

“The Really Good News”

There is a difference between curiosity and commitment. When I was a kid I was curious about lots of things. As an example, when I was around 10 years old I had a curiosity about photography. I begged for a camera, and back then it was an actual camera, a piece of equipment you used just for taking pictures and not for making phone calls! Anyway, I was all fired up about photography, and not just picture taking but developing my own photographs. Our family had a friend who was really into this hobby and for a time he invited me to learn about dark room technology, including developing my own film and starting a scrapbook of my “work.” It didn’t last very long. After a few months, my curiosity lessened and I moved on to other pursuits, like animal training. Oh yes, when I was a boy there was a time when I fancied myself a sort of dog-whisperer. Our family always had a dog and I was curious about what it would be like to train dogs. Now, back in the day, we didn’t have *Google Search* so I went to the library where they had actual books. I read up on techniques for training dogs, taking notes on how to achieve the best behavior of your animal in order to develop your dog into a true companion. It just so happened that at that time our older family dog passed away and, like before, I begged my parents. “Please, can we get another dog? I promise,” I told them, “I’ll be the one to take care of the dog. You won’t have to worry about a thing because I am going to be the trainer.” Well, it didn’t last. We did get a dog and I taught him a few tricks but I quickly realized that training an animal requires great patience and consistency. My curiosity faded and I moved on, and so it went through my younger life. I dabbled in hiking and kite flying and stamp collecting and model airplanes. When I was a boy I was curious about many things, and that’s why I say there’s a difference between curiosity and commitment. The first, what makes us curious, feels intense for a time but it comes and goes. The other, commitment, may seem less exciting but it goes deeper. It lasts. Commitment is the result of what captures not just our attention for a moment but the investment of our whole selves.

Early in the narrative of John’s Gospel, we are told that one night a Pharisee, Nicodemus by name, came to see Jesus. Nicodemus was a leader in the community and a teacher of the faith. Nicodemus was very religiously successful but his achievement was not a guarantee that his time with Jesus would go well for him. There has been speculation over time about what motivated Nicodemus to come to Jesus. The bible doesn’t tell us exactly but there are some clues that help us know more. Though it’s early in the gospel story, Jesus was already getting the attention of those in the territory of Jerusalem because he was performing signs. The signs indicated Jesus was tapping into a power and authority that was God-infused, and the world took notice. Specifically, in the early chapters of John, there are two events that point to the evidence of divine power. First, Jesus was at a wedding one day in Cana where the wine was running out. As a way of pointing to the abundant life-giving power of God, Jesus turned water into the best wine on the shelf. In the second instance, Jesus went to the temple and began to overturn the tables that were used to change money and sell token offerings. As Jesus is flipping tables into the air, he says that the temple is his Father’s house, implying that the priorities of the religious world need to be re-evaluated. All of this was very public in order to point out how Jesus’ life was connected to the purpose of God. It’s not a stretch to imagine that Nicodemus came to Jesus out of curiosity. He’d seen the signs. He was intrigued but he was not convicted. Nicodemus came wanting to know more for himself but not ready to offer more of himself. The gospel says he came at night, which is a not so subtle way of describing Nicodemus’ spiritual blindness. In other words, he was in the dark. He came to see Jesus but only from a safe distance, curious about who he was but nowhere near ready to make a commitment.

What we have in our reading for today is the back and forth conversation between this curious Pharisee and Jesus, the Lord of Life. We’ve noted just a moment ago that Nicodemus was very accomplished when it came to understanding religious matters. His mind was all over it but his heart wasn’t in it. There’s an interesting contrast going on here. While Nicodemus doesn’t see the full reality of Jesus because of his spiritual night-vision blindness, Jesus, the light of the world, sees the whole situation clearly. As it turns out, this is one of the abilities Jesus possesses, to see all the way into a person’s heart. There is nothing that can be hidden from God. What is motivating Nicodemus is obvious to Jesus. And this is the point, what I’ve described this morning as the difference between curiosity and commitment, and what Jesus described as the difference between being born of water and being born of spirit. Life is more than taking air into our lungs and breathing moment by moment to keep our physical selves going. The deeper, truer life is a life with God where we breathe in the Spirit, what Jesus describes as being born from above. Now, that kind of talk created some serious tension between Nicodemus and Jesus. They were not connecting on this. Because the pharisee is merely curious he does not go deeper than his surface understanding of Jesus’ words. “It’s impossible to be born again,” argued Nicodemus. And he was right, of course, but he missed it.

“It’s not being born again,” Jesus said, “This is a birth from above.” We get the distinction, right? On the one hand, there is a day, a moment in fact, when we physically enter the world and take our first breath. It happens once and it’s done. The other, what Jesus is pointing to, isn’t limited to a time or place. When we’re born from above, filled with the Spirit, wrapped in God’s blessing, it happens again and again. Life is more than flesh and bone. True life is found in the Holy Spirit. Nicodemus wasn’t ready to be embraced by that life. What about us? As we hear the gospel, Jesus extends an invitation to deepen our commitment to receive the love God gives.

I wonder if Nicodemus heard that good news, how God so loves the world. If he did then there was the chance that even in his darkness the light was starting to dawn for him. I want to come back to the idea of commitment and clarify our thinking about that. Christians have sometimes taken what is perhaps the most well known verse of the bible and used it to scare people into believing in Christ. John 3:16. “For God so loved the world that he gave his only son, that whosoever believes in him may not perish but have life.” The thing gets twisted around as if to suggest that Jesus is saying we will perish if we don’t believe. We’ve got to be careful not to turn things upside down the way Nicodemus did. If our commitment is our own power to save ourselves, the darkness remains. God so loves the world and it’s that commitment that is our saving grace. God loves. In fact, God so loves the likes of Nicodemus, and so loves folks like us, that just knowing this moves us deeper into a relationship with God. It is God’s commitment to us that makes our commitment to God possible. This is the light Jesus is shining into the world. And the choice is whether or not we will be illuminated by it.

There is no greater good news than God’s love for us and for the world through Christ. Many in our congregation are participating in our Lenten Study, *Soul Reset*. Each week, we are being introduced to a spiritual practice that can help us discover our life in the spirit. In week one of our study, we’ve learned about an ancient type of prayer called *Examen*. In this way of praying at the end of each day where we take time to reflect and to go back over the events of the day filtered through the lens of love. We can all do this today, taking time tonight to think back over what will happen today. As we make ourselves ready for sleep tonight we can ask: *Did I give and receive love today? Was it easy or difficult for me, and why? How did God teach me today about the generous ways of love?* A practice like this intentionally looks for the light as the darkness of night is falling. This is the good news Jesus wanted to bring to Nicodemus and this is exactly what Jesus gives to us.

The season of Lent is the right time to be honest about our faith. Are we mostly curious about Jesus or are we ready to affirm our commitment to God? Jesus knows we can do it because of God’s incredible commitment of love for us and the world.