

**Be Love****John 3:1-12****Sunday, March 5, 2023 – Lent 2 – Parkminster United Church**

If you are like me, you hear a Scripture passage like this, and many others from the gospel of John and simultaneously think it is beautiful, almost poetic, and yet I am not sure what is really being said. It is a text that invites us to go beneath the surface, to plumb the depths of word and symbol and Spirit. As I began to peel back the layers of the story and work through each verse, what emerged was a glimpse into the mystery of life in the Spirit.

The conversation between Nicodemus and Jesus begins with Nicodemus coming to Jesus at night. How late, we don't know, probably late. Was Jesus asleep? Clearly Nicodemus could not sleep, his was a soul tossing and turning in the middle of the night. It's a curious time for a visit - a visit that doesn't seem on the surface to have a purpose. In fact, Nicodemus took quite a risk to come to Jesus at all. He was a teacher in the temple and a leader, a Pharisee, a sworn doubter, and a critic of Jesus. Normally, a Pharisee wouldn't want to be in the company of Jesus. Yet something led him to Jesus' door in the middle of the night. The risk he took might be our first clue that something important was happening to Nicodemus. Sometimes being faithful requires taking a risk.

It is not clear exactly what has led Nicodemus to come to Jesus for he asks no question, tells of no struggle, and doesn't even challenge one of Jesus' teachings. Instead, he offers a statement of faith in Jesus, "Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God; for no one can perform the signs and wonders you do, unless by the power of God." These are hardly the words of a doubter or critic. It seems Nicodemus has risked everything for a clandestine visit because he wants to experience this for himself.

I imagine that there must have been a long pause before Jesus spoke as if Jesus heard Nicodemus' words but knew there was something else beyond the words beneath the words. I imagine that Jesus opened himself to Nicodemus, much like he opened himself to everyone he encountered, and opened himself to the guiding presence of God between them. At the very least, he must have paused long enough so that his next words, which are a complete change of subject, did not feel disrespectful. He says, "The truth of the matter is, unless one is born from above, one cannot see the kingdom of God." Other translations of Scripture use the language of being "born again." Now before you think too much about the loaded phrase "being born again" you must know that the word in Greek that is here often translated as "again" simultaneously means "above" and "again" or "anew." This ambiguity is important and lost when simply translated as again.

Jesus looked beyond Nicodemus' words and recognized that a spiritual transformation was happening in Nicodemus. Jesus sensed that the Spirit was working on Nicodemus' heart and mind and Jesus wanted to encourage him. And so he chose to reveal to Nicodemus the mystery of spiritual transformation that we are all invited to be born again or born anew and born from above. Born again or anew suggests that spiritual transformation is a radical change as if starting a new life. Almost any change can feel like we are starting a new life. Graduation from high school, college or university, the beginning of a life partnership, the birth of a child, the

end of a partnership, the death of a parent, the death of a spouse, and retirement are just a few examples of life's passages through which we are born again into a new life. Some fundamentalist Christians have used this idea of being born again as a kind of code word for acceptance and approval in the faith, emphasizing it as a one-time life-saving event.

Theologian Marcus Borg, however, invites Christians to reclaim the metaphor of being born again, suggesting it as a bridge metaphor to use in talking about transformation. As he explores the importance of this story, he emphasizes the ambiguity of the meaning of the original Greek. He writes that the importance of the second meaning of the word, being born from above, suggests that Jesus preached not of change for its own sake, but personal and social transformation rooted in the Spirit. He goes on to say that, "For most of us, being born again is not a single intense experience, but a gradual and incremental process. Dying to an old identity and being born into a new identity, dying to an old way of being and living into a new way of being, is a process that continues through a lifetime"(Marcus Borg, *The Heart of Christianity*, 2003.) I like Borg's idea and that the welcoming of the incremental changes he talks about, both big and little is what it means to live life led by the Spirit. I believe the kingdom or realm of God can be understood as a vision of what humanity - each of us - and all of creation can become through this process of being born anew. The work of the Spirit is to nudge and lead us toward that vision every day. Our work is to welcome the leading of the Spirit as we embrace the life we have been given. Jesus recognized that the Spirit was already at work in Nicodemus, and that Nicodemus must embrace the new life that was trying to be born in him.

