

Philippians 2:5-11

John 3:1-17

March 8, 2020

Second Sunday of Lent

Preached by Philip Gladden at the Wallace Presbyterian Church, Wallace, North Carolina

BELIEVING IS SEEING

Let us pray: Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

No, it's not a mistake that I missed when I proofread the bulletin on Thursday. Today's sermon title really is "Believing Is Seeing," and not "Seeing Is Believing." If that sounds strange and counter-intuitive to you, then you're already on your way to grasping the meaning of this intriguing dialogue between Rabbi Jesus and Pharisee Nicodemus.

Here's an interesting story to make us think more deeply about what Jesus is talking about with Nicodemus. Will Campbell, who died in 2013, was a Baptist minister, author, lecturer, and Southern white supporter of African-American civil rights. You may have read his most well-known autobiographical book, *Brother to a Dragonfly*.

Retired United Methodist Bishop Kenneth Carder was a friend of Will Campbell. In 2011, Bishop Carder preached a sermon to seminary students at Duke Divinity School. In his sermon, Bishop Carder told the following story: "My friend Will Campbell, the iconoclastic Baptist preacher, tells a story about when his daughter Bonnie asked him to baptize her two-year-old son. Will and his family are Baptists, and since Baptists don't baptize infants, Will had a problem. Not wanting to create conflict with his father, who for sixty years had been a Baptist deacon, Will felt the need to consult him. So he went to his father and asked, 'Daddy, do you believe in infant baptism?' His dad responded, 'Believe in it? Why, son, I've actually seen it!'"

Bishop Carder went on to say, "I called Will last night and told him I was going to use him in a sermon this morning. He said, 'Well, you could do worse.' Recalling that story, I said, 'Could you tell me any more about it?' He said, 'When I went to my father with a question, I always got more than bargained for. I just wanted a 'yes' or 'no' answer from my daddy. Instead, he gave me a paradox about seeing and believing." That paradox, Bishop Carder says, is this: "So he has seen infant baptism. Does that mean he believes it? Or does believing in it enable him to see it?"¹

In the night shadows, Nicodemus got more than he bargained for when he went to see Jesus. The Pharisee never really gets the chance to ask the question or make the request of Jesus that is implied in his opening statement: "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." If Jesus had not cut Nicodemus off at that point, the Pharisee

might very well have gone on to say something like, “Jesus, do some more of these signs so that we might see and believe.” After all, as they say, “seeing is believing.”

But, as is so often the case in the gospels when people approach Jesus with a demand or a challenge or a trick question, Jesus turns the tables on Nicodemus. If you skip ahead a few verses in the story, Jesus answers Nicodemus’ implied request — “Show us some more signs.” Jesus says, “We speak of what we know and testify to what we have seen; yet you do not receive our testimony. If I have told you about earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you about heavenly things?” (John 3:11-12)

These verses from John 3 contain what is probably the most famous Bible verse in the New Testament — John 3:16: “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.” The second half of that famous verse is something of a positive re-statement of what Jesus has already told Nicodemus earlier: “I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born again.” In other words, contrary to our typical “I’ll believe it when I see it” approach to life, Jesus offers Nicodemus and us an entirely new perspective on life and our relationship with God: “You’ll see it when you believe it!”

That invitation was hard for Nicodemus to wrap his head around — “How can these things be?” (John 3:9). To this day, it’s just as hard for us to imagine such a different way of knowing and seeing. You may be a native Tar Heel or a recent transplant, but in many ways, most of us operate like folks from Missouri, the “Show-Me State.” There are two or three stories about how Missouri got its nickname, but the most widely known concerns U.S. Congressman Willard Duncan Vandiver. He served in the U.S. House of Representatives from 1897-1903. As a member of the House Committee on Naval Affairs, Congressman Vandiver attended a banquet in Philadelphia. In his speech, he said, “I come from a state that raises corn and cotton and cockleburs and Democrats, and frothy eloquence neither convinces nor satisfies me. I am from Missouri. You have go to show me.” It’s unknown if Congressman Vandiver came up with the “show me” phrase, but his speech made the nickname well known.²

The temptation before Jesus is basically the same one he faced in the wilderness — to use his powers and deeds to razzle-dazzle people so they will believe in him. It’s the same temptation Jesus faced at the end of his life, as he hung on the cross and was mocked by the chief priests and scribes — “He saved others; he cannot save himself. Let the Messiah, the King of Israel, come down from the cross now, so that we may see and believe.” (Mark 15:32)

“That we may see and believe . . .” Isn’t that how we always want it to be? Jesus says, “Follow me,” and we say, “OK, Jesus, but first, tell us what we’re going to be doing, how we’re going to do it, what the risks are, what I’ll have to give up, etc., etc., etc.” Jesus says, “Believe in me . . . put your trust in me,” and we say, “OK, Jesus, but first,

give us a little more evidence that you are who you say you are and that you can do what you say you can do.” Jesus says, “Believe in me and you will see what I’m talking about,” and we say, along with Nicodemus, “How can these things be?”

