

March 12, 2017

Questioning Heart/Born Again

PRAYER

May the words of my mouth be meditations of our hearts and be always acceptable unto Thee. O Lord our strength and our redeemer. AMEN

SERMON

The Gospel reading for this morning is one that I'm sure is very familiar to all of you. Story of Nicodemus. A Pharisee who has heard Jesus teach. Seems as though he has witnessed some of his actions. And certainly, if he was a member of the Sanhedrin, the ruling body of Israel, he certainly would have seen some of the things that Jesus had done.

In the Gospel, according to John, the cleansing of the temple occurs early in Jesus' ministry. And Nicodemus would have been aware of that. So, he comes by night because he doesn't want to be associated with this guy quite yet. He's not ready for that. But he has a questioning heart. He wants to know who this Jesus is and what he is really about. And so, he makes the effort to come to him. To ask the questions that are on his heart and in his mind. And he begins by saying to Jesus, "Rabbi, we know you are a teacher who has come from God. Because of the things that you say, because of the things that you are doing. We see this, we believe this. We understand this. Nobody could be doing the things that you're doing. (He didn't put it this way but I think was part of his statement). And getting away with it without God being with him."

And Jesus sees the sincerity of the person Nicodemus who is standing before him. His honest questioning. Here is a Pharisee who has built his life on following the law, understanding the law, teaching the law to others. Trying to ensure that everyone would know and understand that being a person in covenant with God that following the law and doing so in a particular way. With the hope that God would intervene in the like of the people. And to bring the people of Israel into this special place in the world. And that would be accomplished through the Messiah, the Christ, the Anointed One.

There is a sense of anticipation. John has come on the scene. Has predicted that this person is coming. Now is the time. So many people have heard that, have witnessed to that. And now this Jesus is teaching and preaching even in the temple. And people are responding and things are happening. And this man now comes explain to me, help me understand what's going on. Jesus acknowledges the sincerity of the question. And he says, he

takes the conversation to a very deep level. Very quickly, at least what we have. Said you can't see the kingdom of God. You can't really see the kingdom of God unless you are born from above.

That had to have been troubling for Nicodemus. Who sees the kingdom of God being bound up in the law. Why would one need to be born from above? Why would one need to be any different than who he is standing before Jesus? One who has followed the law and taught others to do the same. Isn't this about God's kingdom, God's rule, God's law?

So, he has to follow up with a question. How can somebody be born when they're old? How can I start over? What are you asking me to do? You're asking me to change how I see the world. You're asking me to change how I live in relationship to God. You're asking me to change who I am from the very core of who I've become. That's a lot to ask. Is it even possible? Nicodemus is asking is there any hope for me to be a part of this kingdom of God? I can't start over. You can't be born again. Can you?

You can't enter the kingdom of God unless you are born of water and the Spirit. Nicodemus knew what it was to have baptism. That's what John was teaching. It was very common for the Pharisees to have a form of baptism. Where they wash away, they repent from their sins. They wash themselves clean, they come out on the other side. They start again with the intention to do better. He knew about the water. What about the Spirit? How could he even know? Of course, it was a difficult question. A difficult statement for Nicodemus to hear. How do you want me to be born of the Spirit? How do I get that? How do you offer the Spirit of God?

And the only thing that Jesus could tell him there and now is that it's God's intention in the giving of his son to offer the Spirit of God. That God so loved the world, so loved humanity. That he gave his only son to the end that all believe in him. Put their faith in him. In what he is, in what he is doing, what he has done. Would enable him to be born of the Spirit. What's born of flesh is flesh, that's all that Nicodemus knew.

The time was coming where there would be a rebirth, a new birth. A birth to a resurrected life. That would come after Jesus had accomplished all that he needed to do. To present to the world, to present to his disciples, to present to his witnesses what God was doing in the world. And forgiving sins. And reconciling the world, creation to himself, to God. That time was coming.

Nicodemus had to be patient. Nicodemus had to wait. But the promise was there. God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten son that to the end that all who believe shall not perish but have eternal life. To be with

God. Because that is the life of Spirit. That is the resurrected life that was coming. Nicodemus had to wait. The life that Jesus talks about is the life that we are called to live now. We have witnessed the resurrection. We have witnessed the Spirit of God coming on those who believed in Jesus, who have followed Jesus, who are trying to live out their life that they have been called to. The disciples. After being visited by the resurrected Lord. Peace be with you. Don't be afraid. Go out into the world, share with them what you have seen. What you have experienced. Share with them the good news of the resurrection because it's a gift not just to you but to all people. An invitation to come and partake of the resurrected life. Live that life now so that you will be ready to enter into that fullness of that resurrected life when you go from this life to eternal life. That's good news. That's the gospel.

Nicodemus saw it dimly but the time was coming when he would be able to understand. When the message of the disciples was being spread throughout the land. That this Jesus, though he was crucified. Though he was dead, though he was in the tomb for three days was raised from the dead by God. To offer life to all who believe. To establish a new relationship with God. Not based on law but based on God's love through his son Jesus Christ.

Through the sacrifice, the Jesus Christ the Messiah so that the sins of all could be forgiven. And that's the pronouncement that the church has for the world. Your sins are forgiven. Believe. Come, be baptized. Start living the resurrected life. Know and understand that God has come and embraced his creation. Has taught us, has shown us what he wants for the world in his son, Jesus Christ. So, that all who believe can participate in that resurrected life here and now. Not when we pass from this life to the next. We are resurrected life now. We know the love of God for us deeply now. It is a gift given to all of us offered to each of us to be received now.

So many times, we have this mis-idea that we have to somehow change in order to receive the gift of life. To receive the gift of forgiveness. To receive the gift of reconciliation to God. Nothing could be farther from the truth. We're not asked to change to receive the gift. We are asked to receive the gift in order to change. To see the world, to change how we see God. To see how we see each other. To become that resurrected life now so that God's dream for the world, for creation, for humanity can begin now.

Where we know and understand God's love for us. And are free from fear to say I love you too. I put my faith and trust in you too. As you have put your faith and trust in us in giving us your son. And coming to us so that we

might be reconciled. That's the resurrected life. That's the life that we are all invited to participate in now. So, we can celebrate life and we can find the joy of living in this world. We can know the joy of traveling through the difficulties of life and not being alone but being in the hands of God. So that we anticipate, look forward to, coming into the fullness of that life in that relationship with God. As we pass from this world and come into the fullness of God's kingdom. Now as a foretaste in anticipation, in living out of it perfectly then translating from this life to life in the kingdom of God. Not because we have earned it but because God has offered it to us. And we have said Yes.

Season of Lent is all about remembering what has been offered. About remembering that we have been invited to a nearer and dearer relationship with God. To remember what God gave us in coming into the world and showing us what the love of God is about and inviting us to play a part. And may we take this season of Lent to say yes. May we take this season of Lent and remember our baptismal vows, the promises we made to God to be his children, to be his witnesses. To respect one another and to love and care for one another. To proclaim by word and example the good news in God and Christ. To seek justice, to do mercy. To be in relationship with one another. In relationships that give life, that give hope, that give promise. For that is the resurrected life and from the time that we are baptized and the Spirit of God comes to us. We are born of the Spirit. And we are living that resurrected life. May you live it more deeply. And may you be strengthened to invite others to live it as well.