

**Trinity Sunday – Year B – June 7, 2009**  
**Isaiah 6:1-8; Psalm 29; Romans 8:12-17; John 3:1-17**  
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Ricky is a teenage drug dealer, who moves through life practically attached to his camcorder. He is new to the neighborhood and soon becomes obsessed with Jane, the girl next door. Jane initially rejects his attention. However, bathed in the darkness of suburban secrets, in the sanctuary of her bedroom, Jane is not unaware that Ricky is capturing her most private moments on video. Despite the outward rejection, she is not displeased by his interest. Eventually, the two become intimate friends, and you may have recognized these characters from the movie *American Beauty*.

In each other, the teenage voyeur and the insecure young woman, find ways to escape from the difficult situations that dominate their home lives. Ricky uses both drugs and his camcorder to rise above the disturbed world of his parents. His relationship with Jane is like a breath of fresh air. One windy day Ricky films a video of a plastic grocery bag. Most of us would drive right by, perhaps vaguely annoyed that there was so much litter in the street. A child might see a new parachute for their favorite action figure. A homeless woman is thrilled by her newfound treasure. Ricky sees beauty, and he is right the scene *is* beautiful. The bag seems to be pregnant with the spirit of an invisible dancer. Like a prima ballerina lifted gracefully into the air, twirled in full extension, playfully teasing the leaves around it. Invisible arms and legs guide its movement, and quite suddenly, the day becomes more alive to us, more real, more present.

Jesus' presence has not gone unnoticed by the Jewish leaders in Jerusalem. In the verses before today's Gospel reading, Jesus has traveled to Jerusalem for the Passover festival, and has been speaking and teaching in the Temple. He has caused a major ruckus by angrily condemning the money changers and driving them out of the Temple courts. He has stirred the hornets nest at its very heart! Others have been listening to Jesus' elegant words; and some just watching Him have seen the signs that he has done. And it is with signs in mind that Nicodemus comes to visit Jesus one night.

Some suggest that Nicodemus comes at night out of fear, hoping the darkness will cover his tracks and he will not be seen talking to Rabbi Jesus. Others suggest that he comes in darkness hoping to find Jesus at rest from the work of the day, and amenable to a visit. Each is plausible. There is also another possibility that the enigmatic Gospel writer might wish us to note. From the Greek, we can also deduce that Nicodemus comes as a sympathetic representative of a larger group of leaders, who may also be secret disciples. Nonetheless, Nicodemus comes to Jesus from the darkness of the world. He comes to the Light of the world with compliments and questions. In many ways he also comes to Jesus burdened with a certain pride in his position as a prominent leader, his knowledge as a studious teacher of Israel, and a significant rigidity in his understanding of God. Jesus' deeds of power tell Nicodemus that He is from God. Yet, there are also many things about Jesus' teaching that challenge Nicodemus and his own small understanding.

In J.B. Phillips' book, *Your God is Too Small* he reminds us of thirteen ways that Christians and non-believers alike tend to make God into something **we** can handle. The highly descriptive titles for these erroneous gods of our imagination cover the spectrum from "Grand Old Man", "Parental Hangover", "Resident Policeman", "Meek and Mild", and "Projected Image", to my personal favorite, "God-in-a-box". I bet that at least one of those titles sounds uncomfortably familiar to almost everyone here today. Just like Nicodemus, our lives in this world have prepared us well to judge others by what we think we know about God. By virtue of his position as a leading Pharisee, Nicodemus probably believes that he has the inside track on God, how God works in the world, and about God's kingdom. All that is about to change radically.

Jesus gets straight to the point of lifting the lid on Nicodemus' image of God. Jesus is not just a teacher from God. As Christians, two thousand years on, most of us don't think twice about reciting the Nicene Creed, which elegantly outlines the doctrine of the Trinity and the foundations of our faith

tradition. You and I know some about the Holy Spirit and her transformative work in the world and in our hearts. But think now about how it would have felt to be Nicodemus and to hear Jesus speaking of God's kingdom in a whole new way? To be taught with great authority that there is no possibility of humanity evolving from our natural life in the flesh to new life in the spirit without being born anew by God's gift of grace and faith. What about Jesus testifying that He is the One sent from heaven who will ascend to heaven again, giving the gift of healing and salvation to all who believe in Him, to all who look to Him in faith? For Nicodemus this isn't just letting the crayon slip a little over the lines, or just peeking inside the lid of his own God-in-a-box. No. This is so radical, so challenging to the foundations of his faith and traditional teachings that he must have wanted to stand up and shout "heresy" and "blasphemy" at the top of his lungs. Indeed many of his friends and colleagues did just that. What we do discover at the end of the Gospel accounts is that the Holy Spirit does her work well, and Nicodemus becomes more openly supportive of Jesus, overcoming his own fear of rejection in this world, to truly enter into the kingdom of God.

Remember Ricky and Jane? How many of us have already formed a decisive picture of that most unlikely couple, whether or not we saw the movie? I know I can be pretty quick to start coloring in the lines based on my own worldview and experiences. But something tells me I'm not alone here. Even as children, we learn pretty quickly to conform to the world by coloring inside the lines. And did any of us ever question why that was somehow better? What about in our spiritual lives? Is coloring inside the lines of our limited human understanding what God really desires for us? Are we supposed to get stuck in little vignette-sized images like the one we learned as a child of "gentle Jesus, meek and mild"? What about the image of God we may have learned as a teenager -- "God, the angry parent", or maybe "God the money and possession machine." How about our own "God-in-a-box" image that we have grown to be comfortable with? In all the facets of our lives, it can be hard to discern where God calling us to break out of our boxes. Yet our spiritual growing edge is often those characteristics of God that we hold at arms length or have firmly packed away because it goes against everything we think we know about God. Either way, it is usually a painful stretch to step outside the box.

Before the scene shifts, Ricky turns to Jane and says, "Sometimes there's so much beauty in the world I feel like... my heart is going to cave in." Who would have thought such unlikely characters as an alienated teenage girl, and a drug dealing teenage boy could see such beauty in the world? In the movement of the wind they glimpse a tiny corner of God's kingdom of grace and peace. They could not see it with the eyes of their flesh alone. It is truly a spirit-filled revelation of beauty that breaks through the boundaries of their black and white lives so that they might see the color beyond that is God's joy and love.

Jesus has playfully drawn across Nicodemus' carefully sketched image of God, daring him to learn and grow. Look at any child's drawing to see how God colors our world, constantly breaking human-made boundaries and walls of judgment. Is my God, or your God too small to reach out and embrace Ricky and Jane with love? Is my God or your God too small to search out those who have been hurt by the small god of religiosity? What if God is inviting us all to learn how to play again like the beautiful child God created us to be, before our parents taught us to color inside the lines. Perhaps God is calling each and every one of us to climb out of our spiritual boxes. And when we do we may see with new eyes just how much more God desires for us and this community of faith. Like a child, we may remember how much fun it is to color outside the lines. Together, we may rediscover how exciting it is to grow in the depth, length and breadth of loving relationship, and just how much more we can expand God's kingdom.

Amen.