

“Ordinary People”
John 3:1-10
2nd Sunday in Lent

March 8, 2020
Westminster, Greenville
Ben Dorr

With baseball season right around the corner, I was thinking that it’s been a while since I mentioned the New York Yankees in a sermon. By the look on your faces, I can tell: you were secretly HOPING I would say that!

So, don’t want to disappoint.

On September 4, 1993, a game I almost went to...but went to see the Red Sox play instead—on that day, something remarkable took place at Yankee Stadium: Jim Abbott, a pitcher for the NY Yankees, threw a no-hitter.

Why is that remarkable?
Plenty of pitchers have thrown no-hitters.

What made this no-hitter notable is that Jim Abbott was born with only one hand.

He is, to the best of my knowledge, the only major league ballplayer with one hand to ever pitch a complete game without allowing a hit.

A few years ago, I read a biography of Jim Abbott.¹

There were pictures in the book, pictures of him as a boy, growing up in Michigan. And do you know what Jim Abbott used to do as a young boy, when his picture was taken?

He’d take the arm that had no hand, and he would put it in his pocket.
When his picture was taken, he wanted to be like every other kid.
Just another ordinary kid.
He did not want to STAND OUT.

And we can understand that, right?

¹ Jim Abbott and Tim Brown, *Imperfect: An Improbable Life*, New York: Random House, 2012.

The reason we understand is not only that all the adults in this room were once kids who didn't want to be different than other kids.

The reason we get it is that there are still PLENTY of moments when we too just want to blend in...just want to be ordinary people...don't really want to stand out.

Have you ever been wary of standing out?

Anyone here ever been late for church?

Walking to your pew, wondering if people are looking at you because you're running a little late that day?

I recall my very first day in the ministry 22 years ago.

April 1, 1998...there was a 7am Bible study at the church in which I was starting my ministry as an associate pastor in Richardson, Texas.

Went to the Bible study that Wednesday morning, and everyone in the room was excited—they were friendly, they were welcoming, I was excited to be there.

And then one of the gentlemen at the table told me that while he really glad I was there, if I ever wore a tie to Wednesday morning Bible study again, he just might have to take me to the Trail Dust restaurant outside Dallas, where—when you wore a tie—they would cut it off and hang it on the wall of the restaurant.

So I looked around the room, and it wasn't just that the senior pastor wasn't wearing a tie...there was no one else in the room with a tie.

Do you think I ever wore another tie to Bible study?

Of course not.

I was new to Texas, new to that church, I wanted to get along, be liked by the people of that church...I did not want to stand out.

The 3rd chapter of John tells the story of someone who was, I think, a little afraid of standing out.

His name was Nicodemus.

And John tells us that Nicodemus was a Pharisee,
 a leader of the Jews, who came to Jesus “by night...”
 to have a conversation.

Why by night?

John does not explain, but I think we can make a pretty good guess.

Nicodemus wanted to keep his visit...a secret.

Perhaps he did not want his friends to know he was curious about Jesus.
 Perhaps there would be QUESTIONS,
 if people in HIS circles found out
 that he was hanging around with Jesus!

On the one hand, Nicodemus was clearly interested in Jesus....and on the other hand, he did not want to stand out.

And we get that.
 After all, we're Presbyterians!
 Frozen chosen, just blend in.

In fact, Jesus himself talks about NOT standing out.

Do you remember what Jesus says in the Sermon on the Mount?

“So whenever you give alms, do not sound a trumpet before you...when you give alms, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing...”

In other words, don't stand out.

It's a line that we love to live by.
 Is that the line we need to live by?

Imagine with me for a moment that there are some visitors sitting nearby you right now. It's their first time here at Westminster. And I'm going to take a

minute in this sermon to tell them something about this congregation that they have decided to visit.

What should I tell them?

Should I tell them that we're a "just blend in" kind of church?

Ordinary church?

You can't tell the difference between Westminster Presbyterian Church and any other Presbyterian congregation that's nearby...stay if you want, go if you want, nothing really memorable about our church.

Is that what I should say?

Or should I say that we're a growing church?

