

Sunday, May 26, 2024
Romans 8:12-17; John 3:1-17
"Born to Give us Second Birth"
The Rev. Joan Withers Priest, preaching

How many of you like to read bumper stickers? I do, especially when I'm stuck in traffic. The funny ones, like, "I'm pretty sure my last words will be, hold my beer and watch this!" Or the psychological ones, "It is a scientific fact, you are not the center of the universe." Or the political ones, "In God we Trust, In Government, we question." I especially enjoy the religious ones. You've seen them: "Be Fishers of Men.... you catch 'em, He'll Clean 'em." Or "My Way is the Highway, signed GOD". Or from our lesson today, simply "John 3:16". I've seen that all over the place. There is another one I read, "The Bible said it, I believe it, that settles it." Well, when I read that one, I did one of those little gasps and thought, I'm glad I'm Presbyterian. Presbyterians, by the way, are known to be "thinking Christians". We are open to the spirit of God, to the message of Christ, and yet feel quite comfortable questioning all of it – our Bible, our faith, our God. It's all part of our learning and growing in faith.

And on this Trinity Sunday, it is quite fitting that our story is the questioning, thinker, Nicodemus. Now Nicodemus was a very well-educated religious man, a devote leader of Judaism, an interpreter of the law. He was a responsible, kind, intelligent person who worshipped regularly in the synagogue. And yet, something was missing from his life. And yet, he had questions. And since this man named Jesus had come into his town, preaching a message of love and forgiveness, healing the sick, eating with sinners, his entire belief system was shaken. He needed to know the authority behind this man, this prophet, who could do and say such things. He needed to know that through his obedient life that he too would be a part of this "kingdom" of God, this Jesus spoke about.

So he came to Jesus by night, by candlelight, in the darkness, and took a great risk coming to see him because if he was caught, his entire credibility could be lost. So with fear and self-assurance he comes and asks Jesus, "from all I have heard and seen; you must be from God, right?" What he is really asking is, "and if I believe, will I be part of this kingdom you talk about?" Jesus answers him, "Very truly I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above." What Jesus was really saying was, "you see, God is starting a new family - which comes from above, from a spiritual rebirth of your soul."

The word "above" could also mean "again" or "anew" which is probably why Nicodemus misinterpreted it – he thought Jesus meant he had to be born again, a second time. Oh, how many have misinterpreted that phrase over the years! Born again Christians beware! Now Nicodemus is totally confused. And Jesus makes his point by bringing up the two most uncontrollable things of them all – birth and wind. Wind, no one knows where it blows, it blows where it will – you can hear it, you can feel it, but you can't control it. And birth – you can prepare all you want – but in the end, very little is under our control – just ask anyone who has given birth! I have stories! You think you have it all under control only to find out, none of it is what you thought! And so it is with the spirit and rebirth, you can't control it, you don't choose it, it chooses you – the spirit of God doesn't belong to you, you belong to it.

Being born of the spirit, being born from above, means that we are claimed by God, we belong to God. [Just like Ashley, through Baptism we become part of a new family, God's

family]. And here Jesus defines the Trinity. God is the one who loves the world, who created the world, and who, unwilling to let it perish, gives us the Son, to rescue and restore the world. And God connects us to God's son and the world by the Holy Spirit. Recall the Romans passage just read, according to Paul, we are not only God's children, but also heirs, and not just heirs, but co-heirs with Christ. Now, think for a moment about what Paul is really saying. That God considers us co-heirs – that is, equal inheritors of all God has to give as creator, Son, and spirit. And not only that, but Paul goes on to describe the huge difference it makes. Rather than being afraid – of the future, of what people may think of us, of our status, of our standing with God – Paul invites us instead to imagine a life of courage, the courage of those who have been adopted by God and invited into the full measure of God's blessings.

Jesus says much the same to Nicodemus, inviting him and us to imagine that we have the opportunity through our life in the Spirit to be born anew, born from above as God's children. For Nicodemus, this would mean he would have to rid of all his assumptions about God, about himself, all that he so devoutly believed, and let it all be washed away and replaced by a radical new understanding of who God really is and how God really works. It was an infusion of life, an opening of the mind, a rolling away of the stone, and it blew him away.

So, this past week I celebrated being ordained 35 years. It's been 36 years since I graduated from Princeton Theological Seminary! I know, I look so young! When I entered Seminary as a new student all those years ago, I was so excited. I was going to study with some of the top theologians in the country. Professors who taught from books they had written, using bibles they had helped translate, from theological perspectives that were transforming Christianity. I thought my spirituality would deepen and intensify; my faith would become clear and certain. But by the end of my first year, I was so confused I didn't know what to believe. Atonement, Karl Barth, predestination, John Calvin, consubstantiation, Zwingli, dispensationalism, Walter Brueggemann, sanctification – then there was Greek and Hebrew. Everything I had believed, my entire faith structure, my theology, everything I held dear to my faith, had been thrown up into the air. I can relate to Nicodemus.

One pastor recalling when he was a student who actually had Walter Brueggemann as his Old Testament Professor remembers Brueggemann saying to him during his first year, "I'm going to break you down; I'm going to blow up your world as you know it. You're going to question everything." Be prepared for chaos. When he asked the professor "why, why would you want to do that?" He smiled at the student and said, "Because it's what happens when you grow up and let God be God." (1) And here's the thing – we are all theologians – all of us! How cool is that?! Because a theologian is anyone who goes through life expecting to find God at work, searching for God at work in new and even ridiculous ways; searching for God's spirit in all we do and see.

And that's exactly what Jesus was asking Nicodemus to do. He offered him an entirely new way of thinking and being. There are times in all our lives, whether in seminary *or not*, when our faith, our beliefs, are thrown up in the air – through tragedy, death, illness, pain, suffering, loss, we have doubt, we have questions and lots of them. Many people leave the church altogether. Others, through time, come back because they know this is the place where they can ask their questions. They may not receive all the answers, or the answers they want, but they are assured God is with them.

