

JOHN 3:1-17

¹Now there was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews. ²He came to Jesus by night and said to him, “Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God; for no one can do these signs that you do apart from the presence of God.” ³Jesus answered him, “Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above.” ⁴Nicodemus said to him, “How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother’s womb and be born?” ⁵Jesus answered, “Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit. ⁶What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit. ⁷Do not be astonished that I said to you, ‘You must be born from above.’ ⁸The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit.” ⁹Nicodemus said to him, “How can these things be?” ¹⁰Jesus answered him, “Are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things?

¹¹“Very truly, I tell you, we speak of what we know and testify to what we have seen; yet you do not receive our testimony. ¹²If I have told you about earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you about heavenly things? ¹³No one has ascended into heaven except the one who descended from heaven, the Son of Man. ¹⁴And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, ¹⁵that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.

¹⁶“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.

¹⁷“Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.”

Hungry for God **May 27, 2018**

One of my favorite musicals is *Fiddler on the Roof*. Some of you may be familiar with it. If not, I strongly suggest you see it. The story, which takes place in imperial Russia around 1905, centers on Tevye, the father of five daughters, and his attempts to maintain his Jewish religious and cultural traditions as outside influences encroach upon the family's lives.

"Tradition" is the opening number in the show where Tevye, explains the roles of each of its citizens (fathers, mothers, sons, and daughters) in the village of Anatevka, and how the traditional roles of people like the matchmaker, the beggar, and the rabbi contribute to the village. The song also sets the major theme of the show which is the villagers trying to continue their traditions and keep their society running as the world around them changes.

Tradition runs deep in their souls and sometimes it is hard to change. Tevye is constantly negotiating with God about how to do this especially with the strong-willed actions of his three older daughters who wish to marry for love, rather than through the traditional ways of having a matchmaker. And each daughter’s choice of a husband moves further away from the customs of his faith. Tevye manages, through some quite humorous ways, to convince his wife, Golde, that this is best for the girls. All seems to be going well until Chavelah his third daughter falls in love and elopes with a Russian boy named Fyedka, and that is the last straw for Tevye. Because of his traditions, he just can’t allow it, and as a result, they disown her and think of her as if she were dead. No one is to talk to her or have anything to do with her. It is a tragic and heartbreaking scene. But redemption comes at the end of the musical when everyone in Anatevka is forced to leave due to the Russian pogroms.

As the Jews leave Anatevka, Chava and Fyedka stop to tell her family that they are also leaving for Kraków, unwilling to remain among the people who could do such things to others. Tevye still will not talk to her, but

when Tzeitel, his oldest daughter says goodbye to Chava, Tevye prompts her to add "God be with you". It is his way of letting her know that he loves her still. That the world is changing but love is stronger than tradition.

Sometimes we just have to let go of practices and traditions that no longer serve us or others.

That was the situation for a Mid-western family tradition I read about. The matriarchs of the family had passed along a time-honored recipe for the traditional Easter ham. Along with the list of spices and herbs, rubs and glazes, cook times and basting procedures, was the strict instruction that the last three to four inches of the ham must be cut off — completely removed. This order was an integral part of the recipe that their great-grandmother had passed down. Grandma continued the practice, as did her granddaughter. When the great-granddaughter was initiated into the secret recipe, she dared to ask why the ends of the ham were cut off. Neither her mother nor her grandmother had an answer. Thankfully, great-grandma was still around and had a perfectly logical explanation.

“My roasting pan was too short,” great grandma declared, “I had to cut off the last few inches or the ham would not fit in the pan.” Although the conditions had changed they had all continued to follow the old instructions, without knowing why, without realizing that their bigger roasting pans made it possible to fit the whole ham.

It is easy to get comfortable, to do things the way they have always been done. And maybe we are guilty of doing the same thing at times in our lives.

Maybe this was true for Nicodemus as well. He was a learned and spiritually wise leader, a Pharisee and not one without power and authority. He was one who made it his life’s purpose and mission to keep the law and traditions and help others to do the same. It was his ticket to being acceptable to God and his appearance in this story may highlight again the difference between keeping the law and experiencing God’s grace and mercy in the life of Jesus. And it got me wondering about any other Nicodemus’ in our lives. those who are so focused on keeping the rules, obeying the commandments, doing the right things, saying the right words, holding others accountable to standards of holiness? Do we know anyone like that? I’ll bet you do. And for them that gets to be a pretty heavy burden to bear after a while, doesn’t it? Especially when they discover they aren’t God after all.

And It may be that after seeing what Jesus had been doing and the signs that he had given, that Nicodemus knows that there is something incredible about this man Jesus, that he is from God and he wants to know more. Perhaps he heard a word that opened a door to his heart and he is hungry for more than the law and traditions, and so he comes to Jesus by night. The spirit is already moving ahead of him and though he may not understand it yet in time, he will.

I am reminded of a conversation I had a few weeks ago with some of my close friends. We were talking about, and wondering about, how it was that we cared about these spiritual things. How is it that we have this hunger for God? And why doesn’t everyone? I think it was in light of that passage about Jesus telling the disciples that he chose them, and it had us all thinking about when that happened in our lives. When did the Holy Spirit swoop into our hearts and compel us to find Jesus, God, the Holy, the Divine? do you ever wonder about that? and do you still feel that way? Are you still hungry for God?