That we've got over 100 teenagers who come to youth group every Sunday night?

That we've got over 500 children who are 5th grade and younger at our church?

That we've got a ministry to house families experiencing homelessness—
and four times a year, anyone can volunteer for it at our church?

That we have outreach with the Dominican Republic and Cuba?

That we have exceptional adult education classes on Sunday mornings?

That we've got a choir that sings gorgeous music every time we worship?

Should I say that we're an open church?

That we're a welcoming and inclusive church?

That one would be hard-pressed to find another Presbyterian church in Greenville that's like our church.

Is that what I should say?

Or should I say...eh, we're not much different than any other church?

Would you like Westminster to stand out?

Do you see the tension here?

The tension between blending in, being ordinary...and standing out?

Of course, THAT tension is not quite the same tension that is in our text.

Nicodemus is afraid of standing out...NOT because standing out would make him exceptional.

Nicodemus is afraid that standing out...would make him controversial.

That it would cost him something.

That's why I think he came by night...he doesn't want this Jesus stuff to cost him something!

What do you think?

Not just about Nicodemus's relationship with Jesus, but ours.

Is our relationship with Jesus supposed to cost us something?

When the preacher Will Campbell died a few years ago, *The New York Times* noted how Campbell was the only white person invited by Martin Luther King, Jr. to the founding of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference.²

On the one hand, Campbell was a fierce advocate for African-Americans, an outspoken opponent of our country's racism. Those stances earned him enemies as well as friends.

And in the midst of his civil rights work, "he gave a significant amount of his time to imprisoned Ku Klux Klan members."³

Which didn't always please people either.

For example, he visited Tommy Tarrants, a Klansman at Parchman Prison...

Tarrants, filled with hate...

was a key figure in the Klan program of violence...

² Robert D. McFadden, "Rev. Will D. Campbell, Maverick Minister in Civil Rights Era, Dies at 88," *The New York Times*, June 4, 2013.

³ Tex Sample, *A Christian Justice for the Common Good*, Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2016.

When Tarrants attempted to bomb the home of a progressive Jewish businessman, the FBI set a trap and...nearly killed him.

*His crime gained Tarrants a thirty-year prison sentence...
It was there that Campbell began to visit Tarrants
and spent hours with him behind the barbed wire of Parchman.*

[Over time, Tarrants] began moving in a new direction. Eventually rejecting racism, he...was paroled...then entered the University of Mississippi, completed a degree, and responded to the call to be an evangelical minister.

In speaking of his ministry among the Klan, Campbell put it quite simply:

*'Mr. Jesus died for the bigots as well.'*⁴

Do you see what we're talking about this morning?
Will Campbell lived his faith with NO FEAR of standing out.

And there's something inside of me RESISTS all that.
Something that wants to practice my faith quietly, not cause a stir,
just wants my faith to fit into my life the way I want to live it.

Maybe a good question for each of us today...is this:
How would your life would be different if you were NOT a follower of
Jesus?

How differently would you spend your time, your energy, your love?

I know of a family that used to have three kids.

A few years ago, this family with three beautiful children thought about adopting a fourth child.

The child under consideration was from Eastern Europe.

⁴ Ibid.

They received a video of the child, and they took the video to their doctor, and all indications were that this child whom they would adopt had fetal alcohol syndrome.

Now the understandable thing to do would be to give up that particular adoption, right?

I mean, this is going to cause a REAL change in the family.

It's going to mean a sacrifice not just for the parents, but for their other three children.

As the mom wrote, while they were disappointed to learn that their prospective daughter had this disease, they were not dissuaded. The mother said that they saw this child that could be their daughter.

And if that child had stayed over there, in an orphanage, fetal alcohol syndrome, no parents...what hope does the child have?

Now if she comes to live with them here...she still has this disease...but she'll also have a family, and she'll also have some hope.

And this mother said, "Isn't that the gospel?"

To be family to those with no family?

To give hope to people who have no hope?

And the family adopted the child.

Now I know that is not always the going to be the best answer for a family that considers adoption. Each family is different. But for that family, it was their faithful response to what it means to love like Jesus.

And their decision really got me thinking.

