

LIVING THE TRUTH OF A DOUBLE LIFE

(John 3:1-17)

The irony of today's sermon title is that what we are used to hearing from people who stand behind a sacred desk such as this one, is that *living a double life is living a lie*; so a sermon title like "living the truth of a double life" has the sound of a *misnomer*; an *oxymoron*; a *non-sequitur*, since supposedly there IS no truth in living a double life.

But on this holiday Sunday that marks the official beginning of summer in our United States of American culture; on this Memorial Day weekend where we are called to re-member many things—as well as called to make corresponding decisions as to what to *bring forward* from what we remember, and what to *leave behind*—I'd like to talk a bit today about a particular way to look at the concept of *living a double life* that can be creatively life-giving, compatible with what Jesus teaches us today about the kingdom of God, and hopefully illuminating

as to how the discipleship experience of Nicodemus can inform our OWN continuing and hopefully growing discipleship.

II.

In 1903, an African American sociologist and historian named W.E.B. DuBois, wrote a book entitled *The Souls of Black Folk*. (Just so you won't feel left out, he also wrote a book called *The Souls of White Folk*—but it's a VERY different book)! Allow me to share with you a powerful and centering quote from *The Souls of Black Folk*:

One ever feels his two-ness—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder... He simply wishes to be both a Negro and an American, without being cursed and spit upon by his fellows, without having the doors of opportunity closed roughly in his face.

DuBois is describing the concept of what he calls “double consciousness;” and what I call the “living of a double life” that was and in many ways still is the reality and status quo for people of African descent in this country.

But people of African descent are not alone in having to live out the reality and truth of a “double consciousness” in our society:

- ✚ There are people whose gender and sexuality don't match up with the traditional “male, female and heterosexual” categories, who must live the reality and truth of a “double consciousness” in our society;
- ✚ There are people who are differently-abled who must live the reality and truth of a “double consciousness” in our society;
- ✚ There are people who live in perpetual poverty who must live the reality and truth of a “double consciousness” in our society.
- ✚ There are people who practice religions and faiths that are not born of the Judeo-Christian tradition, who must live the reality and truth of a “double consciousness” in our society.

Why? Because what they are striving and seeking for themselves just doesn't match up with where society has relegated them, and how society has decided that they deserve to be treated. So you always end

up having one foot in and one foot out of acceptance, respectability, and a stable existential orientation. One way to have a “double consciousness” is when you have to constantly carry the weight of your own self-worth onto a battlefield that is always seeking—in ways that are unmistakably “othering”—to strip that worthiness away from you.

But the concept of having to have a double consciousness can work in a slightly different way also. Because one can be like Nicodemus—a member of the ruling populace—whose curiosity about something whose worthiness had already been questioned began to form in him a more expansive way of looking at things.

III.

Nicodemus was a Pharisee—in fact, a LEADER of the Pharisees—and his Pharisaic community was the ruling party as temple politics and good order goes. And Jesus had just shown very “bad order” as, right before the story of Nicodemus appears in John’s gospel, Jesus had just taken a whip of cords and drove the Passover money changers and animals out

of the temple, declaring that the temple should not be made a marketplace! The Pharisees in particular could not have been very happy about that.

It's after that that Nicodemus comes to see Jesus, after night had fallen, so that *those who respected him as a religious leader would not see him talking to Jesus*. Because Jesus had already been labeled by them not only as unworthy, but also as a criminal—because of that little stunt he pulled in the temple!

But Nicodemus begins his visit with some strange words, words that don't quite line up with reality: Nicodemus says that both he AND the Pharisaic community he represents knows that Jesus is a teacher who has come from God—because no one but God could do the things that Jesus does! By saying that, Nicodemus thus becomes the spokesperson for a group of Pharisees who have already *discredited* Jesus, but who now speaks words of *credit* to Jesus on that group's behalf. Very confusing . . .

For his part, Jesus ignores what Nicodemus just said—maybe because Jesus just didn't believe him! You know, it's hard to get a lie past Jesus. He's got this uncanny knack of knowing when we're lying! We all need a "knack like that!"

So Jesus goes on to begin to teach Nicodemus about a true double consciousness, and what the truth of leading a double life really is.

IV.

In his reply to Nicodemus, Jesus uses a word that has a double meaning. When he says to Nicodemus that "no one can see the kingdom of God without being born—and here John the gospel writer has Jesus using the Greek word *anōthen*, which can mean "from above" or "again."

Nicodemus couldn't yet grasp the double consciousness Jesus was trying to introduce him to. So Jesus tried an "immersion" approach, and bombarded Nicodemus with words and imagery that all had double meanings:

- ✚ Jesus spoke to Nicodemus about the kingdom of God—the reign of God that is both temporal (as in “the reign of God is ALWAYS”) as well as spatial (as in “the reign of God is EVERYWHERE”)
- ✚ Jesus spoke about not being able to understand that the kingdom of God is always and everywhere unless you are born both of water (which signifies a *physical birth*) as well as of the spirit (which signifies a *spiritual RE-birth*)
- ✚ Jesus speaks about the wind blowing where it chooses, but the word used for “wind” is also a word which means “spirit”—signifying that the Spirit blows where it will, just like the wind does.

Nicodemus was having a hard time with all this new information

Jesus in effect said “Listen to me Nic. I’m trying to help you see what you didn’t even know you weren’t seeing. In order for the kingdom of God to reveal itself to you, you have to live a *double life*. You have to live life not just on *one* level, but on *two* levels. You have to have one

foot anchored in the *physical realm* of life; and the other foot anchored in the *spiritual realm* of life. In that sense, it requires living a double life, having a double consciousness. And do you know what anchors you in both realms of that life Nic? Gratitude to God for the revealed gift of God's love!" Living the truth of a double life is living out our gratitude to the God of heaven and earth, right here on earth, while every moment anchored in the spirit is an unspeakable joy!

And Beloved, what Jesus was seeking to get Nicodemus to see is the same thing that Jesus is trying to get US to see: that Jesus IS that revealed gift of God's love! And that love is present and accessible to us, right here, right now, and always. It culminates in the life, death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus, the Anointed One of God

Because there is another word that Jesus uses today that has a double meaning for the double lives we lead: that word is *eternal life*, as in "so that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life."

Eternal life is life not only in the future; but also life in the present.

Eternal life begins NOW, and is fed through God's imagination into God's never-ending kingdom.

So the double lives we live are lives that are constantly renewed, powered by the Spirit of the living God, and lived in the truth of that very real God, who is always and everywhere, and whose love is meant to feed the whole human community, through our lives that are here, but not yet; on different levels, but that seeks its unity, from a God who is Love and Unity Personified.