A couple of years ago, I had the privilege of being a member of the cast of the Living Last Supper at the Wallace United Methodist Church on Maundy Thursday. They graciously invited me to reprise my role this year, but I had to decline because of my shoulder surgery. I had the honor of portraying Thomas (who was called Didymus or The Twin), so I have some sympathy for this biblical character. For 2,000 years, Thomas has been saddled with the unfortunate nickname of “Doubting Thomas,” even though he ultimately made the profound confession of faith, “My Lord and my God!” (John 20:28)

Thomas’ story later in the gospel of John is the quintessential “show me” story. You may remember that Thomas wasn’t with the other disciples when the risen Jesus appeared to them on Easter evening. When the disciples told Thomas, “We have seen the Lord,” he said to them, “Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe.” Thomas said, “I’ll believe it when I see it — show me!”

A week later, Jesus did just that, when he offered his nail scarred hands to Thomas and said, “Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe.” Then Jesus said to Thomas what he talked about with Nicodemus during his night visit: “Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.” (John 20:29)

While John 3:16 may be the most familiar verse in the New Testament, there is another verse in this story about Nicodemus’ night visit that has gotten a lot of attention over the years. After Nicodemus complimented Jesus on the signs he had done, Jesus said, “I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above.” That’s the New Revised Standard Version translation, and a good translation at that. Maybe you’re more familiar with the phrase “without being born again.” That’s a good translation, also, except it has been misused over the years as a litmus test of a true faith. In some Christian traditions, unless you can cite a specific date, time, and place when you were “born again,” your Christian faith is suspect or, at least, not quite as legitimate.

However, Jesus is talking about a whole new perspective on life and God and our relationship with God. A faith and life “born from above” is not a life of “seeing is believing” but a life of “believing is seeing.” A faith and life “born from above” is not a life based on simply knowing the facts and the doctrines and the history and even the right Bible passages. Rather, it is a life of “believing is seeing.”

Our opening hymn this morning — “Open the Eyes of My Heart” — was written by Paul Baloche, who spontaneously sang it as a prayer while leading worship one day. Because the prayer was completely unplanned, if the service had not been recorded that day, we wouldn’t have the song to sing in worship today. In the companion volume to our hymnal *Glory to God*, we read, “That prayer of the moment has found a sympathetic response from many people who understand this song as a prayer for an authentic and transformative encounter with God. . . this prayer does not try to bring God down to human level. Instead, it asks for an experience like Isaiah’s, being present to God ‘shining in the light of your glory.’ Like a light casting a shadow, this text implies a subtext. The intense prayer for direct apprehension of God is simultaneously expressing dissatisfaction with secondhand reports of other people’s encounters with God.”³

About halfway through John’s gospel, we read the story about the death of Jesus’ friend Lazarus in Bethany. By the time Jesus arrives to console Lazarus’ sisters Mary and Martha, Lazarus has already been dead and in the tomb for four days. When Jesus told the people to take away the stone from Lazarus’ tomb, Martha (the sister of the dead man) reacted just as you and I would have reacted, based on the realities of this nitty-gritty life: “Lord, already there is a stench because he has been dead four days.” (John 11:39) The King James Version of the Bible is a bit more graphic: “Lord, by this time he stinketh: for he hath been dead four days.”

Do you remember what Jesus said to Martha, the sister of the dead man? Contrary to what Martha completely and rationally expected, Jesus said, “Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?” (John 11:40) And she did, when her brother walked out of the tomb!

Like Nicodemus, like Thomas, even like the chief priests and scribes, we want to see before we’ll believe. Which, when you get right down to it, is really a matter of control on our part. If we can gather enough information up front about what is expected of us as followers of Jesus, then we can count the cost and decide whether or not we really want to follow Jesus. If Jesus can show us enough evidence to convince us to follow him, then maybe we’ll be more comfortable in our discipleship.

But Jesus has this irritating habit of not performing signs on demand so that people will believe in him. Instead, he issues invitations — “Come and see. Follow me. Take up your cross. Believe in me. Be born again. Be born from above. Walk in the light. Trust in God who loved the world so much that he sent his only Son.” That’s the message of this Season of Lent. That’s the invitation from Jesus. That’s the call of faith. That’s the offer of new life, a life born from above — “Believe and you will see.”

At the end of his sermon to those seminary students, Bishop Carder said, “John reveals the whole secret of the gospel, the meaning of all the signs and wonders: ‘For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should

not perish but have everlasting life. God sent the Son into the world not to condemn the world (even Nicodemus) but that the world through him might be saved.”

Bishop Carder ended his sermon with these words: “Believe that, and you’ll see. Believe that — I mean really believe it — bet your life on it, and you will see the signs in the midst of your own and the world’s suffering, loss of control, and even death. And you will be born . . . anew from above.

“Do you believe in the new birth?

“Believe it? Why, I’ve actually seen it.”⁴

Let us pray: Holy and loving God, open our minds that we may perceive your kingdom. Lift up our eyes to where the cross of Christ stands for our healing, so we may believe, and in believing not die but have eternal life; through him who in your love for us you sent into the world, Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

NOTES

¹Kenneth L. Carder, “Seeing, believing and the new birth from above,” Monday, July 4, 2011 at www.faithandleadership.com.

²Missouri History, “Why Is Missouri Called the ‘Show-Me’ State?” from the *Official Manual of the State of Missouri, 1979-1980*, p. 1486 and found at www.sos.mo.gov.

³Carl P. Daw, Jr., *Glory to God: A Companion*, “Open the Eyes of My Heart,” (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2016), p. 457.

⁴Kenneth L. Carder.