How would my life be different if I were NOT trying to follow Jesus?

How is my life SUPPOSED to be different because I am a follower of Jesus?

I'm reminded of what Flannery O'Connor once wrote:

“What people don't realize” she said, “is how much religion costs. They think faith is a big electric blanket, when of course it is the cross.”⁵

Speaking of the cross, do you remember what happens to Nicodemus in the Gospel of John?

We don't hear from him again, until we reach chapter 19.
At the end of chapter 19, Jesus has just been crucified.
And Joseph of Arimathea comes, removing the body of Jesus.

But not just Joseph.

According to John 19.39:

“Nicodemus, who had at first come to Jesus by night, also came, bringing a mixture of myrrh and aloes, weighing about a hundred pounds.”

Nicodemus, who once came to Jesus by night, now comes to Jesus by day!

Nicodemus is such a wonderful character in this Gospel.
Not because of his extraordinary faith or his unflappable courage.
He's wonderful...because he's so ORDINARY.

In chapter 3, he's someone who struggles with his faith.
In chapter 3, he's someone who wants to follow Jesus, but is a little scared to follow Jesus.

But by Chapter 19, we learn that God has been at work in the life of Nicodemus...moving him from night to day...moving him from hesitation to courage...from asking questions to taking actions...we learn that God never gave up on Nicodemus.

Just like God never gives up on you and me.

⁵ From an undated letter in 1959 to Louise Abbot, as presented in *The Habit of Being: Letters of Flannery O'Connor*, selected and edited by Sally Fitzgerald, New York: Random House, 1979.

In the midst of our own hesitations and fears,
 pushing us, prodding us, helping us to embrace
 all that the love of Jesus demands...

I recall a once upon a time story.
 Once upon a time, there was a priest who had a dream.

This old priest, he dreamed that a mother named Mary was coming to see him. She had some concerns about her boy Jesus, who was 12 years old at the time. So the priest spoke with her son.

“What’s the matter?” asks the priest.
 “I don’t know,” says the boy. “I seem to roam the streets, wrestling.”
 “With whom are you wrestling?” asked the priest.
 “With God,” said the boy.

So in the dream, the priest takes the boy Jesus to his house, teaches him carpentry, and takes the boy for long walks during which the priest talks to the boy about God.

And the priest describes God as if God were a neighbor, very friendly,
 someone who might stop by for a chat
 on a long summer’s evening
 to spend a few hours with you.

Content to let you be you.
 Maybe even offer some good advice from time to time.

After about a month, the boy feels better.
 He goes home.
 He stops wrestling.

Many years later, the priest hears that the boy Jesus is doing fine.
 That boy is now in his 40’s, and has become the best carpenter the town of Nazareth has ever seen.

He is liked, he is accepted, he is successful.

And then the priest wakes up.⁶

I know it's a "Once Upon a Time" story.
What does that story mean?

To be liked, to be successful—nothing wrong with all that, unless you're Jesus. If you're Jesus, you wrestle with God, you struggle with God, you put down your carpentry tools one day...and you follow God not just through controversy, but all the way to the cross.

If you're Jesus, that's what you do.
Now, let's be clear.
Anybody in this room think that they're Jesus?
Good...

Anybody here a follower of Jesus?
No need to be timid, you can raise your hand...

If you're a follower of Jesus...what do you do?

Do you ever wrestle with God?
Do you ever struggle with God?
Do you ever go back and forth with how far you're supposed to go,
in order to follow Jesus
in order to show the love and grace of God?

In order to give hope those who have no hope?

Are you supposed to go as far...as turning the other cheek?
As far as loving our enemies?
As far as forgiving not 7 times, but 70 times 7???

Be careful how you answer that now.
Be careful.

⁶ This story appears in "Born to Set Thy People Free," a sermon by William Sloane Coffin, appearing in *The Collected Sermons of William Sloane Coffin: The Riverside Years, Volume 1*, Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008. Coffin believes the story appeared in a book by Nikos Kazantzakis.

If you go far enough with your answer,
your life might start to look a little different than the rest of the world.

You just might start standing out.

Amen.