

Introduction

Imagine that you are having a dream in which you are climbing a high mountain. The valley below is where you grew up, where you experienced pain, where you were wounded, where friends/relatives and perhaps family members died, and perhaps you made mistakes there too. You are trying to transcend and leave this place by reaching the summit of the mountain, on which you will be sublimely holy and one with God.

As the summit comes into view, the wind rising from the valley brings with it the sound of a child crying out in distress. You realize that there is no real choice but to go down the mountain to find and help the hurting youngster. Turning back, you descend into the valley. Following the child's cries, you arrive at the very home you tried to leave behind.

You carefully open the door and look inside. Sitting in the corner on the floor is your own wounded child-self, that part of you that holds feelings of powerlessness and regret. You sit down next to the child on the floor. For a long time you say nothing. Then a most amazing thing happens. As you are putting your arms around this child, you suddenly realize you are on the summit of the mountain, in union with God!

To be transformed in the compassionate love of God does not mean that we do not continue struggling and working through our limitations and difficulties. It means learning to join God who loves us completely in the midst of all our shortcomings from inside the day-to-day activities, the joys and sorrows, of life.

As we continue to be transformed in this way, we come to realize that right here, right now, with all of our imperfections, we are already one with a love that loves us and takes us to itself just the way we are.

(this story adapted from a talk by James Finley)

Body of the Text

Nicodemus

Perhaps Nicodemus, a Pharisee, and a “leader of the Jews”, began his journey up the mountain too. Thinking that if he could only climb the mountain of perfection, keeping the law impeccably as the Pharisees taught, then he could escape the struggles of his life and he would come to know God perfectly.

But as we have been continually reminded of late through our study of the *Sermon on the Mount*, keeping the law does not in itself help us experience the presence of God in our lives. We cannot perfectly obey God's law, something we are confronted with each day in the living out of our lives.

The law, although important, functions to drive us to the message of the gospel and the free gift, the unconditional promise, of grace. Rules and requirements are never an end in themselves.

It seems this was the tension that Nicodemus was struggling with – he kept the law, he was a good person, but he had a deeper feeling that something was missing.

I wonder if this would describe many of our feelings too. We are all essentially good people, law abiding, and we help others as we are able – but there is something in us too that yearns for this message of grace. There is a freedom in this message; a freedom to live, to join God’s symphony of life, to hope for what is yet to come...through grace, not through our perfectness, but through grace. What a relief this is actually; we don’t have to be perfect and we don’t have to get it right all the time.

At night

So Nicodemus decides to go to see Jesus in person to hear this message for himself.

He approaches Jesus not by day but by night – something some wonder about; why at night? Well, perhaps he did so at night in fear of being seen by his contemporaries; perhaps in shame over the unrest in his heart; or perhaps reference to the night is intended for *us as God’s people* to remind us that we too come face-to-face with Jesus, “the light of the nations”, from the blind spots of our lives, from our darkened corners.

Perhaps we are meant to see the promise embedded in this meeting.

And it begs a few questions for us too:

What are those areas of darkness in our lives where we miss the message of the gospel, and how is Christ inviting us to be transformed by his living Word?

This is a good reflection for us – perhaps now especially that we have begun Pastor Jeff’s Lenten reflection discussions groups which emphasises our own *hallelujahs, hiccups, and horizons* of our journey together.

The answers (to these questions) we work out together - by living out our faith lives as a community; by learning from those who think differently than we do; by listening for the work of the Spirit; by studying the bible together, not as a 1st century static document, but as the *living Word of God*, with the power to transform.

How is Christ inviting us to be transformed by his living Word? Our life as a church depends on how we answer this question.

Signs alone are inadequate

So Nicodemus comes at night, unsure, but approaching the one he calls “teacher” in all sincerity.

And he comes knowing something about Jesus too. He says, “Rabbi,” which means *teacher*, “We know that you are a teacher who comes from God, for no one can do these signs that you do apart from the presence of God.”

An interesting statement by Nicodemus, he recognizes Jesus as a teacher in the presence of God and in so doing points to a central theme of the gospel of John; that “signs alone are inadequate for understanding the message of Jesus.” (John 20:30-31)

What I mean by this: God is part of our every reality already – “but we hesitate to believe this until our personal experience gives us confidence to believe it.” (Thomas Keating) Not just signs, it is in our personal experience of God – through our activities with others, during prayer or worship, in nature – that our faith is matured and strengthened; where we learn to trust God. It is the tangible glimpses of God which help move us forward on our faith journeys.

