

Second Sunday in Lent Year A: 7 / 8 March 2020

St. James' Episcopal Church, Clinton NY

The Reverend Kathy Major

"...while we draw lines, God erases. Where we exclude, God includes. Where we condemn, God loves. Where we push people away, God embraces. Where we judge, God forgives."

Genesis 12: 1-4a

Romans 4: 1-5, 13-17

John 3: 1-17

Psalm 121

I don't know about you, but with the spread of the Corona virus and the resulting fluctuation of the markets, the incomplete advice on what we should be doing, and the fact that everywhere I've looked they're sold out of hand sanitizer, my anxiety level seesaws between 'Nothing to see here' and 'We're all gonna die!' I'm sure the truth is somewhere in between, but the anxiety is high... What worries me most is how we will all react to each other as the virus spreads. We will literally need to put up walls between the healthy and the sick in order to curtail the spread of the disease. But putting up walls is almost always antithetical to what God is all about.

I have a cartoon posted to my Facebook page (done by a cartoonist called 'Naked Pastor') – it shows a group of people using enormous pencils to draw a barrier around themselves –

large penciled squares – and a Christ figure, with a crown of thorns, also with an enormous pencil. But instead of drawing lines, Jesus has flipped his pencil upside down and is using the enormous eraser to get rid of the lines, the barriers between people.

Jesus says to Nicodemus, "Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above."

Growing up in the Baptist Church, that verse was meant as an indicator of who belonged and who did not belong to God. We relied very heavily on the words Jesus said to Nicodemus about being 'born again,' the King James version of our being 'born from above.' You MUST be born again, Jesus says – which in our church language meant that you must have asked Jesus into your life, you must have had a conversion experience and then been baptized. Then, and only then, it seemed, were you part of the world that God loved so much.

We drew lines about who was in the kingdom and who was outside. Truth to tell, it's not just the Baptists who draw lines. Most religious folk draw lines – we all just vary in the places where those lines get drawn. Episcopalians are pretty tolerant, but we still draw lines.

In that, we're all pretty much like Nicodemus. He was a Pharisee, which meant that he belonged to a denomination of Judaism that studied the Law and worked hard to put it into practice. Religious historians believe that it was the Pharisees, and their understanding of the Law, of Torah, that helped preserve Judaism after the fall of Jerusalem in 70 CE and the

destruction of the Temple. It was the Pharisees who helped figure out what it meant to worship God without Temple sacrifices and high holy days centered in Jerusalem. The Pharisees were the good church people of their day. They worked hard to understand the laws God expected the people to keep and they did their best to keep them and make sure that everyone else kept them, too. It's what we'd like to do – make sure everyone lives according to the rules that we ourselves live by. Wouldn't the world be a better place if everyone just agreed with us on right and wrong???

Except. Except that while we draw lines, God erases. Where we exclude, God includes. Where we condemn, God loves. Where we push people away, God embraces. Where we judge, God forgives.

The reason Nicodemus came to meet with Jesus is that he wanted to understand what God was up to in the life of Jesus. And Jesus did not make it easy for him. Nicodemus would have expected Messiah to work among and through the educated, religious men of the Temple – the Pharisees and Sadducees and Scribes. And Nicodemus would have expected Jesus to hold those righteous folk up as examples of godly living to the masses who were too sinful or uneducated to know what God expected.

Instead, Jesus chose disciples from the uneducated masses, from regular folk, from known sinners (Matthew was a tax-collector, after all). Jesus did not behave as the Pharisees thought he should behave. So Nicodemus goes to question Jesus and Jesus responds with

words about the wind, the breath of God blowing wherever it wants, about the need we have to be born from heaven, born of that wild wind that blows from God's heart.

God tends to surprise – that's the last principle in a book called '*The Origins of Christian Morality*,' by Wayne Meeks and it traces the early years of the church and how we struggled to figure out what God was doing and what God wanted us to do. God tends to surprise, Meeks says... Just when we think we understand who God is and what God wants, the wind blows us someplace else. Just when we think we know where God wants the line drawn, we see Jesus erasing the lines, tearing down the walls that divide us and 'those people,' whomever 'they' might be.

God tears down walls. God erases lines. God loves us all. God wants us to love each other. We won't always agree on everything. We'll disagree on what color the rug ought to be, or what color to paint the walls or what music to sing or where our money ought to be spent. But even in our disagreements, we need to remember to love. We can disagree on whether to wear masks or not, when to set aside a passing of the peace or to discontinue serving the wine during the Eucharist. Even in our disagreements, we need to remember to love.

Inside these walls, at the least, there is no 'us' vs 'them' – there is only 'us.' It's also true outside these walls – God only sees 'us.' If we are not kind and loving to each other inside these walls – how will the world in here or out there ever see the love of God in us? And if we are not kind and loving to others outside the walls – how will the world ever know God loves them?

For God so loved the world, Jesus said to Nicodemus... The world will only know about God's love because of how we live our lives. The world will only know about God's love as we live in love with everyone around us.

The Christian life is not an easy one to live – we draw lines where God wants us to erase them. We are the salt of the earth, the light of the world. Amen.