

Trinity Sunday 2018 Sermon. Heidi Carter

The gospel assigned today features a conversation between Jesus and a religious leader named Nicodemus. He was from the synagogue, and drawn to Jesus as a teacher. Nicodemus believed Jesus' power came from God. Nicodemus defended Jesus to his colleagues. He sought him out for counsel. He even helped pay for Jesus' burial.

Nicodemus knew God, and was beginning to understand how God was recognizable, in both old and new ways, through the teachings and life of Jesus.

But in today's story he was confused by what Jesus said about being re-born – of the Holy Spirit. Nicodemus understood God, certainly even the Spirit of God, but this seemed different. Distinct. So what, or who, was this holy spirit?

In an effort to understand – he asks Jesus a rhetorical - yet still awkward - question about the distinction between being born of the flesh, and being born of the spirit.

In spite of how today's Epistle might sound – when Jesus said “what is born of the flesh is flesh” he was not tearing-down or degrading the flesh. Jesus was flesh! We require these wondrous, meaty bodies of ours to be vessels of God. We need our bodies; they are ultimately good. But this was about a rebirth of the spirit. Not of the body.

This theme of the necessity of rebirth by the spirit, or in some translations – of becoming like children again - appears frequently in the Gospels. The Gospel of Thomas goes further, to say one enters life by recovering one's original self, undivided. Undivided by differences between male and female – or even distinctions between the physical and the spiritual. United. Be re-born as children – not in age – but in attitude.

But what does that have to do with eternity? We are such linear thinkers, especially when we think about our journeys. Becoming like a child sounds like going backward.

I was fortunate to get a sneak peek at the upcoming documentary “Won't You Be My Neighbor?” this past Friday morning. In it, Pastor Fred Rogers works with early childhood specialists, and is fortified in his belief that children are not empty vessels waiting to be filled. They're not just little adults who need to grow up. Children are complete, and have rich, varied and raw emotional lives unencumbered by adult fear and loss and cynicism. Many of us already know this, but Fred Rogers has a way of being present to children, and adults, that disarms us. It relieves us of our baggage. A way that gives permission, and space, to be as afraid or brave or curious or wildly optimistic as you need to be.

You see, children are able to speak the truth in ways that adults have decided against. If you have ever given a child the gift of listening, then you know this. They will tell you without any ambiguity about death, about their mistakes, about love, and about God. [side note: when I began the sermon at this service today, a four-year-old member of the church walked to the pulpit, watched me for a moment, then came right up and hugged my leg. Because she wanted to.] We have so domesticated and explained away our fears, or impulse to simply give love freely, and our awe about the world around us, that we've lost touch. We've lost that way of seeing the world, of seeing God's life everywhere.

At our 9:00 Family service, you can sometimes get a glimpse of the spiritual life Jesus demands we have, through the lens of our children. Unlike us, they always bounce to the music if they're feeling it. Unlike us, a child confesses boldly that they do not want to share their stuff. They don't like their fake friends. If you ask them what they can do to make someone happy, they will tell you. Sometimes, for no apparent reason, their hands just clap and clap. And sometimes they cry, also seemingly for no reason. Which is sometimes confusing for them – just the overwhelming power of these feelings. It is for us too.

Jesus told Nicodemus that the wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit. As a child.

Nicodemus was open to this new revelation of god through Jesus. And was presented with this fresh understanding of God's Spirit. Nicodemus speaks from a people overwhelmed with information, supersaturated with knowledge, but hungry for spiritual wisdom. We know something of this hunger. This noise. As well as this longing.

We might, however, decide to follow our children's lead and tell the truth about our desire for this life. Let them teach us what it means to be born from above. Perhaps we have felt it here, with a child, or in a prayer, a poem, a kiss of peace, or a bit of music.

Over the summer, if a pocket or two of time opens up for you, you might have the chance to take on a discipline; a practice that puts you in the mindset to let the spirit restore you.

In doing so - - - you do what Thomas suggests, recovering your original, undivided – self. We hear the bumper sticker slogan about letting go, and letting God be God for awhile, anyway. It sounds terrifying, but can be exhilarating

And probably not all of the time, but when you can, to let it reveal something familiar, and something new, about God's life already within you, and the eternity that awaits.

Poet Eunice Tietjens wrote about what it is like following this kind of discipline, this practice of stepping-out of your control, into God's spirit, and how it might transform you. She wrote

“But I shall go down from this airy space, this swift, clear, peace, this stinging exultation, and time will close about me, and my soul stir to the rhythm of the daily round. Yet, having known, life will not press so close, and always I shall feel time ravel thin about me; For once I stood in the windy presence of eternity.”

Let's pray.

God our lives are in your hands, and for that we give you thanks. Amen