

Second Sunday in Lent
March 12, 2017
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Born of Love

C. S. Lewis said, “If you want religion to make you feel really comfortable, I don’t recommend Christianity.” Trying to craft a sermon on today’s Gospel, I agree!

The Gospel opens with Nicodemus coming to Jesus in the dark of night seeking answers, as if he is embarrassed to ask Jesus for answers to questions he should know. There is reason for confusion however, because the concept Jesus is trying to convey using “born again” language, is one of believing first, and then having that belief drive your actions—this was a brand new concept for the Jews. On Wednesday evenings during Lent we are exploring the book, *Mudhouse Sabbath*. The book makes the point that Jews pray, read scripture, and follow traditions in a life rhythm. For Jews, it is through actions first, doing and experiencing a life rhythm through which they come to understand the scriptures, and then believe and develop faith. It is a doing first, believing second model familiar to Nicodemus.

Nicodemus is likely confused, because birth involves blood and men would not have much to do with it, especially a Jewish scholar. Nicodemus came to Jesus in the dark of night, but there is the deeper darkness of unbelief that I think is troubling him. He cannot understand the concept that Jesus is suggesting -- that we can be born again in the Spirit. Nicodemus seems stuck in his literal, physical world-view and he cannot get past it. Their conversation had to be interesting to be sure, Nicodemus asking Jesus, “What exactly do you mean by being born from above? Above what? I mean, really Jesus, how does that work? I’m a grown man, what is it you are suggesting?” Nicodemus understands all the individual words, but the concept of believing first, and then acting on that belief is completely lost on him—it is the opposite of his Jewish “do first and belief will come” model he has known all his life. He was stuck and unable to grasp a concept of rebirth and he needed to understand.

I imagine Jesus wanted to shake Nicodemus and tell him, “You are more than just flesh!” Can you imagine the scene? Jesus raising his voice in frustration, “You cannot see the wind, but you know that it is there; it is about the Spirit, it is not just about the flesh.” We share our spirit with God—that is what makes us brothers and sisters. We have heard some of this before, “It is not enough to say we have Abraham as our ancestor.” In other words, we are not united because we share DNA with Abraham. I think Jesus is trying to say that we have the Spirit of God in all of us—weather we acknowledge it or not—and the Spirit is who unites us to God and each other.

Still, I have questions about this first part of this Gospel. What in the world possessed Jesus to use the metaphor about being born again in the first place? What was he thinking? His task was to explain God’s immense and incomprehensible love for us in human terms. Trying to explain to someone the nature of God in human terms seems an insurmountable task. To the human mind God is incomprehensible—since the dawn of time humankind has tried to sort it out and come to an understanding. Jesus came to enlighten us to the love of God, to get us to understand that we are all one in the Spirit, and that love is the opening door to our salvation.

This is a tall order. Imagine Jesus going off by himself to pray about how to get this message to us, the human race, the children of God, created in the image of God, loved by God who will provide for us. All we are asked to do, is to love God and our neighbors—be in right relationship with our brothers and sisters.

Imagine Jesus contemplating how to deliver this message in a way we could understand it, in an earthly way. He would need to start with the very basic concepts of the life that we experience to explain it.

In my head, I picture Jesus praying about how to convey this message, and “pop” a light bulb appears above His head as he jumps up, and exclaims, “I’ve got it.” Jesus is excited, he knows what to say to clear everything up! Getting in right relationship with God is like being born again! Simple, birth is the most basic understanding of human life! Everyone should get this...right? Being born we are a creation of our parents, made in their image, loved by them, cared for by them, dependent upon them, and as a family, we need to be in right relationship with our brothers and sisters. “This is great,” Jesus thinks, “I nailed this metaphor for sure! I mean, who could miss this?” So all excited, he runs off to teach the new concept to His followers. Yet, here we are, two thousand plus years later still pondering what this Gospel means.

Sometimes I think we all understand individual words, but do not comprehend their true meaning. Trying to explain to someone the nature of God in human terms seems an insurmountable task because God is incomprehensible for our minds, but we know God in our hearts.

I tried to find some common ground with Nicodemus and his inability to comprehend the true meaning of words. I found that common ground in the next part of the passage, specifically John 3:16.

In Washington, DC, if I say 26.2, to most of us it means a marathon, and if I say 3.14 who doesn’t love a piece of pi? John 3:16 is part of today’s Gospel and it is likely the most marketed Bible passage of all time. I have seen it on a billboard on 95 South. Do you remember when you first saw it on a billboard, sign, bumper or T-shirt?

My earliest memory of John 3:16 was when I was a child riding in a car with my Mom -- it was on the license plate of the car in front of us. I thought, John got a car for his birthday on March 16th. John must be really proud of the car he got for his BD and had a vanity plate made. My Dad was a car salesman, so like my sisters before me, I knew that I would someday get a car for my BD, and I thought perhaps I would have a plate that read Jamie 5:26 – how cool would that be? A few weeks later, the Superbowl was on TV, and when they panned the crowd there was a guy with a sign that read, John 3:16. “Wow! I exclaimed, look, that guy is from Erie. He was driving his car the other day on 12th street and there he is at the football game.” My sister explained it to me – apparently, it was not a guy named John, who was overly enthusiastic about his March 16th BD, it was a Bible verse. “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in Him may not perish but may have eternal life.” God so LOVES the world.

Like Nicodemus, on the surface I could read the words and numbers John 3:16, but outside of my tiny world, I was clueless as to their deeper meaning. I understood it in my head, but not in my heart.

I do not think that these two concepts, being born of the Spirit, and God sending His only Son to save us are in this Gospel by chance. Being born into a life, brought into a family, a community and understanding the love a parent has for a child is at the core of our human existence. Understanding that while we have human parents, we are all united as one family of God—His Spirit living in all of us—this is what I believe is the core of the Gospel message for today.

John 3:16 is an expression of radical love. The idea of giving ones own child for the salvation of the world is the ultimate expression of love. God loved the world even more than we can imagine, which means that we are GOOD and WORTH SAVING, and WORTH FIGHTING FOR, and therefore, it is WORTH LOVING God and each other with everything we can muster.

How do we experience the radical love proposed in John 3:16? When we are aware of the presence of Christ in our lives, and when we are living into the work God has given us to do, with joy. That joy however, does not stay with us, and it needs to be renewed -- reborn in us! How do we renew that joy, that re-birth? We renew our joy through worship, prayer, and meditation. But, we also renew it when we reach out and show love for each other, and recognize that we are united to God and each other through the Spirit.

Lent is a time for us to examine our lives, and our relationships with God and each other. To fast from that which keeps us from loving God, and take on practices that help us draw nearer to God. On Ash Wednesday, we were reminded that we are dust. Today we are reminded that we are also Spirit and united through Spirit to God and to each other. What would the world be like if everyone came to understand in their hearts that they were loved, and passed on that love to each other? God loves us just the way we are, "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. Go forth then, and "do" according to what you believe, what you know in your heart.

Amen.