

The Spirit Blows Where it Chooses

John 3:1-17

March 12, 2017

I have this friend, we will call him Mike. Well Mike lives a pretty good life by anyone's standards. Big house, beautiful wife & kids. Member of the Country Club... You get the picture.

Well Mike and I became friends a while ago and over time our conversations took on a faith dimension. Mike and his family are members of a big church in their town and faith has always been important to him. We would share our ideas, we would even share our questions, about God & Jesus. No matter what we would always get to the place where Mike would say,

“You know something, I'm not sure how hard I try to listen to God and what God really wants for me... You want to know why? I really love my life just the way it is and I don't know what I would do if I really listened to God and discovered that I need to change my life. I don't know how I would handle that, so most of the time I'm not sure I even try to listen.

I've always appreciated Mike's honesty because I believe many of us feel the same way. The truth is Nicodemus was not that much different than we are. He was someone of deep faith, but he still longed for answers... a formula... a plan so that he might somehow be right with God. We all long to be right with God, don't we?

Now before we delve too deep into this encounter between Nicodemus and Jesus, I believe it is important that we know something of the way the Gospel writer John liked to write. For instance, John liked to use words with multiple meanings and we are offered a chance to see that in his use of the name Nicodemus. You see, the name Nicodemus is a combination of *nike* which means “victory” and *demos* which means “people.” So, while the literal translation of Nicodemus is “victor over the people” or “conqueror of the people,” some have suggested “victory of the people” or “victorious among his people,” is an equally good translation. This is important, I believe because it shows us today that not only is Nicodemus a member of the ruling class, his name is a symbol of domination.

Now the text tells us he was a Pharisee and leader within the Jewish faith community. Being a Pharisee meant that he was a member of the Sanhedrin, Israel's highest legislative and judicial body. From all accounts, there is no

denying that he was a good man who really did try to live by THE LAW. We might even say that his was a life lived “by the book.”

Yet in today’s text, it seems clear that living “by the book” has left Nicodemus hungry. Nicodemus has come to understand that something in his life was missing. Everything in his life to this point had been invested in keeping the law. Yet here he was seeking the advice of Jesus as though he was starting to realize there was something more to life itself. It seems the law had become an empty shell. Not that the Law was not important, because it was then and is now, but as important as the law was, Nicodemus realized that it was a human construct designed to control people. It was an artificial and outward way of living that had nothing to do with one’s heart.

Now, the fact that Nicodemus came to Jesus at night, under the cover of darkness, tells us something... He most likely hoped no one would see him or hear him, because after all he was a Pharisee. Clearly something he had encountered was resonating with his own experience of life and he wanted to know more. There is a beauty in this happening and as Richard Rohr says, “... that’s the great moment in all divine revelation, when beautiful ideas drop in from head to heart, from the level of dogma to experience. When it’s not something we merely believe, but in a real sense something that we know.”

He had seen and heard in Jesus a way of living unlike anything he had ever seen or heard before... and you know something, he was drawn to it. For him there was a mystery in this Jesus. Nicodemus said, “I know you are from God.” He even asked questions, and Jesus responded by telling him he needed to be born again. Jesus’ words about being “born from above”, that is, of the Spirit, or “born again” puzzled his soul. Over and again he asked Jesus “How can this be?”

Now on this mystery of being born again, it is important to know that Jesus’ words are more sharply focused than we sometimes imagine. As N.T. Wright says, “[T]he Judaism that Nicodemus and Jesus both knew had a good deal to do with being born into the right family. What mattered was being a child of Abraham. Of course, other things mattered too, but this was basic. Now, Jesus is saying, God is starting a new family in which this ordinary birth isn’t enough. You need to be born all over again, born ‘from above’, meaning the initiative remains with God.

