

"Civil Intrusions"
John 3:1-17
Rev. Gretchen Lord Anderson
First Presbyterian Church, Lodi, WI
June 3, 2010

We could be singing "The Eyes of Texas are Upon You," but that wouldn't begin to cover it. The eyes of the entire nation are upon Wisconsin this week as we head to the polls on Tuesday to vote on whether Scott Walker shall continue as governor or if Tom Barrett will replace him. We have come to this point in time through rancor, anger, bitterness and that four-letter-word that leaves a bitter taste in my mouth: hate. People have been physically (and in some cases figuratively) pushed, shoved and spat upon. Children who are too young to make their own decisions have been used by various and sundry proponents of both candidates to carry placards and wear signs defending or promoting this candidate or that platform. Neighbors are finding themselves hardly speaking to one another as they try to one-up each other by placing the larger campaign sign for their candidate or against the neighbor's. Letters to the editor – well, it amazes me about letters to the editor...yes, I read them with some interest after, that is, I look to see if I know the author. And I'm curious about the derisive tone of so many people – I guess I have to give them credit for being willing to sign their names to these pieces, but what surprises me is that they apparently feel that they are such leaders, such examples to the rest of the community that blasting the opponent is something that will make the rest of us get in step with them and follow their logic.

This isn't unique to Wisconsin. It's going on all over the country. And it isn't unique to this election year. We have become increasingly uncivil to one another for many years now, taking only a few days or months out after the attack on the World Trade Center to act as though we are people who care about one another. It's like the formal unveiling this week of former President George W. Bush's portrait in the White House. The way Presidents Obama and Bush exchanged good humor and their wives embraced one another, you'd think they were the best of friends. Same thing happened when the portrait of President Bill Clinton was unveiled. He and Hillary and George and Laura just seemed to have let bygones be bygones and everything was hunky dory.

And that's nice. It's a nice thing to do: put on a display of niceties for a single public occasion. But it doesn't mean anything if it's just for show. If there's any meaning in it at all, it's that the people involved are even more superficial than any of us would like to think.

Now, whether you know it or not, this congregation has, for the past six years, been growing in our understanding of civility. We haven't called it that. We've talked and I've pushed and pushed till you haven't wanted to be pushed anymore about being hospitable to one another, about honoring each others' opinions on issues and on scripture. We have come to an understanding – at least most of the time – that this church needs to be a safe place where we can learn together and from one another and be able to express our opinions, understanding that not everyone else is going to agree with us, and also understanding that none of us has a corner on being right. And we are learning how to disagree while being respectful of one another. In Sunday School classes, in congregational gatherings, in committee meetings, we have laid our cards on the table regarding ordination of gays and lesbians, euthanasia, abortion, and the Constitution. You all have cussed and discussed current and past pastoral leadership. We have wrangled over music in worship, worship times, worship styles, and the color of carpet and roofing tiles. Sometimes we are more successful than other times in terms of how we conduct ourselves with one another in these conversations. Some of that has to do with wanting to get our own way. And I'll talk a little more about that next week, after the election, as we explore what it means to win and to lose (and, for what it's worth, I already have that sermon

in my head so the outcome of the election on Tuesday won't change anything about what I'm going to say unless the behavior of the electorate on election day or the days after demand my attention). And we have adopted a church policy based on scripture, that tells us how we are to address our differences with one another. Quoting the Old Testament Book of Proverbs, we are to go directly to our neighbor to settle our disagreements, not talk about them behind their backs (Proverbs 25:9,10). And quoting The Gospel According to Matthew, we are to try to work out our differences with one another and if that doesn't work, we are to bring in someone else from the church to mediate and if that doesn't work, we need to bring in more witnesses and, if necessary, the entire church (Matthew 18:15-17).

Some of you don't think that policy applies to you. And it doesn't stop us from getting disgusted with each other. And it doesn't make us better human beings to have a policy if we ignore it. But the leaders of the church and you as a congregation approved this policy, therefore acknowledging the need for it.

Now, Nicodemus is a Pharisee. And you and I know that the Pharisees – as we lump them together (as we would lump together and paint with a broad brush Democrats or Republicans or tea partiers or the “occupy Wall Street” folks) – the Pharisees were out to get Jesus. They were trying to trick him into saying anything that would incriminate him from either a religious or a civil standpoint. They didn't care who got rid of him as long as somebody did. So here we have this Pharisee, this leader of the Jews and a pooh-bah at the Temple, who, the scripture says, “came to Jesus by night.” Now, that oughta tell you something. He's alone. He has waited until nightfall when he is least likely to be seen by those with whom he associates (and probably those who call themselves disciples of Jesus as well) and he has come to talk, to ask questions – not in an accusatory fashion, not in a way designed to trick Jesus – but in a way that demonstrates that Nicodemus, while still being a Pharisee wanted to hear without anyone interrupting or accusing or yelling, what Jesus had to say about performing miracles. It doesn't say he was ready to sign up. It just tells us he wanted to hear what Jesus' take was on this. Then, of course, once Jesus starts talking, Nicodemus can't help but ask some follow-up questions – questions about being born again, about the Holy Spirit: stuff that Jesus says, “Nicodemus, you're a student of this stuff. Is it possible that you haven't thought about this particular take on this particular subject?”

