

COVENANT WORD

The Circle of Truth

Numbers 21:4-9; Ephesians 2:1-10; John 3:1-17

A message by
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Dear Friends,
Thank you for wanting to read and study these thoughts more carefully. Please know that I do not take full credit for anything that may be contained within, because I may have read or heard something at some point during my pilgrimage and do not remember its source and thus, cannot give the rightful author his/her credit. I pray that you will find inspiration and encouragement.
Sarah Shelton



WHERE FAITH COMES TO LIFE

Maybe it was because he was driving too fast. Maybe it was because he ran the STOP sign. Maybe it was because he flashed a rude hand gesture to the neighboring mother with two young children in the yard that motivated her to appear at our front door to voice her grievances. I listened. I apologized. I assured her that our son would be spoken to about this unacceptable behavior.

Interestingly, when the subject was broached, I got that innocent response of "Who? Me?" As I recall, he artfully batted his blue eyes to support his blameless theory. Waiting out the accusatory silence that followed, his confession was soon given with qualifying explanations like: "I was late to work." "She was standing in the middle of the road." "She exaggerates."

As best as I can recall, this was the night that we instituted "The Circle of Truth" in our family. The basic premise is that our relationships are too important to be deceitful. With one another, we will live in the naked, unadorned truth, no matter how painful or difficult. So to this day, if any family member calls for "The Circle of Truth," only the truth can be told. No exaggerations. No excuses. No "pastoral privilege." Just honesty. Just the cold, hard truth and all of its consequences. I believe this is what Jesus is doing with Nicodemus. Jesus demands that Nicodemus stand in the circle of truth.

Like the beloved parables, this story begins with identifying information. Nicodemus is the main character, and he is a Pharisee, or as Jesus describes him, Nicodemus is a

"teacher of Israel." Now we know that Pharisees are in the mix of Jesus' accusers that lead to the crucifixion. With the growing criticism surrounding Jesus, it appears that Nicodemus wants to know for himself if Jesus is a threat or not. Let's engage our imaginations to create a picture of what this encounter might look like. (Examples taken from Walter Brueggemann's "A Nighttime Gnaw and a New Possibility," *The Collected Sermons of Walter Brueggemann*.)

Likely he was a lawyer, schooled in the tradition of his people at Cumberland Law School. If so, he would have been a senior partner in the leading law firm

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in Jerusalem, with all the posh perks. He is a prime candidate for a John Grisham novel.

Likely, he was an intellectual, perhaps an academic. If so, he would have been tenured, a distinguished professor, perhaps even the chair of his department that occupies an endowed chair named for some excessive alumni donor. A string of publications and an impressive series of academic lectureships would be listed on his vitae.

Or maybe, since we are engaging our imaginations, he is a major political leader in Jerusalem with his own political action committee. Because lobbyist stand in line to vie for his vote, his disposable funding is unlimited.

In another time, he might have been a corporate CEO, well connected, with access to all levels of power, plus enough

stock options to live carefully close to scandal, but always careful enough to stay clear of trouble.

Really, we don't know the particulars, but we do know that Nicodemus is a big time guy. And like all big time guys, his actions are very public. The paparazzi follow him constantly, so in order to have a secret rendezvous with Jesus, Nicodemus has to come in the dark of night with a black hoodie to cover his face.

In the gospel of John, night is much more than it appears. Night is ignorance, seeing without understanding. It is confusion and not knowing. This makes it all the more odd that a man like Nicodemus is "in the dark," because Nicodemus, from all appearances, is viewed as one who is "in the know." Being a knowledgeable person, his first words to Jesus are "Rabbi, we know..." He speaks out of a self-confident, secure world where there are some who know, some who are certain, and some who are smug in their certainty. So, in essence, he says, "Jesus, can we talk, teacher to teacher? Now we know...studies have proven that...a recent book by a most reliable authority has demonstrated beyond a doubt that...statistics say..." Nicodemus suffers from certainty.

