

Sermon (3/12/17, John 3: 1-21):

Way back, when I took Marketing classes as part of the course work for my business major, we spent some time looking at a number different types of consumers.

The first group we looked at are called innovators. These are that small group of consumers who are always ready, willing, and even anxious to try something new. They're the target audience a company aims for when launching a new product.

The next group is more loyal to brands and certain types of products but not so entrenched that they can't be moved to try something new. For sure, they aren't trail blazers like the innovators but if a new product meets with good reviews and endorsements from the innovators, this group has the potential to be swayed.

The last group is the toughest to convince that something new is worth a try. They are die hard loyalists...the ones who know what they want and don't deviate much from purchasing only that. These folks are usually brand loyalists to a 'T' and I'm talking about Tetley tea and no other. A mixed marriage, in this case, would be one where a die-hard loyalist marries someone from one of the other groupings. An example of a major stressor for marriages such as these is when a spouse is given a rare assignment to go to a grocery store... with a list, mind you, detailing not only items to be bought but specific brands. Lo and behold, when the spouse returns not only did they not buy the right brands but they even bought things that weren't on the list!

After reading the lectionary texts for this morning, it occurred to me that there might be similar groupings when it comes to the responses people have when God calls. I'm sure there are others, but let me mention three.

The first is made evident in the old testament passage for this morning from Genesis describing the call of Abraham. I didn't read it but I can tell you it's only four verses long. Three of those verses are God's as God instructs Abram to go from his country, his home, his grocery store, his senior center, his familiar streets, his friends and neighbors...just sell everything and go to some never-never land that God promises to map

out for him as they make the trip.

What does Abram do? He drops everything and goes-no questions asked, no prodding, no bargaining, no second thoughts. The poor guy is 75 years old too-a time when most people tend to be more concerned about having things nailed down rather than living life on the edge!

I think the first disciples Jesus called would fit this category too. The ones who were fishing and just dropped everything, right there on the beach, when Jesus invited them to come along for the ride.

Now, I'm all for spur of the moment but this seems extreme, even dangerous. I'm the kind of guy who spends hours on the internet planning trips – where we'll stay, how we'll travel, what we'll do. Planning is important. Experience has taught me just how horrible and even costly it can be to travel without some sort of minimal plan. But here we have Abram and Jesus' disciples doing just that!

The second category I would suggest is the 'Kicking-And-Screaming' group. This group would include Moses who tried to argue his way out of being called when God did that whole burning bush thing. Poor Moses tried everything to prove how wrong he was for the job. "Why would the Pharaoh listen to me?" Moses refuted. "Why would the Israelites trust me? How can I prove that this is a God thing when Pharaoh pushes back?" Finally, Moses tried the ole 'I'm-not-a-good-public-speaker' thing but that didn't fly either. Jonah, who ran in the opposite direction when God called him, would fit this grouping too.

Given the tendencies of this group, perhaps there's something to be said for those who come kicking and screaming to the baptismal font. Makes for difficult baptisms but they *are* in good company.

Then there's the Nicodemus group. The curious but scared to commit group. The ones who are pretty content with the way things are but then there's this gnawing feeling in them that refuses to be satisfied. Maybe their brand of religious thinking isn't quite as reliable as they thought, suggests this gnawing feeling. Maybe there's something more, something they're missing.

I wonder if that 'spiritual-but-not-religious' group we often hear about these days is related to this group. For a wide variety of reasons

there's a hesitation to commit, to jump in, to risk but, even so, there's something that still gnaws at them – the spiritual part – the something more part, the irrepressible tug on the heart part. In fact, maybe this is the wind, the spirit, that Jesus refers to – the wind that blows where it wills whispering, calling, pulling, refusing to give up on us even when we have long given up on the wind.

Perhaps Nicodemus is the Patron Saint of the Extremely Cautious.

Nicodemus has made a name for himself. He's worked his way up the ladder. He's still paying off his college debt from the degrees he's earned and he still remembers the many years of late nights in the office trying to prove his worth but now he's finally made it. He's among the movers and shakers of the religious elite. People seek him out for answers, religiously taking them to heart. His is a world of rule keeping...playing it safe, carefully measuring and keeping within the boundaries of God's good side. Faith is a safe, comfortable, and predictable space. For every question, there is an answer except, that is, for this gnawing, mysterious draw this guy named Jesus has on him. Why can't he shake it?

It's a good reminder, I guess, that even for those among us who seem most sure footed when it comes to things of faith, questions and longings abound. Deep inside, the wind blows... tickling the conscience, waking up longings, bringing unease to certainties, provoking hard questions that disrupt comfortable worlds of being. It's what Jesus does...even for religious experts like Nicodemus.

Unable to resist this gnawing prod any longer, Nicodemus pulls on his hoodie, draws the hood tight around his head, wanders through the side streets late at night in search of Jesus. If his colleagues got hold of this, his career would be over, his hard-won success ripped from beneath him, his authority completely dismantled. Even so, he cannot stop himself...he's tired of the sleepless nights, the restless nightmares, the nagging doubts, the fear that this might turn into an opportunity lost.

'Jesus,' He says. 'You know you've really stirred things up for a number of us. We've been keeping close tabs on you and we can't help but to feel the draw so many others are feeling. What's going on? What's

this power you have over us? What are we supposed to do?

What follows is Jesus telling Nicodemus that if he really wants answers to that gnawing feeling, there's only one thing he can do – be born again, born from above. Unfortunately, for many of us, Jesus' instructions to Nicodemus has become an over-used, loaded with baggage phrase, which kind of shuts down our hearing. But think about it. Consider how this must have sounded to Nicodemus. Starting over, from scratch, couldn't have sounded all that appealing to one who has worked so hard and given up so much to get where he's at. Yet, that is exactly what Jesus is telling him. Like an infant leaving the comfortable, safe space of the womb to be thrust into a frightening, unfamiliar, brand new world, Nicodemus must do the same. Nicodemus must be ready to be thrust out from his self-formed, albeit hard-won womb of predictableness into the world Jesus had set into motion where even death is no longer something that can be counted on.

Wow, that is one tall order for those of us who like to have the details of a trip planned out and the GPS programmed with our destination before we even put the key in the ignition. That is one tall order for those of us who get upset when a spouse comes home with Jiffy peanut butter instead of Skippy. That is one tall order for those of us at a stage in our lives when the predictable and controllable is what we cling to for stability in this all too quickly shifting world.

As if to prove his point, Jesus then explains that God did not send him to condemn the world but to save it. Wow, the whole world...not just the Nicodemuses, not just the ones who think and look like us, not just the ones within our circle of the acceptable, not just our nation and our people, not just our neatly organized little corner of the world. The whole world...everyone has a chance at this salvation thing.

I wonder what would happen if we left today, choosing to believe this; ready to let it shape how we live, what we do, maybe even our sense of mission in the world? Not to condemn the world but to save it-that's what God's up to by sending his Son and, as followers, that's what we're supposed to be up to as well.

Tough stuff, right? Feels risky, even dangerous. Feels a little like

being thrust out of the womb into unfamiliar territory where we must learn how to walk all over again. Admittedly, the appeal of this isn't all that overwhelming.

‘Are you a teacher, and yet you do not understand these things?’

Yes, you're right Jesus, be patient with us...even those of us who thought we had you all figured out are finding this one tough pill to swallow.

To God alone be all the glory.