There's no acrimony here. Jesus isn't shoving anything down Nicodemus's throat or vice versa. It is a civil conversation between two men schooled in scripture, exchanging thoughts and opinions.

What makes this conversation work is what author Parker Palmer calls “a heart that is broken open.” That is, he says, as opposed to a heart that is “broken apart.”

Now, hear this because it is an important observation on the very basis of civility and how we can reclaim civility in our religious and community conversations.

You and I cannot get through life without heart-breaking circumstances. Life can be hard and we get hurt – deeply hurt – by friends who seem to turn on us, by family who desert us, by bosses and supervisors, by personal loss of those we love. We get hurt in a myriad of ways. Sometimes hurt is deliberately inflicted upon us by others. Other times, it's not intentional, but the hurt, the broken heart is still very real. And which of us could not watch the events of 9-11-2001 without having our hearts break for the loss of human life, for the vulnerability of our country, for the devastation of living and workplaces. We even grieve when our particular candidates or platforms are not accepted by a majority of the voters. We grieve deeply and our hearts are broken.

But what Palmer contends is that it is how we handle our hurt, our broken hearts, that makes all of the difference. If our hearts are broken apart, “the result may be anger, depression, and disengagement.”¹

¹ Parker J. Palmer, *Healing the Heart of Democracy*, San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2011, p. 18

It's like those DirecTV ads – you know the ones: where you get frustrated with your cable TV company and that leads you to do something else which leads to something else? “When your cable’s on the fritz, you get frustrated. When you get frustrated, your daughter imitates you. When your daughter imitates you, she gets thrown out of school. When she gets thrown out of school, she meets undesirables. When she meets undesirables, she ties the knot with undesirables. And when she ties the knot with undesirables, you get a grandson with a dog collar. Don’t have a grandson with a dog collar. Get rid of cable and upgrade to DirecTV.”

When our hearts are broken apart, we get a domino effect like that: anger leading to depression, to disengagement or withdrawal from others, and, yes, even to violence, domestically and internationally.

But Parker says if we are deliberate about how we deal with our broken hearts, we can work at seeing that they are not broken apart, but broken open. And when our hearts are broken open, it doesn’t mean we won’t hurt, but rather than having our suffering turn to violence or even incivility, our suffering “can make us more compassionate and receptive, deepening our engagement with others and opening us to new life. The powers of the heart that transform personal anguish can also transform the way we do politics.”² Opening us to new life. And what was Nicodemus asking about being born again?

Abraham Lincoln believed that all of us have what he called the “better angels of our nature,”³ in other words, that all of us have something good inside of us. Theologian C.S. Lewis who became popular during WWII in England with his radio broadcasts designed to help people understand where God might be in the midst of repeated bombings of London and loss of life abroad, also believed that all people are born good, but that life comes to bear on that goodness and it is too often lost. Palmer writes in his book that when our hearts are broken open – rather than apart, “the better angels of our nature” prevail and “the broken-open heart is a source of power as well as compassion – the power to bring down whatever diminishes us and raise up whatever serves us well. We can access and deploy that power by doing what every great social movement has done: *put time, skill, and energy into the education and mobilization of the powers of the heart.* As history consistently demonstrates, heart talk can yield actions just as practical as those driven by conventional forms of power.”⁴

It was *heart talk* that caused Nicodemus to have second thoughts about Jesus and what he was about. The scripture doesn’t tell us that Nicodemus had a sudden transformation, or that he was even converted to Jesus’ way of thinking. My guess is that Nicodemus had to go think about it. Had to go pray about it. And my guess is also that Jesus prayed about Nicodemus too. What we do know is that Nicodemus does speak up on Jesus’ behalf as told in the Gospel of John, and it is Nicodemus who, with Joseph of Arimathea, claims the dead body of Jesus from the cross and takes it to the tomb to be buried.

We do not know if Nicodemus became a Christian. We do know that somehow, through the power of the Trinity, God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit, Nicodemus’ heart was broken open in a way that allowed him to feel and demonstrate compassion and opening him to new life, to being born from above.

Learning to handle heartbreak so that our hearts fall open rather than apart is going to take some effort, a lot of practice. We can start working on that right now because I’ll bet most of us in this room are experiencing some kind of broken-heartedness. And after the election on Tuesday, there will doubtless be more broken-heartedness.

Let us be willing to have the power of the Trinity work through our broken hearts in order to reach our minds that we can be deliberate in our respectful and civil dealings with one another whether we find ourselves in the religious or the political sphere of life. Civility breeds

² Palmer, p. 20

³ Palmer, p. 20

⁴ Palmer, pp. 23-24

understanding. And understanding promotes love, even if we don't like each other very much. We must be born from above so that our hearts are broken open to see Christ in unexpected ways and unexpected people.

For the time being (this discussion will continue next week), Amen.