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Easter 4 Year C 4-17-2016; John 10:22-30
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If you happened to be in church this past January, on the Second Sunday after the Epiphany (I won't ask for a show of hands), you may recall that the gospel lesson on that Sunday was also from John. And in the sermon on that lesson from John we considered his choice of the term "sign" rather than "miracle" to describe Jesus' turning the water into wine at the wedding he attended in Cana. We also discussed the ambiguity of both terms. A sign, as John understands the term, is more like an invitation to faith and a miracle is perhaps more like a demonstration or proof. But both are ambiguous because a sign can have many meanings and what others considered as the miracles of Jesus, for most Jews, were not viewed as a *sufficient* demonstration of God's working in him. I mention this ambiguity this morning because it comes up again in today's lesson from John, though in a somewhat different way. Today, we get a glimpse into some of the *frustration* caused by the ambiguity surrounding Jesus' words and deeds.

Although I won't have time to go into it, the Gospel of John is actually filled with ambiguity, much of it deliberate. Our brief lesson this morning follows one of Jesus' most dramatic signs in John, the healing of a man born blind. Playing with the symbolism of light and darkness, viewing seeing as a kind of faith and blindness as hard-hearted stubbornness, John uses this sign to remind his readers that, when it comes to having faith in God, the sighted can be more *spiritually* blind than those who are physically blind. Just after this, we find Jesus in today's lesson walking in the Temple during the festival of the Dedication, a festival we

know more commonly by its Hebrew name, Hanukkah, or the feast of lights. Again, John is playing with the symbolism of light and darkness. And, he also tells us, “It was winter.”

Now, we could take this simple observation as simply a way to remind us that Hanukkah is celebrated in the winter, at least in the northern hemisphere, but again, with John, we should also suspect that more is going on. In the midst of winter’s gray days, during the feast of Hanukkah, another light is walking through the Temple, but it is a light that only some will see and appreciate. The ambiguity is deepened and the frustration of the participants in the event rises. So, while we might conclude with John that those gathered around Jesus in the Temple, whom he calls “the Jews,” are simply hard-hearted, we might also give them a break and accept that at least some of them are genuinely perplexed by Jesus when they say to him, “How long will you keep us in suspense? If you are the Messiah, tell us plainly.” Again, John is harshly critical of those Jews who, in his view, simply refuse to acknowledge who Jesus is, but I confess I’m more sympathetic. All my life I, too, have wondered and, at times, cried out in frustration, why didn’t Jesus—or why doesn’t God—make things clearer? Why all this ambiguity? Even the saints complained about God’s “hiddenness,” and so, couldn’t we at least once in a while, get a break?

I’m trying to inject some humor into these very weighty questions, but if you or those you love have ever lived through a “dark night of the soul” you’ll know this is no laughing matter. Many, many good people—perhaps even Jesus himself as he died, feeling forsaken on the cross—cried out to God in frustration and even despair asking for some small sign, some small miracle, anything that

would that would give them a glimmer of hope, a moment of reassurance, that finally they matter to God, that God values and loves them as individuals.

In my view, John portrays Jesus responding to such questions in fairly dismissive terms. Jesus says to his questioners, “I have told you, and you do not believe...you do not believe because you do not belong to my sheep.” In other words, John suggests that those who have come to faith in Jesus were chosen by God and that those who don’t, well, too bad—they weren’t chosen. That may be comforting to those who already believe, but to those of us who struggle with the ambiguity of God’s presence in our lives and in the world, such a response may offer little solace.

Indeed, sometimes I just want to grab Jesus by the lapels, shake him, and say, “Tell us plainly!” But it wouldn’t work, even if I could do such an audacious thing. I have wrestled long with such ambiguities in the bleak winters of my own spiritual darkness, and I don’t have final answers to share. I have, however, wondered if there could be a reason or point to all this ambiguity and, if so, what that might be. I have, at least provisionally, concluded is that God is not particularly interested in clearing up all my doubts and questions (that seems obvious!), but is rather more interested in having me enter into a relationship with God that is characterized by love, love that preserves my freedom to accept or refuse it, for only in freedom can true love arise. It is because God seems to desire my love over my certitude that these ambiguities arise. Perhaps an analogy will help.

When we fall in love with someone, both parties must do so freely. Genuine love can’t be coerced; it must be given. Both parties must choose the other, and each must be free to refuse the other’s love. And this is how love is

related to signs. How might I demonstrate or prove my love for the other? I can't, finally. I can only invite it and signal it. Oh, perhaps I could do or say things to prove that I *don't*, in fact, truly love the other as I claim to, but what could I say or do to prove that my love is genuine? I can only suggest it is genuine by giving the other the freedom to refuse it, to open myself to the risk of rejection and misunderstanding, to make myself truly vulnerable to the other, and then wait in hope that the love is returned. But again, I must also give the other "space" (temporally, physically, emotionally) to discover for him or herself whether my love is genuine and whether it can be returned. I must give the other space "to be"—to be him or her best self and, as that best self, to discover within whether love can be offered in return. And should that love be returned, there is also no way I can ever know for sure, to know absolutely and without doubt, it is genuine. There is no proof my beloved could give me that I'm truly loved. For should I demand such proof, the trust between us that is a prerequisite for love would be destroyed and my beloved would rightly doubt my own love as merely a projection of my own need.

My suggestion to us this morning is that God, or God in Jesus, uses ambiguous signs deliberately so as not to be coercive, not to overwhelm us, for our love freely given is what God wants from us and, I submit, deep down what we want from God and to give to God. This means the ambiguities of what is essentially a relationship of love with God can never, finally, be overcome. There will be room for honest doubt in such a relationship because there is always room for choice, for our freedom, however limited. And we may indeed get frustrated and cry out, "Tell us plainly," but that's okay, because in that cry we can recognize an opportunity to grow more deeply in love. But still, most of us live in the midst

of a spiritual winter, looking for a light to guide us and to encourage us when we grow cold and disheartened, and so I conclude with a quote from Albert Camus.

“In the middle of winter I discovered within myself an invincible summer.”

It is my prayer this morning that we, too, will find an invincible summer of light and love within our dark and bleak spiritual winters. Amen.