Representing the mainline religious order, Nicodemus tries to make sense of Jesus who, after all, really does do strange things like heal the sick, welcome the outcasts, and eats with sinners, to just name a few. Nicodemus cannot understand how Jesus fits with his conventional wisdom about God and how God works in the world; who belongs to God and who does not; who is in God's favor and who is out of favor. Nicodemus wants a formula. He wants a chart,

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so that he can put it on a power point and show the other Pharisees. "Look! See? This is how we know God's will! 1,2,3, we have God and God's actions safely contained right here so now we know who is in and who is out." Nicodemus wants confirmation. Nicodemus craves certainty.

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I have sympathy for Nicodemus. Wouldn't our lives of faith be so much easier if we dealt with certainty and not with mystery! Those who remain focused on certainty often use John 3:16 as a gate-keeping passage. They see its purpose as making clear who receives eternal life and who does not; who is favored by God and who is not. They think of it as being like that arm that goes up and down in a parking lot: believe and you are in; don't believe and you are out. But I don't think this is what Jesus is after when he invites Nicodemus into the circle of truth.

You see, while Nicodemus may have questions about who Jesus is, Jesus recognizes who he is talking to. Jesus knows that Nicodemus is already "in." He is a pharisee. So Jesus knows he is speaking to a person of faith NOT a person without faith. Jesus is speaking to someone who serves as a deacon, sings in the choir, teaches Saturday School and even has his own key to get into the Temple at any time. So it would seem their conversation is not about Nicodemus' salvation. It is not a conversation with someone on the outside of the religious world. Rather, John 3:16 is directed to an insider, a leading layperson and a student of scripture who is having difficulty accepting God's freedom to love whoever God sees fit to redeem. Jesus' answer is clear: God loves the entire world and the divine purpose is to redeem all of it, not in part and certainly not with condemnation. This is good news to those who can be embracing and gracious, but it is terrible news to those who believe God loves only them; only those who look like them; only those who believe like them; and only those who act like them.

This passage seems timely in regards to our current congregational discernment process. It started innocently enough with simple, almost objective, conversations about how money might be divided between our mission-sending agencies. The water got muddied, however, when the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship Global announced an Implementation Plan that is attached to a new hiring policy. The Implementation Plan continues CBF Global's discriminatory hiring practices. They will not hire an LGBTQ person for any position of leadership. This is a dilemma for an open and affirming congregation like ours who celebrates the creative and steady leadership of all persons.

When I think about the lack of vision and justice in their policy, I, personally, want to stomp around. I want to shake my finger in their faces and say accusatory things. Then I want to dramatically walk out, take all my toys, and go home. In other words, I want to respond in ways similar to how Baptist Church of the Covenant has responded in the past. You see, the easiest response, for me, is to leave. But while I am packing up my goods, Jesus, like he did so artfully with Nicodemus, invites me to step into the circle of truth. He asks, "Sarah, who is guilty of the sin of certainty?" "They are!" I quickly reply with pointed finger. The accusatory silence that follows is broken when Jesus ask the very same question again, "Who is guilty of the sin of certainty?" and my quiet confession is, "I am as guilty as they."

Peter Enns writes in his book, *The Sin of Certainty*:

Christians eat their own...A faith that eats its own not only drives people out but also sends up a red flare to the rest of humanity that Christianity is just another exclusive members-only club, and that Jesus is a lingering relic of antiquity, rather than a powerful, present-defining spiritual reality; a means of gaining power rather than relinquishing it.

He raises the question: do we want to be a part of the dark underbelly of Christian organizations that look more like the dirty political scheming of Frances and Claire Underwood from Netflix's *House of Cards* OR do we want to claim the Sermon on the Mount? We cannot be flippant, because peoples' lives are at stake, yea, the very gospel is at stake.

Valerie and I were a part of a webinar sponsored by The Association of Welcoming and Affirming Baptists. The speakers, all gays and lesbians, encouraged the listeners to remain a part of CBF Global by raising the questions, "How can we make the greatest impact? How will 100% inclusion occur if we do not make our invested presence known?"