A poem that I’ve shared before came to my mind in this reading and it was written by another pastor whom I’ve lived in the shadow of. Edgar Tufts who founded Lees-McRae College, as well as many other things in my neck of the woods, wrote this poem that really speaks to this moment of being born anew. it goes like this,

When 'twas, thy Holy Spirit came
Into my breast with quick'ning power
And set aglow a sacred flame
I cannot tell the day or hour,

Nor why it is thy Spirit chose
To make a home within my breast
And drive away my deadly foes
Of sin a lust and give me rest.

But this I know: the work begun
By Thee will never cease nor wane,
As long as God's immortal Son
As King of Kings, shall live and reign.

No fear of loss, the work is thine,
And thine alone forevermore!
No fear of death, thy light shall shine
To guide my way to heaven's shore!

Rachel Held Evans in her book 'Searching for Sunday' shares her wonderful faith journey as she struggled with deep and honest questions about the things she had been told were the truth about God, Jesus, and how to be a faithful Christian. It is a book I highly recommend. In her faith she moved from being a conservative Evangelical to a liberal (God forsaken) Episcopalian! Seeking, as many in her generation are, for the real Jesus. For an honest and authentic encounter with God, one that isn't steeped in pat answers, tradition, or theology but an honest, 'come to Jesus' meeting like Nicodemus is having today. Where doubt and faith get challenged to be renewed and reborn in ways that are often beyond our understanding. Where we can ask all the 'why and how' questions we have, and never be ashamed about that. She goes on to say, "We religious types are really good at building walls and retreating into temples. We're good at making mountains out of our ideologies, obstructions out of our theologies, and hills out of our screwed-up notions of who's in and who's out, who's worthy and who's unworthy. We're good at getting in the way. Perhaps we're afraid that if we move, God might use people and methods we don't approve of, that rules will be broken, and theologies questioned. Perhaps we're afraid that if we get out of the way, this grace thing might get out of hand. Well guess what? It already has."

And how are we also like old Nick, I wonder? Aren't we too often caught up in our own traditions and theological understandings of how God works in the world? How the church works in the world? We have our own traditions and rules, don't we? The ways we read and interpret scripture. How we govern the body of Christ, our polity, which is different across denominations. We have our book of confessions and statements of faith and catechisms, and God help you if you start to challenge those in a Presbytery or congregational meeting. "Why, we've done it that way since I was a child in this church! How can you suggest we do it differently? My parents donated that baptismal font! Don't you even think about it! See that big old Bible there on the pulpit! My Grandparents gave that to the church! Our church! Hands off sonny!

Now, Jesus knew about traditions and restrictions and was often criticized for them. "Your disciples don't wash their hands properly. You eat with sinners. You heal on the Sabbath. You harvested grain on the sabbath, you touched the dead and the sick. And Jesus reminded them that the Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath. He didn't dismiss them or condemn them he just merely pointed out that keeping all the rules, while important, are not the most important. Loving others, including others, forgiving others, feeding others, and a whole list of other things are equally important. And when we use these rules and traditions to judge and devalue and exclude others, then those traditions may become unholy indeed!

Yes, I think we may be very much like Nicodemus. This is not to say that our traditions are all wrong or bad. No judgement here. Just poking a little fun at ourselves this morning. But...but...do we lean on those traditions in such a way that we are no longer open to the movement of the Holy Spirit? Are we so stuck in our own ways that being made anew frightens us too much? Do we like Nicodemus try to talk our way out of it or around it? Can we be renewed? Are we willing, and are we open to it? It may not be up to us, this is Holy Spirit stuff, but it can't hurt to be ready to say 'yes' when it does happen. What do you think?

Because the bottom line is, you can't be holy on your own. Even Nicodemus couldn't. You can't earn it, deserve it, buy it, bargain for it, you can only open yourself to it and pray for the Holy Spirit to fill you. And you will be filled because this is a God thing! It is mysterious and wonderful and frightening and amazing, and I hope you feel it and know it. Keep seeking Jesus at night and ask him all your questions and let him pour out his love on you. And if you have any doubts that the Holy Spirit is present, I should remind you, that you wouldn't even be asking those questions if she wasn't already working and moving in your spirit.

Because the Spirit blows where it will—into our lives, into our churches, into our communities and our task is to be free enough to see it, and confident enough to believe it, and passionate enough to follow it! Perhaps like Nicodemus, we can look at how our own traditions and rules might keep us from truly listening and following the Spirit's call, and I hope you struggle with that a bit this week. Get a bigger roasting pan!

And do you want to know the rest of the story about Nicodemus? He shows up twice again in the gospels: Once when he is telling the Sanhedrin to listen to Jesus before they condemn him. The second time is when he and Joseph of Arimathea take the dead body of Jesus off the cross and place him in the tomb. Perhaps he began to believe after all, that even he could be born anew. Thanks be to God. Amen.