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Lent 2A – March 12, 2017

Nicodemus almost had it right. He knew Jesus was from God; he couldn't deny the signs. However, he couldn't get what Jesus was trying to say about being born of the Spirit. For Nicodemus, Jesus' holiness was something he couldn't quite understand because he couldn't let go of his own intellect, his own knowledge, his self-reliance. When Jesus spoke of needing to be born again in order to experience God's Kingdom, he was speaking metaphorically of what needs to happen to have a spiritual awakening - the profound understanding of our belovedness in God. The the deep-down assurance of our worthiness, when self-doubt, fear, and shame melt away, and in their place come an unshakeable sense of love and belonging.

Knowing that belovedness - really getting it - tends to happen when we at our most vulnerable. When we are in that place of exposure and openness where our ego falls away, where our explanations don't mean anything, where our accomplishments don't matter, where one excuses have run out. It is in that place that one finds the extravagant love of God, where forgiveness is no longer even relevant. It is in that vulnerable place where we meet God. It is the springboard for love, the birthplace of innovation and creativity. Vulnerability is the essential component of true life. Vulnerability is the gate to the Kingdom of God.

From the high-school boy who puts it all out there in asking a pretty girl out on a date, to the entrepreneur who risks a fortune to fund a potentially world-changing innovation, to the seed that dies in the earth to bring forth abundant new life. It is when we open ourselves to rejection, failure, and death that we also open ourselves to the fullness of life.

Put it all out there, leave nothing on the table, risk it all - it doesn't make sense, it isn't safe, it isn't prudent. And, yet, therein lie the rewards. That's why Nicodemus, and so many others didn't get it. Playing by the rules, following convention, adhering to the law - those are the things Nicodemus understood. And, here was this amazing man, Jesus, who seemed to break the rules, defy convention, and even question the law - here he was working miracles and seemed to glow with God's presence. How could this be? It's because Jesus was God showing us how to be human, and that in being fully human was where we would find our connection to God, where we would find our own divine destiny.

OK, now this is the part where I talk about sin! Don't get up and leave yet. That's one of the things that bothers me about being a priest - as soon as I begin to talk about sin and repentance, people get a glazed look in their eyes, and sort of tune out. I can't blame them. I've done the same thing too. But, before you glaze over, let me tell you what I think about sin and repentance. And what this has to do with being "born again."

I think for most of us sin is not what we like to think it is. It's not the time you turned left, when you should have turned right; it's not the extra helping of brownie you took, when your doctor clearly said you should stay away from fats and sugar; it's not even the nasty thoughts you have about the person who cut you off in the checkout line at Wal-Mart. Maybe those behaviors aren't so great. And, you probably should work to change those things. But, I don't believe there's a God who sits up on a throne marking each of those transgressions against your potential entry into the gold room of heaven.

No, those aren't sin. Those, are actually the sons and daughters of sin. Sin, is what I described last week in my sermon. It's forgetting who you are and whose you are - not understanding you're beloved of God, and thereby not living as God's beloved. Simple as that. Our Book of Common Prayer says that sin is - "The seeking of our own will instead of the will of God, thus distorting our relationship with God, with other people, and with Creation." But, I think that doesn't quite hit the mark, because it only describes the consequences of not knowing who you are and whose you are. Truly, sin stems from a fundamental misunderstanding of our relationship with God. And, when we don't really get God, or who we are in relationship to God, then of course we're going to seek our will, and of course our relationship with God and others is going to be distorted. Our relationship to God is love - pure and simple, an unshakeable, unstoppable, nearly unfathomable love. It is the love our ancestors attempted to describe in the Law in the Prophets. It's the love of the parables. It's the love of the cross and resurrection. When we truly know that we are beloved of God, that we are part of the great cosmic dance of love that stretches from the foundation of the world to the end of time - each one of us connected to one another, connected to all of Creation, and connected to God - then caring for our bodies becomes less of a challenge, judging others happens less frequently, and most importantly, we become more and more willing to throw ourselves wholeheartedly into the fullness of life.

But, knowing we are beloved, deep down inside, is not where we live most of the time. For most of us, fear is what motivates much of what we say and do - fear of getting it wrong, fear of being weak, fear of not doing enough, fear of displeasing others. But, what if we could be free of that fear? What if we weren't worried about getting it wrong? What if fear of displeasing others wasn't the primary motivation of what we said and did? What if we didn't need to do anything to be worthy? Well, today's Gospel tells us all we need to know in order to be free of those fears. Let me rephrase the last two verses for you -
For God loved us so much that he became human like us, so that we could see for ourselves just how beloved we are to him. God, went as far as enduring our rejection, our ridicule, and death by our hands to show that nothing could separate us from God's love. God does not hate us, and never will. God loves us and wants so desperately for us to know that.

So, how do we get there? How do we get to that place where we know deep down inside, the love God has for us, where we know how love connects us to God, to each other, and to all Creation? How do we get there?

Well, you're not going to like this. We have to be willing to go to that place of exposure and openness where ego falls away, where explanations don't mean anything, where accomplishments don't matter, where excuses have run out. Being willing to go there is repentance. It is in that place that we find that great love of God, and where forgiveness is no longer an issue, and where we realize that our help comes from the LORD, the maker of heaven and earth. It is then that we truly get that strong sense of love and belonging that all of us long for.

But, for some, like Nicodemus, who want a logical explanation, who believe they can survive and thrive on their own wits and muscle, this sort of repentance doesn't make sense. They haven't yet run out of their own resources. For, if a person believes that their worthiness depends on their own good works, then what need is there for God? For some, it's only when they've come to their wit's end, when their own strength has failed them, that they're able to surrender and find their true belovedness as a child of God. For those who have tired of carrying their own load, who have given up figuring out everything for themselves, the love of God made manifest through the Holy Spirit is like a breath of fresh air, a breath of new life. It is the new birth that Nicodemus couldn't understand. And, it is truly a glimpse into the Kingdom of God.

My brothers and sisters, God did not make Abraham the father of a great nation because he was a great guy and followed all the rules. Abraham wasn't always such a great guy and didn't always follow the rules. Abraham was blessed because he knew who he was and whose he was. God does not invite us into a life of blessing because of our accomplishments or because we follow the rules or because we are strong and self-sufficient. It pleases God to give us the Kingdom, because that's who God is. May this Lent be a time of new birth, a time of repentance, when you are able to let go of your need to get it right, to let go of self-sufficiency, and let go of your self-doubt and find that you are and always have been God's beloved in whom he is well pleased.