To stay with CBF Global may feel like we are staying in an abusive religious marriage that leads only to issues of survival. (I believe this is what happened with the Southern Baptist Convention.) But in making this decision, we seem to be asking, is

it time to stop being reactive? Is it time to consider staying in order to make a bolder statement about inclusion, dispelling fear, and breaking down barriers? Since we are standing in the circle of truth maybe I should say my biggest concern is not the answer on which we will land. My biggest concern is how we get there. Can we move forward, united, still speaking to one another with grace and respect?

I do not know where we will come out. I would not ever try to predict your actions. In reality, it is not my decision to make. It is yours to make and own. My role is to support you in living out the gospel as we understand it for this moment, in this place, and with these people. The arguments on both sides are compelling and as a mother of a gay son, I am tempted to drive down this road too fast, ignoring the STOP signs and making crude gestures to those I pass on my way to certainty. So stories like yours and that of Nicodemus help me to put on the brakes. Your stories help me realize that Jesus is asking us to

leave all of our certainty behind so that when we step into the circle, it is like being born into something new and fresh. It is like being born again. It is hearing, believing, and accepting Jesus at his word: "God loves the whole world! God loves Patsy and Glenda and Cindy, Matt and Lloyd and David so much that God gave Jesus to the world so that we

can all – each and every one of us – experience abounding love through the gift of eternal life."

Paul puts it another way: "It is by grace you are saved. You cannot do anything about it; grace is God's gift to you."

And American poet, Edwin Markham, puts it like this:

He drew a circle that shut me out –
Heretic, a rebel, a thing to flout.
But love and I had the wit to win:
We drew a circle that took him in!

I think that's it for me. It is not the decision over which I am fretting, it is the process. It is knowing that every opportunity is given for each one to be heard and that in the end, we will move forward in a united way with our circle of truth enlarged and unbroken. Jesus uses terms like "born again," Paul talks about "light" and "darkness," "alive" and "dead."

The bottom line is that to stand in the circle of truth means a fresh start because there is an end to something old. What is old is our sense of certainty that we have it all figured out: life experiences, study of scripture, deep thinking and playful writing. I confess that in my certainty, I often feel like I am lying under a stone that only resurrection power can roll away if I will but hold myself open to new possibilities and likelihoods and gifts and healings and miracles beyond my wildest imagination. (Martha Spong, "Stop right There," 3-14-12.) How does this happen? It happens with forgiveness. By imitating God's gift of grace with inexplicable generosity so that cycles of resentment and revenge and stereotyping are broken while the circle in which we stand next to Jesus keeps expanding in love to take all in. (Walter Brueggeman, "Ferguson and Forgiveness," *Huffington Post*.)

Sin," printed on the bulletin insert.

There is a song that keeps coming to my mind. Maybe you have heard Johnny Cash or Jerry Lee Lewis or Willie Nelson sing it. It tells the story about the singer's mother, her death and all the things that occur around a burial service. After each verse, the familiar chorus repeats:

*Will the circle be unbroken
By and by Lord, by and by
There's a better home awaiting
In the sky Lord, in the sky.*

As those lyrics rolled around in my soul this week, I realized that its mournful tone matches my mourning over all things Baptist, and how believers, on the whole, refuse the freedom that comes with God's acceptance by attaching qualifications. The lyrics also challenge my gratitude for this place that is my family of choice with whom I live in the circle of truth to experience God's love for all the world through God's son, Jesus Christ. No exaggeration. No excuses. No pastoral privilege. Just honesty and all of its messy consequences. So my prayer for us has become:

*May our circle be unbroken
By and by Lord, by and by
There's a better home awaiting
In the sky, Lord, in the sky.*

You are invited to stand in the circle of truth as best as we know and understand it. Because of love, we will draw it large enough so that you are taken in by the free gift of grace for redemption that comes through Jesus Christ. So stand in the circle of truth today as we stand to sing "Grace Greater than Our