

Spirit Eyes

In one of the oldest manuscripts of Luke's gospel, Jesus says to a fellow working on the Sabbath:

"If you know what you're doing, you are blessed.

If you don't know what you're doing, you're in trouble."

Meaning, if the man understands that the Sabbath is made for us, and not us for the Sabbath; if the man understands that God's rules are not ends in themselves, but rather a means by which we come to know and love ourselves, one another and God, then he's on the right path.

But if that man is breaking the rules simply for the sake of breaking the rules, without these deeper understandings, these deeper motivations, then he's in trouble — because he's not moving toward a place of understanding.

He's simply stuck — in ignorance.

I know.

Tough stuff on a Sunday morning.

But that's what we get when we're face to face with Nicodemus and his midnight encounter with Jesus!

Isn't this the whole point of what Jesus is trying to get across to this teacher of Israel?

That we have to move from a place where we see God as small, obsessed with rules and regulations, and caring only about the very

few; to the God who is “an infinite self-giving” of love for all of creation. Shea, *The Spiritual Wisdom of the Gospels*, Vol. A, 114.

Nicodemus has God stuck in a box.

For Nicodemus, God’s focus is only on the Jews.

And so a God who is determined to save the whole world, by blowing where he wills, by doing what she wants — is an entirely different kind of God.

A God who’s on the hunt for everyone.

Especially the strange.

The different.

The weird.

God picks the Jewish people not because they’re smart or beautiful or deserving — but because they’re nobodies.

Yet by the time of Nicodemus, many of these same people are convinced that they are God's deserving darlings.

Leave it to Jesus to throw cold water on that!

Jesus reminds Nicodemus that God saves because God is good, not because we are good.

Jesus reminds Nicodemus that God is after every last person on this earth because every last person is a beloved child of God.

That God will stop at nothing to have us — by **becoming nothing for us** — on the bloody wood of the cross.

So that when we exclude the “nothings,” God replies - “then you exclude me.”

So what’s going on between Jesus and Nicodemus?

Jesus, as far as Nicodemus is concerned, is talking pure gibberish!

Grown men can’t be reborn!

God’s Spirit is a disciplined taskmaster, not something as unpredictable as the wind!

Perhaps what’s happening is that Jesus, in his encounter with the wealthy, educated and curious Nicodemus, invites Nicodemus, invites us, to see ourselves through a new set of eyes.

Maybe we can call these eyes: Spirit eyes.

Years ago, I worked at a psychiatric hospital.

While there, I learned that infants who aren’t touched or held quite often become schizophrenic, a very serious illness in which the sufferer sees and hears things that aren’t there.

That crucial need for infants to be held and touched, a need that continues throughout our lives, is but one example of how interconnected we are with one another.

How, as the poet says, “no man is an island.”

We might go even further and notice how our own perception of who we are comes through other people's perceptions of us.

We really do tend to define ourselves through the eyes of other people, or more accurately, we tend to see ourselves as we **believe** others see us.

We have children who see themselves as stupid and inferior because they believe their parents see them like that; and children who perceive themselves as smart and capable because their parents see them like that.

It's there in this week's first reading, as Abram sees himself through God's eyes, and has faith in that seeing, which allows him to leave behind all that he knows, in search of the undiscovered, but promised, new country.

How do you see yourself?

If you sit with that for awhile, and consider all the people who have been important in your life, perhaps you'll come to see that how you define yourself is closely tied up with how all those other people, both the living and the dead, have defined you.

Which brings us back to poor, befuddled Nicodemus.

He sees himself through the eyes of upper class Judaism.

Rules and customs define his life.

And he has fit himself very nicely into the womb of that world view.

Meanwhile, Jesus is dropping dynamite down his chimney.

Pushing Nicodemus into another womb, where he may generate his own Spirit eyes, and be born into a reality so very different than the reality he exists in today.

So that he may then, having been born anew, grow and mature into the odd life that Jesus calls every one of us to enter.

“Look at yourself through Spirit eyes,” Jesus says to him, to us, and suddenly how you see yourself, how you see those you once considered to be losers, how you see God, it all begins to change.

This is the new birth awaiting those who claim Jesus as Lord.

Like any birth, it's not easy.

“It's a breaking free.

From unbelief to belief.

From darkness into light.

It's a breaking free.

From a tightly wound, judgmental life — to a freedom loving, abundant life.

And yes, it's painful.

Just like physical birth, it means leaving the past behind.

Just like physical birth, it might take longer than we want and occur at an expected, even inconvenient, hour.

Spiritual birth, while empowered by God's grace, takes real effort and real labor on our part." Alyce McKenzie, paraphrased.

What does this new life do?

Well, it participates in God's work!

What is God's work?

God's work is creating!

Jesus spends his life continuing God's work of creation.

By taking dirt and spit and rubbing it into a blind man's eyes, giving him new sight.

By straightening the bent woman's back on the sabbath.

By healing the lame man.

By eating with outsiders.

"In Jesus, God is creating new human beings, an adventure that we are each of us invited to join in." James Allison, paraphrase.

But make no mistake.

This isn't some neat, clean, orderly creation dictated by Strategic Plans with precise goals and objectives.

The Holy Spirit is messy!

And Jesus emphasizes that messiness by introducing Nicodemus to the God who teaches in parables, not in rule books.

A God who is “willing to live with wasted seed, with nets full of good and bad fish, with fields that sprout both weeds and wheat.

Ours is a God, simply put, who loves us in our messiness.” W. Willimon, *Postmodern Preaching*.

Saint Peter, who himself struggled with wrapping his head around the messy ways that Jesus creates, says this:

“Now that you’ve cleaned up your lives by following the truth, love one another **as if your lives depend on it.**

Your new life is not like your old life.

Your old birth came from mortal sperm; your new life comes from God’s living Word.

Just think: a life conceived by God’s own self!

So make a clean sweep of malice and pretense, envy and hurtful talk.

You’ve had a taste of God!

Now, like infants at the breast, drink deeply of the Lord’s pure kindness.

Then you’ll grow up mature — and whole — in God.” 1 Pet. 1:23-25 (The Message Tr.)

This is the new birth to which we are all invited!

A birth that frees us from the pain of defining ourselves through the eyes of parents or siblings or cynical politicians.

A birth that welcomes us into a life where we are defined through the Spirit eyes of this loving God.

This God "who gives life to the dead, who calls into existence — things that do not exist." Rom. 4:17.

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