Jesus said, God loves the world. The entire world. This world. This foolish, backward, sinful world, so much, so much that God made the greatest sacrifice possible, for us. And through that sacrifice God promises life everlasting. Now this kind of love is a love that breaks through our human conception of what love means and what love is. We can't possibly describe it with words or even picture it, so Jesus uses images and stories.

The image we have here is from the Old Testament. It is a strange story. On their journey through the wilderness, the people of Israel grew tired and impatient. Who could blame them, they traveled for years! And they began to complain – “no food – no water – we hate this life – it might have been better for us to remain as slaves in Egypt – at least we had food to eat and homes to live in.” They doubted their faith –

– and SO, God sends fiery serpents to bite the people, poison them, and shock them back into faith. Geez! The people cry for mercy and repent, and Moses falls to his knees petitioning God to have mercy on his children. Then God instructs Moses to make a bronze image of a serpent and put it on a pole and hold it up in the middle of the camp, saying, “Look up and be saved.” Those who looked at the serpent in belief, were healed of their bites, their wounds, and were saved.

Just as that serpent was lifted up, and the people looked at it, their thoughts were turned to God, and by the power of God in whom they trusted, they were saved; in the same way, Jesus must be lifted up, onto the cross, and we must turn our thoughts to him and we will be saved and find eternal life. We have all been or are going to be painfully bitten by life. And the only thing that matters is how we react to that bite. As one pastor states, “When the gospel of God's love is lifted up among us, it draws out all of our venom and all that poisons the world. The glory of God's eternal love for you, for me, and for the world only touches the earth through a cross – amid the vipers and the venom.” (2) When we look up, look to God, look to our savior on the cross, we are assured we will be okay. We may still question, doubt, question, but we will be loved.

And now we reach the most famous, the most overly used verse in all of scripture. John 3:16. For God so loved the world, he gave his only son. . . We see the signs everywhere, at football games, on bumper stickers. The problem is people have used this verse of scripture as a weapon to justify damnation for all unbelievers - whoever believes in Jesus is saved, everyone else, well, not so much. But I'm pretty sure 17 comes after 16. And I'm pretty sure they haven't read verse 17. Because in verse 17, we hear the clear explanation, affirmation and indeed repetition that the Son was not sent to condemn but to save.

Vs. 17: “God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him”. So, it's not about who's in and who's out, but rather about God's consistent intent to love, save, and bless the whole world. And the Greek word for “World” “Kosmos”, is actually interpreted throughout the rest of John's Gospel as an entity that is hostile to God. Which means that we might actually translate these verses more like, “For God so loved the - God-hating - world, that he gave his only Son” and “God did not send the Son into the world to condemn - even this world that despises God - but instead so that the world - that rejects God - might still be saved through him.” That audacious, unexpected, even crazy character of God's love is probably why it saves! (3)

I was reminded recently of a poem by Hafiz which states: “I am a hole in a flute that the Christ's breath moves through . . . listen to this music.” Let me repeat: “I am a hole in a flute

that the Christ's breath moves through . . . listen to this music." We are the instrument through which Christ's love and grace breathe. We all have that hole in our lives, but we all need to realize the spirit of God flows through us like we are an instrument. The hole is required for music to be made, God needs our longing, our searching, our questioning just like Nicodemus, in order for God's love to be able to flow through us. The flute has several holes in that we are in a community of searchers who together can provide beautiful music. Notice the poem ends with "listen to this music" – not listen to my music – but listen for the music God is continuing to make each day through us. It is music that opens the heart and frees the soul. Can you hear it? Can you fathom that your life, no matter how seemingly insignificant, is never insignificant to God? Can you feel the life-giving essence being breathed within and through you?

Here's what I love about Nicodemus. He doesn't just drop his net and follow Jesus. Or in this case, his law books. There is no immediate response. He goes back into the darkness after speaking with Jesus. Nicodemus disappears into the night to wrestle with himself, with the voice of life calling to his spirit. We don't know the details of how that struggle was worked out, but we do know that Nicodemus appears two more times in our gospel. Once when he tried to restrain the Pharisees in their attempt to silence Jesus - he couldn't quite sign up, but he could make sure that Jesus was treated justly. The second time is at that very place most pew-sitting Christians conveniently avoid: the cross of Good Friday.

As one pastor states, "As night falls quickly on Calvary's hilltop, two new disciples step forward. One is Joseph of Arimathea, boldly asking Pilate for the body of Jesus and offering his own tomb for burial. And joining him in the task of ministering to the one who died as a common criminal is our Nicodemus, overflowing with spices. The triumph of grace is so visible. He comes to claim the dead body of the teacher he was unable to publicly acknowledge in life." (4) As the sun sets on that fateful Good Friday, something wonderful is born in the soul of Nicodemus. He no longer hides in the shadows, nor hides from what he believes, or who he is. This cross the "T's" and dot the "I's" Pharisee is spotted holding the cold, lifeless body of Jesus, tenderly caring for the One who met him in his darkest night and blessed him with a resurrection all his own. And he was born again from above.

May we too come to that place where we allow ourselves to be born a second time from above, when we allow the spirit to move us where it will, to be the hole on the flute that Christ's breath flows through, and be adopted into a new family, into the one who keeps our life, as children, as heirs, of the living God. May it be so, Amen.

(1) www.desperatepreacher.com

(2) Tickle, The Rev. Phyllis. "A Serpent in the Desert" 11/6/05

(3) Lose, The Rev. David. "Just One More Verse!"

(4) Perry, The Rev. Carol. "Slow Grace" 1/15/06