

4th Sunday in Lent
March 11, 2018
John 3:14-21
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When I was growing up, it was my mother's practice in early to mid-May, to commence the annual "spring house cleaning". The rugs in the house were taken up, carried outside and shaken out, then hung on the clothesline for air freshening. Room by room all the curtains and venetian blinds were taken down, washed and air dried by hanging them on the clothesline. With the curtains and blinds down, all the windows in the house were then washed – inside and out. I loved seeing the bright sunlight stream in through the now cleaned of their grime, and temporarily curtain-less windows.

So how is it going on your Lenten journey, this time of intentional 'spring cleaning of the soul'? After reading today's gospel passage, I found myself initially wanting to take issue with the gospel writer John. Most of us are very familiar with at least one verse in this passage - 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.* Less well known is the next verse: *Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him."*

This is all good news, right? God loves the cosmos and has come to us in Jesus to save the whole world. So what's the problem? It's in the last part of the passage: *"And this is the judgment, that the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil. For all who do evil hate the light and do not come to the light, so that their deeds may not be exposed. But those who do what is true come to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that their deeds have been done in God."*

According to John, it's not God who condemns us. It's our preference for remaining in the darkness, a familiar and comfortable place, and that's the problem – "people loved darkness rather than light". Our own actions condemn us, in other words. But John, do people really love darkness rather than light? You speak with such certainty about this.

Darkness. For John darkness is those things that oppose God in the world. Things that run counter to the message of Jesus' life, death and resurrection. That darkness takes many forms. Maybe you have seen some of those common places of darkness in yourself: habitual patterns of fear; worry; stubbornness; self-reliance; wrapping ourselves in past hurts; criticizing/labeling/blaming; refusing to take action about

something we know we are called to speak or act upon. These are individual sins, pockets of darkness.

The darkness also comes in systemic sins in which we all collectively participate and collude. The news has been full of stories of how much of that darkness has been coming into the light of day – sexual abuse; violence related to guns; disregard for the dignity of every human being present in systemic racism, sexism, classism; and environmental degradation. If anyone needs other examples, just look in the Book of Common Prayer (p.267) at the Litany of Penitence we offered on Ash Wednesday. I looked at the Litany again this week, and yep, there are things on the list that I need to confess – again.

Yes, all of us at times, do prefer the darkness of our hidden interior places and our unhealth, prefer this to the light. No one challenges us to change when we remain “in the dark”. We don’t have to be accountable or live with transparency. Truth can be what we say it is. But that doesn’t mean our behavior – those things done and left undone - doesn’t affect others. It does. If we can be honest, it’s more comfortable staying in the dark because we believe there we can at least control our own “spin”, project and protect the way we want to be seen by the world. Secrets can remain hidden.

Lent especially invites us to engage in self-examination of our thoughts and behaviors. Yet part of us resists throwing open the curtains to let in the light which will expose us. We feel vulnerable, and maybe deficient, defective, damaged, guilty or ashamed. In the early Church, Lent was the period when converts to Christianity were being instructed in the faith and preparing to make their baptismal promises to follow Christ as Lord. Lenten practices can help lead us again to the light of Christ which brings healing. The light of Christ reveals our false selves. The light of Christ leads us to see our need for repentance. The light of Christ releases us from bondage to sin through forgiveness. The light of Christ redirects and restores us to become more truly our authentic selves, the people God intends, stamped with the imago Dei, persons created in the image of God.

So, how do we find the courage to turn toward the light, rather than remain cloaked in darkness and beset by sin? The first step is to pray and ask for courage – courage to be honest with ourselves and God. We might need to begin by asking God to give us the desire to ask for courage! And that’s okay if that’s where we are. A second thing we can do is seek out those who are mature in faith who can serve as examples, teachers, and mentors.

I meet with my spiritual director, Sister Davia every month. We began our relationship in 2005. She knows me well. We met this past Monday. For the umpteenth time I was sharing with her my struggles with perfectionism. I have referred to myself in the past as a “recovering perfectionist”. Some weeks it seems like there is more relapse than recovering happening in dealing with my perfectionism. Persistent perfectionism is a kind of compulsive drivenness that sucks the joy right out of life. Sister Davia said two things this time that really got my attention. The first thing she said was: “If you are perfect as a priest and pastor, who is your life pointing to? Likely it’s not toward God”. The second thing she said was: “The mask of perfection is what keeps us away from God.” And then she talked – as she has before – about the need to “embrace our diminishments”. I don’t really want to embrace my brokenness, my flaws and defects. I just want them to be fixed. I don’t like it when Sister Davia goes there. The pockets of “darkness” in me resist going there. And yet, I know that I would experience more joy, gratitude, and freedom if I would let God take care of, and somehow use for good my struggle with perfectionism, as well as my other flawed parts. This would lead me to spiritual growth, in other words.

Spiritual direction is one of those practices that can help us open the windows to let the healing light of Christ shine in. Spiritual direction offers accountability which is important for spiritual growth. If we want to grow deeper in trust and loving relationship with God, sometimes we need others to help reveal the negative and self-defeating things we do and say. We need to hear how we are again listening to untruths (lies) about ourselves and God. We need to hear about grace and God’s constant love. It’s challenging. Sometimes reassuring. Usually humbling and enlightening. Always life-giving, pointing back to our baptismal identity as children of God called to walk and learn in community of the faithful.

There is one other practice we often speak about during Lent that offers a very powerful experience of opening our hearts to move toward the revealing and healing light of Christ. It is the Rite of Reconciliation of a Penitent, otherwise known as making private confession to a priest, which includes receiving absolution and pastoral counsel. The guideline for us as Episcopalians when it comes to private confession is “All may, none must, some should.” Please speak to me about these practices if you would like to know more. They are holy, stretching, life-giving practices.

In our struggles with the pull to choose light over darkness, the gospel remedy we need to remember is there in John 3:16 – “For God so loved the WORLD that God GAVE”. God can help us turn toward the light. We can trust that the God who created and so loves the world, wants us to be saved, healed, and set back on the road with Christ. The road of mercy, forgiveness, love, justice and peace. You’ll recall this passage

occurs after Jesus has just had a conversation with Nicodemus about being “born again” or “born from above”. It seems Nicodemus came more fully into the light of recognizing Christ over time. Only after Jesus is crucified does Nicodemus come out in the open and show himself as a believer and follower of Jesus.

Every day we have choices to lean in and turn toward the light of God. In the remaining weeks of Lent, let’s accept the invitation to look at our days and see how we have cooperated with the God of light. Let’s confess the times we have chosen to remain in darkness. And let’s listen and talk with the Lord about how God wants to bring us a little more into the light as we continue walking with Jesus to the cross and resurrection. There’s still lots of time for spring cleaning, friends. It’s never too late to open the windows of our hearts to let in the light of the God who loves us, loves the whole world. Amen.