

Isaiah 6:1-8

Romans 8:12-17

John 3:1-17

Psalm 29

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God's Gift of Love

Have you ever been in a conversation with someone and at some point you realize that you are not on the same wave length. Instead of talking to each other you are talking past each other. There has been no substantive communication but merely confusion as you mentally scratch your head and try to figure out what in the world is the other person talking about.

The passage from John's gospel reminds me of this kind of encounter. Nicodemus comes to Jesus at night in hopes of better understanding this strange, charismatic man who is wise beyond his years. Because he is a public figure he doesn't want the neighbors to know about this clandestine meeting. He is hungry to know what to make of the many signs and miracles Jesus has done in the name of God. He has witnessed Jesus' passionate outrage when he cleared the temple of money changers as well as the deep compassion he showed for those he healed with the gentle touch of his hand. Nicodemus is vexed. He yearns to understand what does this say about the one, true living God. As the two begin talking it is clear that Nicodemus, himself a scholar, hasn't a clue what Jesus is saying. It is as if he is talking in riddles. Jesus is speaking on an esoteric, spiritual level of divine things not of this earth. "To part of God's realm a person must be born from above"¹ (3:3) Conversely, Nicodemus is taking everything Jesus says on a literal, human level and failing miserably to grasp Jesus' meaning.

Despite his confusion, something of what Jesus says rings true and it begins to take root deep within Nicodemus' soul. We know this because we will run into Nicodemus two more times in John's gospel; when he surprisingly assumes the role of an advocate for Jesus after he is arrested, insisting that the Sanhedrin follow the law that requires Jesus to have a public trial (7:45-52). And, immediately after Jesus' crucifixion when he provides the spices needed to embalm Jesus' dead body after it is taken down from the cross (19:38-42). Clearly, at this point Nicodemus is a devoted follower of Christ as he goes "public," a very different man from the one who once hid under the cover of darkness.

Nicodemus' life has been transformed by God's love. And, this was the very heart of Jesus' message when Nicodemus first sought him out. Jesus explains the very nature of God, who created us from a love so powerful it cannot be contained. Therefore, God's kingdom is already here in our very midst, not some far off place we hope to attain in the future. We see it Jesus, in the Word made flesh, whose life here on earth reveals God's self to us.

¹Emmanuel Y. Lartey, *Feasting on the Word, Year B, Vol. 3*, eds. David L. Bartlett & Barbara Brown Taylor, (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008), 46.

Because of God's self-giving love God continues to seek us out and beckons us to be a part of God's holy realm, where no one is excluded. God desires to be in a relationship because this is the nature of God.² And, because we are made in God's image, it is also in our nature. When we are in relationship with God we experience what it means to love and be loved. This is when we are fully human and fully alive, as God intended from the very beginning.

When I gaze into the face of my newborn grandson, Jackson, I am filled with such love and joy, there is no doubt that we are made in God's image. I am looking at the face of God, as the old Celts believed.

Jesus says we must be born from above to be part of God's kingdom. It is only possible through the power of the Spirit working in our lives.³ It cannot be forced, attained or learned because it is simply not in our power. It is a gift from God. "The Spirit blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes" (3:8). This is the mystery of Christian relationship; God the Father is with the Son who is with the Spirit and all are in communion with each other, inviting us, pursuing us to also be in this holy communion of love and participate in God's life.⁴ This is the eternal life – this is our salvation.

When God created us he bestowed upon us the freedom to say yes or no to God's extravagant gift of love. We can choose to go on about our lives and pretend that we have no need of God or community or anyone else for that matter. Sadly, this attitude is encouraged by our society today, elevating our individual needs and desires at the expense of others, especially those unlike ourselves. And it is an easy trap to fall into. We can become so frazzled and overwhelmed with the anger, bitterness and intolerance that pervades our society we lose sight of that vital connection to the rest of the world. We end up building a prison, cutting ourselves off from God and our neighbor. But, this is not living. A life of quiet desperation void of love is not the life God intends for anyone.

Last week our Presiding Bishop, Michael Curry, gave an inspiring sermon at the wedding of Prince Harry and Megan Markel. He spoke of the power of love to change and heal lives.

There's power in love to help and heal when nothing else can.
There's power in love to lift up and liberate when nothing else will.
There's power in love to show us the way to live. Set me
as a seal on your heart, as a seal on your arm. For love is as
strong as death.

This was Jesus' message to Nicodemus and it is the same message for you and me today. Life is about living into God's love. When we say yes to God, we say yes to life and we are healed and transformed where all things become possible.

Friday night and yesterday morning I witnessed the power of love. Several Boy Scouts and members of our parish family came together as a community to transform a small patch of ground into a beautiful community garden. Adults and children put on work gloves and shared

² Judith M. McDaniel, *Feasting on the Word, Year B, Vol. 3*, eds. David L. Bartlett & Barbara Brown Taylor, (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008), 47-49.

³ Judith M. McDaniel, 47-49.

⁴ Id.

the hard work of shoveling dirt into wheelbarrows, filling the beds, planting the seeds, assembling a tool shed and even constructing a fence. We now have six wooden beds, filled to the brim with rich, black soil, that hold the promise of a bountiful harvest with all kinds of vegetable from God's green earth for those who don't have enough. This good work is done out of love – love for each other, for our neighbor and for God.

This is what it means to become part of God's Kingdom and to experience the power of love to heal and transform lives. And it begins with saying yes.

Amen.