friends. I remember thinking one day in 11<sup>th</sup> grade social studies, when we were studying comparative religions, and looking around the classroom, and saying to myself, are these folks who are not Christian really going to hell? They are good people who were brought up in a family with traditions that go back centuries, just like mine, and how is that fair? I just knew there was something wrong with this picture.

Then when my sister married Peter, and Jewish man who was also the high school valedictorian and went to Harvard Law School, and a heck of a nice guy with a great sense of humor, who just walked the Camino at age 78...was he going to hell? All of the people I am speaking of are good people who are in honorable professions, with grown children in honorable professions and good upstanding citizens. So doesn't God love all good people enough to include them in eternal life since they are doing what is outlined in scripture, but not under the same name? Isn't the end product of our faith in fact the action that grows out of our prayer? So you see where I am going with this. Without knowing it, I began to have a both/and understanding of this scriptural verse.

The fact is, John 3:16 excludes, and John 3:17 includes. I would like to lean into John 3:17 by looking at a beautiful image from Julianna of Norwich's book, the Revelations of Divine Love. When 15<sup>th</sup> c. Julianna was 13 years old or so, she prayed that one day she would understand Christ's physical suffering on the cross and its meaning. At age 30, she had a near death experience and in her feverish illness she experienced several visions which were written down by her scribe and became her book. She has a holy day in our Episcopal calendar (Feb. 13<sup>th</sup>), as the medieval English mystic and anchoress whose Revelations of Divine Love is the earliest surviving book written in English by a woman.

So this is a passage from Julianna's Revelations of Divine Love. When I first read it, I felt so validated because here was a holy mystic who had the same questions. And Jesus response was simply, “All shall be well, all manner of things shall be well.” Let's hear what she said.

## **Julianna's Wisdom**

“There is a deed that the Blessed Trinity shall do on the last day according to what I saw. When and how the deed shall be accomplished is and shall remain unknown to all creatures beneath Christ until the day that it is done. What our Lord wills that we know through His goodness and love is that the deed will be done. His power and wisdom, by the same love, will conceal and hide from us what the deed will be and how it shall be done. The reason He wills that we know that the deed will be done is because He wants us to be more at ease in soul and more peaceful in love and to stop looking at all the tempests that could keep us from truly rejoicing in him.

This great deed is the one ordained by God from eternity, treasured and hidden in his blessed breast, and only known to himself. By this deed he shall make all things well. Just as the Blessed Trinity made all things from nothing, so the same Blessed Trinity will make well all that is not well.

At this sight I wonder greatly. I looked at our faith, marveling thus. Our faith is grounded in God's Word, and it is part of our faith that we believe that God's Word shall be saved in all things. But one point of our faith is that many creatures shall be damned, like the angels who fell from heaven because of their pride and are now devils, humans too, who die outside the faith of the holy Church. That is to say, heathens and men who are baptized Christians yet live unChristian lives and so die outside of charity, shall all likewise be damned to hell forever, as Holy Church teaches us to believe. Considering all this, it seems to me impossible that all manner of things should be well, as our Lord had showed me at this time.

Concerning all this I had no other answer in any showing from our Lord. But thus what is impossible to you is not impossible to me. I shall save my word in all things, and I shall make all things well. Thus I was taught by the grace Of God that I should steadfastly hold myself in the faith as I had before I understood it and that I should seriously believe that all manner of things would be well as our Lord at the same time showed me. (chap. 32, p. 129 -131) **3**

## **Second Reading from Julianna**

And part of how all this shall be well was made by Jesus' death on the cross for all the world, as it says in John 3:17.

So I'm going to read a related chapter from Julianna's Revelations of Divine Love, since it is Lent and we are all walking towards the cross together. This particular vision is part of the answer to Julianna's prayer to understand the suffering of Jesus on the cross and its meaning.

