

John 3:1-17

So what is Righteousness?

By many folks' definition it looks more like SELF-righteousness...or some believe it's like earning God's favor...being or acting in such a way that we believe is Holy. But what one considers holy is always up for debate isn't it!

Follow this set of rules and you become righteous in God's eyes. These misunderstandings always get us into trouble...why? Because then WE get to judge other people and we get to determine, from our particular point of view, who is righteous and who is not...who's in and who's out...and in that very act...we then become unrighteous ourselves.

See God is NOT transactional...God's relational. And if you want to start damaging relationships... start to impose your view and judge others as to their relationship with God...that never ends well does it?

The best way to think of the word "righteousness" in Biblical terms is that Righteousness means to be in RIGHT RELATIONSHIP...both with God... and with others in Creation...there's those two great commandments Jesus gave us to follow again.

When you are in right relationship with God and others...you know it!

It's that feeling of wellbeing...that peace and connectedness we feel...that sense of oneness and feeling of something greater than ourselves...where we place ourselves outside the frame or the box...that feeling is called Shalom or in the East they call it Enlightenment. So how do we get that kinda perspective?

Here in Lent, we now switch to a different Gospel...the Gospel of John written well after the other three. With Jesus' imminent return now questionable... the story about Jesus now shifts to a more symbolic and theological approach to Jesus and to God. We go from Jesus the Rabbi and Prophet...to Jesus the Cosmic Christ...God itself.

The Gospel of John is ultimately about Transformation...your transformation!

This well-known passage from John is a rarity in the Gospels because it shows Jesus discussing all three aspects of the Trinity. This new viewpoint transcends dualism – black and white, good and bad, night and day, right or left wing...whatever.

Here in this encounter Jesus is challenging Nicodemus to move from theory to practice...from knowledge to trust... from curiosity to commitment...pulling the camera way back to challenge this well-educated man of God with seeing things in an even bigger way.

See Nicodemus thinks that he, as an Elite religious leader understands who Jesus is... and ultimately who God is... and Jesus calls him out on his book smarts here. (His Theological BS)

John is a master of symbolism and imagery and so note that Nicodemus, a man, a Pharisee and Jewish leader arrives at night...a symbolic time of unbelief, ignorance, and temptation.

He comes to learn more about this young teacher but really doesn't want anybody to see him...he's playin it safe here! This passage in John is coupled with next week's reading...a woman at a well in the light of day...and these two stories actually play off of one another in the gospel.

See there are those that trust Jesus (that's the word faith) and these folks reveal God's light in the world... and then there are those who do not trust Jesus...those without faith and they remain in darkness.

And like a typical scholar, Nicodemus begins the conversation with a statement based on evidence. "We know" that you are a teacher come from God. Well, how do we know anything? By observing with our senses...and Jesus' signs/miracles provided proof that this guy was connected to God in some way.

A major theme in John's gospel is that of miracles or signs...signs that prove that Jesus is acting on God's behalf! Here in this passage, Nicodemus comes praising Jesus' signs... yet doesn't quite grasp what that might mean as a whole...he hasn't connected the dots yet...though he will later on.

Jesus isn't simply a great teacher of God's laws...or a prophet performing miracles on God's behalf... but rather Jesus is more than this... He is the one who will reveal and reconcile God's love for all creation.

So Jesus asserts that no one can see this revelation...the kingdom of God ...without first being born from anaothen, which is a play on words...in Greek it can mean... born again, born anew, or born from above.

And Nicodemus takes the more literal meaning as "born again" and is therefore confused...which invites Jesus' to further elaborate between Spirit (think God's Realm) and the Flesh (think man's realm).

Note that Jesus commentary here shows that His meaning is rather that one must be born "from above." One's participation in this new reality represents being awakened to the reality of heaven.

And unless Nicodemus allows God to change his whole way of being in this world, he will not be able to perceive God at work here. Nicodemus promptly demonstrates his lack of spiritual perception by missing Jesus' wordplay and so takes Jesus literally.

Those who place their trust in Jesus will have eternal life, being re-born from above through the Spirit (the Greek word pneuma). Pneuma like its Hebrew counterpart Ruach can mean either "spirit," "breath," or "wind," and Jesus plays with this word as well...which we miss in the English translation as bible scholars get to choose the meaning for us.

And like the breath of God in Genesis...the Spirit gives life. And like the wind, God's Spirit blows wherever it wants, and though we may perceive it, we can neither comprehend it... nor control it.

