

## SERMON: The Johannine Playbook

(a)The four Sundays of Lent starting today, (b) the days of Holy Week except for Palm Sunday, (c) all but two of the seven Sundays of the Easter Season, and then (d) the Day of Pentecost, take us “Lectionary followers” away from the Gospel of Jesus Christ according to Matthew (where we spend most of this year, Year A of the lectionary) and immerse us in the Gospel of Jesus Christ according to John.

To use an architectural metaphor, we thereby remain in the same house of FIRST CENTURY CHRISTIANITY, but John and his community (the Johannine community) are in a room by themselves, thinking and doing things differently from the rooms of Mark, Matthew, Luke, James, Peter and Paul (which also have their differences but, between them, not as markedly different as they are from John). Since this is the first Sunday of many back-in-the-Johannine-room, some reorientation is in order.

On the “*shared*” (or “*common denominator*”) level, there are features *present* in all the rooms, but which are more pronounced as we read John ... features which we do well to talk-and-think about occasionally because they are so different from our post-modern western reality.

Heading this list is the fact that altered level of consciousness experiences are usual and normal for the people of the Bible. Not only do dreams get dreamt, but waking visions get seen (*and participated in*) and voices get heard! This is true of individuals *and of collectives*.

Notably, this is the human experience *even today* for some 90 percent of the world’s hundreds-and-hundreds of societies. We post-Enlightenment, post-Industrial Revolution, technologically advanced folk happen to be among the 10 percent that have filtered such possibilities away. Yet we cannot-but-see that our Bible reports a multitude of visionary experiences; its four Gospels, in particular, all have centrally important visionary content (as do Paul’s writings). John, though, highlights / teaches / guides / *indeed “pins”* his community to visionary experience like no other biblical author.

Other *shared characteristics* across all the rooms of the house “1<sup>st</sup> Century Christianity” which you know from this pulpit:

1. the honour/shame basis and structure of community life (wherein a person is born into their family’s level of honour and thereafter joins their kin in ardently maintaining that honour);
2. the centrality of patronage (wherein people-with-unmet-need search out a local broker to connect with a patron—someone with standing and resource—who then decides, case by case, upon granting their patronage);
3. the limited goods understanding of life (whereby all things—land, wealth, belongings, honour itself—are perceived as finite resources, so if anyone gets more then there is someone or some group who has less).

Again, all of these things are true across the biblical record, but they stand out *particularly* clearly/recognizably in John’s account because they come at us *entwined in* what is peculiar to John. And that list is substantial! Elsewhere, we are familiar with Jesus preaching and teaching about kingdom of God, and the fact “it is at hand”; never so in John, where he is all about being born again from above. Elsewhere, we are familiar with Jesus teaching “love your neighbour” and “love your enemy”; never so in John, where speaking to the circle of his followers he commands “love one another”. Elsewhere, Jesus has apostles (“sent out ones”); not so in John, where he has only disciples (the students of a rabbi).

John’s community of believers is best characterized, sociologically speaking (and we’ll get more to the philosophical, spiritual and religious aspects across all these Lenten and Easter weeks) [it is characterized sociologically speaking] as an anti-society. Representative examples in our time are street gangs. Members of an anti-society remain inside the larger society but are opposed to and in conflict with it (in John’s terms, “in the world but not of it”). Interpersonal relationships (within the anti-

society) are of more value than relationships with family, coworkers or neighbours outside (i.e., in the broader society). There is *intense* in-group loyalty (... John's word for this is "love" ... which is an example of Johannine anti-language, to which phenomenon we turn next).

A way to recognize you are dealing with an anti-society is their use of anti-language. Anti-language takes ordinary words from the larger society but gives them distinct and heightened in-group meanings. Think of street language and rap music. Our Gospel reading this morning contains a number of Johannine examples, a major one being the phrase "born again" / "born from above," both meanings coming from the one Greek word "*anōthen*" ("you must be born *anōthen*"). John's Jesus works hard to explain the in-group meaning to Nicodemus, this business of being born from above vs. born from below; born of the spirit vs. born of the flesh; born from the sky-realm vs. born of the earth; born "of God" to become children of God.