And I just want you to know that there are some visceral images. "After this looking at the body bleeding as severely as it had at the scourging, I saw the following. The fair skin was broken all over the sweet body, with very deep cuts into the tender flesh by sharp blows. The hot blood ran out so abundantly that neither skin nor wound could be seen, as if all the body were blood. But then the blood came to where it should have fallen down from the body, and it vanished. Notwithstanding, the bleeding continued awhile until it could be observed with attention. The bleeding was so abundant, as I saw it, that I thought it had been actually happening that way in nature and substance at that time. It would have filled the entire room with blood and spilled over on all sides. And then it came to my mind that God has made the waters plentiful on earth for our service and bodily ease because of the tender love He has for us. But it pleases Him even more when we accept simply His blessed blood. To cleanse ourselves from sin. For there is no liquid made that gives him more pleasure to give us, and it is as precious as it is, as it is plentiful by virtue of the blessed Godhead. It is of our own kind, and most blissfully flows over us by virtue of His precious love, as truly as the most valuable blood of our Lord Jesus Christ is most precious, so truly is it plentiful. Behold and see the virtue of the precious plenty of his blood, so very valuable. It descended down into hell, and breaking their bonds, delivered all those there who belonged to the court of heaven. The precious plenty of His most highly valued blood overflows the entire earth and. It's ready to wash clean from sin. All creatures who are, have been, and shall be of good will. The precious plenty of His most valuable blood ascends into heaven in the blessed body of our Lord Jesus Christ. It is there in Him, bleeding, praying for us to the Father, and it shall be. As long as there is need, it flows in all of heaven, forever enjoying the salvation of all humankind who are there, and it shall fill up those who are lacking [of those who are to be saved]. (chap. 12, p.102-103) 4

**In conclusion**

Our God created an entire universe, and our planet earth is characterized by diversity. There are not only diverse plants and animals, within each species there is much diversity. I heard one day on National Public Radio that there are 248 variations of blueberries in England! God loves diversity. So why would the only aspect of life on earth that is not diverse be humanities' religions? It just does not make sense.

John 3:16 and John 3:17 are a perfect example to two contradictory statements that we must hold together as a both/and truth.

I just think there are some things that come under a great quote for unanswerable questions: "It's a mystery". Christian mystery refers to truths that, while revealed, still surpass full human comprehension, such as the nature of God, the Incarnation, the Trinity and the sacraments. There is no problem in admitting that there are some things only God knows, and until the next life, we will not be given to understand. Thank goodness for this Biblical expression for it gives us patience until the day we know all there is to know. For now we see through a glass, darkly; but then face to face: now we know in part; but then shall we know even as also we are known. (1 Cor. 13:12)

Three expressions that have helped my life through conflicted times, whether personal or collective, and to live into the big questions - and are the inner levels of another example of "Ukrainian nesting dolls thinking" that we began with:

1. *This is a both/and situation.*
2. *All shall be well, all manner of things will be well.*
3. *It's a mystery.*

In closing, I think we are still in good standing with our Maker if we try our best to follow the Shema Prayer. Shema is Hebrew for *Listen. So hear this O Israel,*  
<sup>5</sup>*Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength.* <sup>6</sup>*Keep these words that I am commanding you today in your heart.*  
<sup>8</sup>*Bind them as a sign on your hand, fix them as an emblem on your forehead,* <sup>9</sup>*and write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates. (Deut. 6:5-6,8-9)*  
*Verse 9 inspired the use of the Mezuzah, an artful prayer container that many Jewish families have on their front doors, which contains the Shema, and reminds*

*us to Love God, love our neighbors as God loves us, and practice forgiveness as we are forgiven.*

*Surely, the Lord shall watch over your going out and your coming in, from this time forth for evermore. Psalm 121:8*

Thanks be to God.

**Amen**

**Resources:**

1. Berry, Wendell; This Day – Sabbath Poems 1979-2012; Counterpoint Press;2013;p. 312
2. Ibid.
3. Juliana of Norwich; Revelations of Divine Love; Image Books; 1977; p, 129-131
4. Ibid.; p. 102-103