Jesus shifts the conversation now from the smallness of Nicodemus' viewpoint to the largeness of a life lived in right relationship with God.

He goes from the signs on which Nicodemus bases his understanding... seeing is believing...show me the miracles...to the invisible mystery of God's Spirit... unknowable as the wind... giving breath and life to everything.

Now when Nicodemus remains confused, Jesus wonders how "this teacher of Israel" doesn't understand... I love Jesus' sense of humor here...and I appreciate it...like Peter, he is asking all the same "stupid" questions we would ask...and Jesus says hey aren't you supposed to know all this stuff?

If you want to make God laugh, just pretend that you know everything! And this goes double for us clergy and leaders of the law!

So, using a classic rabbinical argument Jesus goes from the lesser ("earthly things") to the greater ("heavenly things"), Jesus sends Nicodemus back to the Torah, which any teacher of Israel would know by heart.

Jesus recalls the story of a plague of poisonous snakes that were threatening the Israelites. The anti-venom to their bites was to look at a bronze snake that Moses lifted up on a "pole". Now in Greek, the word for the "pole" is also the word for sign...again another play on words here!

Next a transition in the narrative occurs...we go from the singular YOU to the plural... You and I together now see the sign...something yet to come...Jesus upon a pole...the sign is the cross.

And this death will not end in defeat... but rather becomes the moment of God's triumph and transformation... and, like the serpent raised upon the pole to heal God's people, The pole that Jesus is raised upon...the cross...will save all those who look to Jesus to be saved by God.

In a paradox... the mystery of God revealed comes at the very moment of a cruel and shameful human death...which leads us strait to a new life in Christ...a new state of being... eternal life.

Now we come to John 3:16...Everyone who believes in Jesus will not perish but will have eternal life.

Most people know John 3:16 but most of us may not associate it within the context of this exchange between Jesus and Nicodemus.

Read as a whole, John 3:16 becomes the summary for Nicodemus and for people like him, and perhaps just like us, who believe they know Jesus and who come to him not to be turned upside down, or changed and transformed... but rather to just have their current opinions, world views and beliefs about him confirmed.

Read in its entirety, this passage becomes less about realizing that our faith rests upon OUR own knowledge and OUR own convictions... but rather it is God's love for us through Jesus that draws us into that mystery...and that mystery will always be just beyond our understanding.

We must be born from above...born from the Spirit! We must allow for ourselves to be transformed. In this conversation...in six verses... birth is referenced eight times and the story ends in a statement about life!

Jesus is inviting us to be born into this new reality...where death is just the doorway...a transition from one state of being to the next...and this transformation, this metamorphosis, is not just referring to our physical death...but to the death of all the earthly things we cling to...

All those earthly things that keep us from being in right relationship with God and others! Rather than our Self-Righteousness!

Above and below are directional symbols here for alternative worldviews...unless a person is born into God's worldview, that person will never ever see the kingdom... so they won't be able to enter it.

Eternal life is a life shaped by and dependent upon God's love for us in all its wondrous and mysterious ways.

It is not simply life in heaven after death. It begins now...the moment that we trust and give our lives to Christ.

When we receive eternal life, we enter into God's kingdom here and now... becoming citizens of heaven and submitting to "God's will be done on earth" and in our lives.

And Citizenship in God's kingdom is never a solo affair...It's relational. We are born into God's new holy family...a community we call the church!

And birth into this reality does not come from our knowledge or convictions but rather in the trust we place in Jesus.

John 3:16 is not a statement about the correctness of our faith or what we believe in...sorry to say that a tattoo, or a bumper sticker or your mental tenacity isn't what's gonna do it here! It's not about me!

In context... here with Nicodemus... and throughout the entirety of John's gospel ...being born from above (think kingdom of heaven) and believing (think trust) in Jesus are not done with the mind but rather with the heart...it's a posture and a state of being lived out every day!

In John's gospel (the Gospel of transformation) ... believing and doing are inseparable...you either are in Christ or you are not...and YOU get to choose...And you choose by the way you live out your life everyday.

Jesus invites us to open our imaginations and reconsider our relationship with God. Jesus invites all of us Nicodemuses to come into the light of day...and Nicodemus eventually does get it later on in John's gospel...in fact he figures it out at the cross.

We are all now invited to fully participate into this new and abundant life which Jesus offers to all of us... through our own transformations...by being born of the Spirit...by breathing in and breathing out the very Breath of God – today and tomorrow and always.

Your faithful servant,

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