This makes me think of the poem, *The Woodcarver*, by Chuang Tzu, which speaks to our process of becoming. The poem tells the story of a carver who crafted a work of art, a bell stand. Everyone was amazed by its beauty and wanted to know the secret. Typically, when this story is told, we try to relate to the woodcarver. But for today, I would like to suggest that we are like the bell stand and that the woodcarver is the Spirit. Here's a portion of the poem: "Khing, the master carver, made a bell stand of precious wood. When it was finished, all who saw it were astounded. They said it must be the work of spirits. The prince of Lu said to the master carver: "What is your secret?" Khing replied: "I am only a workman: I have no secret. There is only this...I was focused on the single thought of the bell stand. Then I went to the forest to see the trees in their own natural state. When the right tree appeared before my eyes, the bell stand also appeared in it, clearly, beyond doubt. All I had to do was to put forth my hand and begin. If I had not met this particular tree there would have been no bell stand at all. What happened? My own collected thought encountered the hidden potential in the wood; From this live encounter came the work which you ascribe to the spirits."

God's vision for each of us is not a fixed destiny we must accept or reject, but rather a hidden potential whose shape is determined by the live encounter between us and the Spirit. Now Nicodemus didn't totally get it. Maybe he wasn't really ready. Maybe he was afraid. Maybe the ambiguity wasn't satisfying enough for him. And so, in the midst of his anxiety on this night of the soul, all he can see is the strange literal picture of being born again. Reflecting on the physical impossibility of being literally born again, all he can say is, "How can this be possible?"

Do you ever look at your life and ask the same question, "How can this be possible?" During this Lenten season, a season of paying attention to the urgings of the Spirit, how are you being

invited to change? What ways are you being born anew? Are you feeling resistant to this change? Are you stuck seeing only the surface of things? How do you believe in those things both seen and unseen? What will it take for you to be open to be led more fully into the life you have been given?

In her 2013 book, *Christianity after Religion*, historian Diana Butler Bass points out that the English word "believe" comes from the German word for love. To believe is not to hold an opinion. To believe is to treasure. To hold something beloved. To give your heart over to it without reservation. To believe in something is to invest it with love.

This is true in the ancient languages of the Bible as well. When the writers of the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament wrote of faithfulness, they were not writing about an intellectual surrender to a factual truth. They were writing about fidelity, trust, and confidence. As they saw it, to believe in God was to surrender their whole hearts, minds, and bodies to the Spirit.

I can't think of any significant human relationships in which doctrine matters more than love and trust. So why should our relationship with the Divine be any different?

What does it mean to believe in Jesus? To hold onto him? To trust him? For Nicodemus, it meant starting anew, letting go of all he thought he understood about the life of faith. It meant being "born again," becoming a newborn, vulnerable, hungry, and ready to receive reality in a brand new way. None of this could be reduced to an altar call or a litmus test. The work of trusting Jesus was mind-bending, soul-altering *work* — it was hard, and it took time, and it involved setbacks, fears, and disappointments. No wonder Nicodemus walked away baffled that first night. Jesus was calling him to so much more than a rote recitation of a prayer; he was calling him to fall in love and stay in love. Why is belief important to God? Because *love* is important to God. To believe is to be-love. (Debie Thomas, "Where the Wind Blows," 2020.)

The scripture story from last week's worship service, Jesus' temptation in the wilderness, begins with an innocent and yet important phrase, "Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness..." I don't know if Jesus was excited about being led into the wilderness. But he was open to the Spirit's leading, entrusting the outcome to his faith in God. In this season of Lent, we too are led into the wilderness. Wandering, thirsting, yearning, waiting, and listening go with the territory. This Lenten season, as we invite the Spirit to lead us into life, we open ourselves to let the winds of the Spirit blow where they choose. Like Nicodemus, let us embrace the beauty of night's darkness and create space for curiosity, vulnerability and even uncertainty, knowing that that a new day is dawning. Let us welcome the Spirit and let us be love.

May it be so. Amen.

Rev. Heather Power