"Lifted up" is another important anti-language phrase in this passage and throughout John's Gospel account. While crucifixion is the most shaming of displays imaginable in that society, John and John's Jesus speak of his "lifting up" as an exultation. Anti-language! The big-picture thinking here—foundational to John's Gospel—is this: Jesus was born to Mary into a craftsman's household, with something near the bottom of honor standing. But by many signs he shows himself to be from the sky-realm, the God-realm, which means his true honor standing is above everything created. He has come down from that realm and then, at his dying, in being "lifted up," he returns to that realm. Which is, for his disciples, a whole new beginning; because, as Jesus teaches Nicodemus (rather cryptically!) at verse 13, he who came down and goes up is *ever thereafter* able to descend and ascend. This makes for the core religious experience of all members of the Johannine community: altered state of consciousness visitations by Jesus, who comes down to his disciples from the sky-realm, revealing himself—in

encounter after encounter—just as he did in the many Easter encounters John carefully lays out for his readers as archetypal for their ongoing experiences. It is, can you see it?, exactly as Jesus promised before his crucifixion, in John chapter 14, “I will not leave you comfortless: I will come to you.” Again and again in the practice of the Johannine community, he comes!

There is other anti-language vocabulary in today’s passage (as throughout John’s writing). Every time a distinction is being made between the anti-society and the larger society, you are hearing anti-language. So, “light” verses “darkness”, “spirit” verses “flesh”, “life” verses “death”, “heavenly things” verses “earthly things”.

Now, building upon this reintroduction to the Johannine room of the house “1<sup>ST</sup> CENTURY CHRISTIANITY”, I want—this morning—to open up for you one (just one!) key dynamic that John’s Christology and Ecclesiology (his understanding of Jesus and of the Church) bless us with (concerning Christian faith). The dynamic is **acted out** in today’s Nicodemus story, as this man with high credentials / high honour [(i) a Pharisee, and (ii) a leader of the Judaeans]

- comes to Jesus (who elsewhere in this Gospel is acknowledged as having no formal learning) and calls him rabbi,
  - withstands Jesus’ honour challenge (“Are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things?”),
- and—as Nicodemus’ later involvement and behaviour shows—
- becomes changed by the encounter.

***In Jesus and for all his followers—can you see it?—the whole honour system gets redrawn.***

Perhaps the clearest evidence of this: recall John’s Jesus, in the company of his disciples, following the Last Supper, praying to God and asking

<sup>21</sup> ... As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us ... . <sup>22</sup> The glory that you have given me I have given them, so that they may be one, as we are one, <sup>23</sup> I in them and you in me ...

“The glory that you have given me I have given them” is an honour-standing statement, as is this ‘new math’ whereby all are one in Jesus-and-God just as Jesus is in God and God is in Jesus.

So, just as the earthly Jesus, from a craftsman home in Galilee, redrew the world’s honour picture of himself through many signs, showing his true place at the top; and just as the most honourable of Judaeans (Nicodemus) recognizes, submits and is personally ‘redrawn’/‘rewired’ by this reality; now all who are disciples / “believers” / “followers” of Jesus and know this to be their reality (because Jesus comes to them, again-and-again!, in altered state of consciousness worship) [all disciples] are to understand themselves individually and communally up at the top of the God-designed honour schema. The world outside doesn’t get it, but all inside get it. Which is to say that all inside are saved.

You and I, who are post-Enlightenment, post-Industrial Revolution, technologically advanced folk, cannot and must not try to rewire ourselves so as to have free access to altered state of consciousness experiences. Doing so would be for us the path to mental illness (and I can point you to the published research of my colleague Shawna Lucas who explores and explains this for psychiatrists, psychologists and psychotherapists). But you and I equally can and must be confronted by this saving grace that sees, and knows, and therefore no longer lives *the lie of the world’s many and varied honour systems*. (More regularly what we speak of is “people’s privilege”). Rich people; politically powerful people; highly athletic people; really beautiful people; straight cis-gendered white males like me, (... there’s a long list of possible qualifiers) ... this world’s honour spreads of any kind disappear in Christ, *and every single being matters the same*. Very Baptist, by the

way – everyone having equal and direct access to God ... a “priesthood of all believers”.

A relationship playbook for life-in-this-way—“that they may be one,” Jesus prays to God, “as we are one, I in them and you in me”—this is what we reenter and rediscover once more (what we breathe in, and strive to integrate) in the Johannine room of the house “1<sup>ST</sup> CENTURY CHRISTIANITY”. Across these coming weeks, as we here at MacNeill “Imagine the Cross approaching” and thereafter celebrate the resurrection, let this playbook truly become a resource for you in your personal journey and for us in our journey together as “church”. Amen.