I know a few of us feel this during our Wednesday evening Holden Prayer services which we began this week and continue during Lent. It just does something to us, doesn’t it? It inspires us in some way.

Someone told me this the other day too. She had been going to church her whole life, listening to sermons, praying, and singing hymns but it was not until God became real for her in the struggles of her past and now the joy of the present that she has come to know God from the experience of the love of God and God’s mercy.

It is *heart* work that God performs on us. It is not what we think with our mind but more what we feel in our hearts and what we live in our lives together through which God comes near, is imminent. And it is a complete gift. Our lives of prayer are so important in this.

We spoke about this in our bible study on Thursday too. It is really the experience of God that helps us trust what God has already done for us.

Born from above

Initially, Nicodemus assumes that he is enlightened already, but Jesus redirects this thinking, “no one can see the kingdom without being born from above,” says Jesus. Some think of this as a command – to be *born again* as something we do - but I would say that it is more an invitation to be transformed by God. We do not birth ourselves, we are re-born in Christ.

Jesus’ meaning becomes clearer as we read on. When he tells Nicodemus that he needs to be reborn *by water and Spirit*, he is inviting Nicodemus to allow the *work of God* to permeate his life.

Essentially he says to Nicodemus/us...

we have to start over, we have to be re-born in Christ; and for that, we must become vulnerable, and innocent, and dependent as a child, we must let go of achievement, wealth, and reputation...let go of all the things that make us self-sufficient and that alienate us from the wonder of the gift of God.

Nicodemus' response and perhaps ours too: "How is this possible?" and perhaps he is thinking, "That's too costly, I cannot give all that up."

These are the last words we hear from Nicodemus in this text.

Not what we do

Jesus response to Nicodemus was like holding up a mirror in front of him and letting him view his life, perhaps for the first time, as completely in the hands of God (mirror). And here is our invitation too. It is not something Nicodemus does, or we do, but it is the work of God who brings us new life; we are held completely, gently, and compassionately in the hands of a loving God.

This is already so but we are involved too. When our hearts lead with a *yes* instead of a *no*, *trust* instead of *resistance*, our lives may be transformed. And we begin to see God in our activities with others, in our decisions, and even in our struggles and our doubts...

...rebirth is God's gift to give, God's work to accomplish, and it is God who labours to bring new life.

Our task is to align our lives with this message - to allow, to embrace, and to welcome new life in Christ; and to pray, "thy will be done."

The wind blows where it chooses

And then finally, as if to reinforce this message, Jesus says, "The wind blows where it chooses". With images of the breath of God sweeping over the waters in Genesis 1, God's Spirit is revealed as uncontrollable and unknowable as the wind.

And this is our journey which brings us through the mystery of life, led by the Holy Spirit – and into the arms of God. We move sometimes through joy and celebration but sometimes through trial and darkness – but always surrounded by the mercy of God; a God who laughs with us in our joys and weeps with us in our sorrow...

... all while God's promises never leave us. This is what a covenant relationship looks like and the integrity of grace. There is really nothing to fear. God's grace surrounds us. God is with us in all things. God is with us.

Conclusion

Ultimately, the message I think in this text is about letting go, being born into new life in Christ. There is complete vulnerability in this, isn't there, and an admission that we do not have the control that we think we do? But it is so important too because it invites us to open our imaginations to reconsider our relationships with God and with each other.

And it points to the kingdom message: When we are open to others, when we live with a readiness and a willingness to remain in relationship, this is the kingdom right now, this is salvation in the present – God's will being lived out among us through our openness to follow.

It is not about replacing our human nature with something more fully divine, *or climbing a mountain to attain some special spiritual blessing*, but of growing into an understanding of who we are as broken yet beloved children of the living God, and living out this understanding with each other in the here and now. It is about being free to let God give through us.

As long as we show up with some degree of vulnerability, the Spirit can keep working - *as long as we show up with some degree of vulnerability, the Spirit can keep working.* (adapted from the work of Richard Rohr)

What would we at Zion Lutheran Church become if we left our activities as a church totally in the hands of God? How would we pray? How would we be with one another? How would we treat those who are different from us? How would we interact with the community of Stratford? and other communities?

These are the questions that the Spirit poses to us now and each day of our lives in community.

Amen