Nicodemus’ problem was that there was no room for mystery in his understanding of faith. As is often the case, this problem may have been caused by him projecting his own cultural context (which always serves to limit the way we

understand how the world works) onto God. Nicodemus wanted someone with all the answers... just like a lot of people of faith do today. When we want all the answers we leave no room for mystery, and in my opinion no room for God.

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Now, in an effort to explain the mysterious nature of the Spirit, Jesus, in verse 8, said the “wind blows where it chooses.” Jesus told Nicodemus, you hear the *Wind* (you hear the *Spirit*), but that does not mean you know where it comes from or where it goes. That part remains a mystery like it has been since the very beginning. This is so important to grasp because Jesus is not only teaching Nicodemus, I believe he is teaching us that the *Wind*, the *Spirit*, has always and forever blown where it chooses. That part is a mystery, just as it should be, and we are not charged with understanding it. We can simply let go and live into it.

It seems Nicodemus struggled to break free from all the rules he had been taught. All the rules which had defined his very existence to that point. It certainly appears he could not receive the *Spirit* God intended because he was bound up in legalism, and it was choking him.

The good news is that later in the story Nicodemus actually came to Jesus’ defense and then helped with his burial. For me, this is evidence that Nicodemus finally let go and surrendered to Jesus’ teachings about being born again. In this way, Nicodemus stopped resisting the Spirit and allowed the Spirit to Blow in and through him.

This was a courageous act for Nicodemus, after all he was a respected and senior teacher of the Jews. Even though we can’t be sure Nicodemus knew why he was coming to Jesus for advice, I believe it is safe for us to say Nicodemus came because he was hungry for something more in his own life. Instead of falling back on a hard and fast set of rules this was the starting point for Nicodemus’ journey toward more. The thing is, relying on hard and fast rules, being bound up in legalism, always keeps people from being who and what God created and called them to be. Unfortunately, in my opinion, there are a lot of churches that actually promote the thinking that plagued and burdened Nicodemus.

Fundamentalism...in its many manifestations...is concerned with believing the right things. It keeps us stuck in the head and prevents us from dropping into the heart. Throughout history the idea has been that “right belief” will lead to right behavior, and it is exactly this belief that Jesus was addressing.

Without a changed heart, any and all change is artificial.
Without a changed heart, we do all the right things for all the wrong reasons.
Without a changed heart the artificial hides the real.

The bottom line for Nicodemus is that Jesus called for him to be radically changed... to be born anew which initially confused Nicodemus, but at least he asked some follow up questions. The thing is, we must not see his confusion, and his need for clarification as anything other than OK. Confusion is not some sign of weakness or inferiority as long as it doesn't prevent you from seeking. On the other hand, when confusion stops you from seeking, when confusion causes you to fall back on the rules you already know, then divine revelation is practically impossible.

The fact remains that Jesus was telling Nicodemus that he was going to have to approach life itself from a whole new place and perspective. Jesus was telling Nicodemus that he could no longer approach life from the place where he was or where he has always been, and this was hard to hear.

If we are honest, we do not easily hear someone, or something, telling us we can no longer approach life as we have before. Most of us really do not like living into a "new normal" and some of us hate it with a passion. Each one of us knows the struggle of this journey. It is why we seek answers... from preachers who say they have them... from authors who say they have written them... from churches that have it all figured out. It is why we seek after more... trying to fill the empty spaces of our lives.

I have a pretty good sense of why this text is part of the Lectionary during this time. There is no better time than Lent for us to be talking about our need to re-examine our lives, especially our spiritual lives. Lent is about PAUSING & asking WHERE AM I DOING GOOD & MOST IMPORTANTLY WHERE DO I NEED TO START TO DO BETTER.

I believe these are such important questions. They are important for me, for my friend Mark and for you.

So as we leave here today,

May we Pause;

May we stop resisting the Spirit because the Spirit Blows Where it chooses, not where we choose;
May we ask where we are doing good;
May we ask where we can start doing better; and
Then may we take seriously what we hear for we may just find ourselves being born again.

In Jesus' name...Amen.