

“Blown Away by the Spirit”

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John 3: 1-17

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Last week my dad gave a great sermon about the body and God's love of our bodies. If you missed it I encourage you to check it out online — it was excellent. God really does love all of you: every pound, every ache and pain, every wrinkle and freckle and every toenail. God loves the body so much that he took on flesh. As our reading says today: *“For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish, but have eternal life.”*

Now, strangely enough, this morning we are going to talk about the other side of that gift of human life: the Spirit.

This morning's scripture is the famous story of Nicodemus coming at night to talk to Jesus and ask him questions. Nicodemus is a Pharisee and a Teacher of the Law, so he knows *a lot* about his religion. He knows a lot about 'the Law' — the teachings of Moses in the first 5 books of the Bible, which the Jewish faith is founded on. Presumably, he knows a lot about God. But as he approaches Jesus and asks him questions, it becomes clear that he doesn't seem to know much at all.

Nicodemus was a member of a faith that was full of rules; but no longer full of life. The church can't grow; the church can't make a difference and help transform people and societies when all it has is rules. Fundamentalist churches can be like that—focused on and filled with rules. The United Church does not have that problem — we are not a rules church (though we do love our Manual!) But I think at times our church, our denomination, can be just as lifeless.

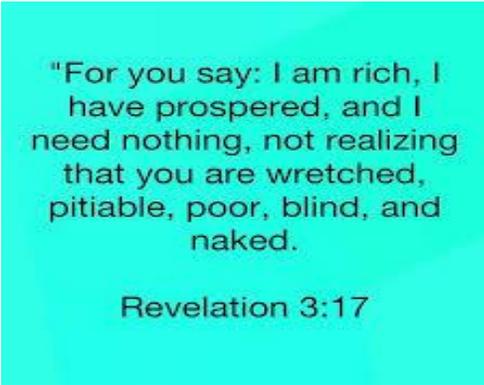
In a couple of weeks, the United Church of Canada will celebrate its 93rd anniversary. When the United Church was formed in 1925, it was a big deal. It was by far the largest Protestant church in the country, and it just kept growing. As the country grew, so did the United Church, until 1961 when the membership of the UCC peaked ... and then, while the country's population continued to climb, the decline of our church began. In 1925 there were 600,000 members, and by 1961 there were 1.1 million members in the United Church. Today the number of members has fallen to somewhere around 400,000 and it continues to fall.

A friend of mine told me this week that her church had 8 members worshipping last Sunday morning. Sure, it was the long weekend, but 8 members? It won't be long, maybe less than a year, before that church will

close and many others too. It's partly demographics, but you can't blame it all on that. Somehow the church has lost its relevance.

The United Church is a church of volunteers, a church that is passionate about justice and making a difference in all kinds of ways in communities across the country. That is obviously wonderful — unless there is no Holy Spirit present to fuel it. Because if we serve only out of duty and because we *should*, and because we feel better about ourselves and maybe even a touch morally superior to those other people or churches, *then we are headed for burnout*. A religion of service can be just as lifeless as one of following the rules (like Nicodemus's religion) if the Spirit of God is missing.

But at least Nicodemus noticed something was missing. At least he noticed Jesus. In Revelation 3:17 the Spirit speaks to the angel of the church of Laodicea and says:



"For you say: I am rich, I have prospered, and I need nothing, not realizing that you are wretched, pitiable, poor, blind, and naked.

Revelation 3:17

The Spirit could have been speaking to our denomination over the last few decades. You have to experience the Holy Spirit before you can understand how lifeless your faith is without it.

Nicodemus goes to Jesus in the dark of night. He doesn't want anyone knowing that he's going to talk to Jesus. But he is seeking. He has seen the signs, the things Jesus is doing, and they look like something from God, and so he's seeking. If Nicodemus was walking into an AA meeting that first night, he would go forward and get a 'desire chip'. At that stage the person coming for the first time may not even have a full day sober, but they have a desire. They see a room full of people that have something they don't have, and they want it. Nicodemus is not sure exactly what to think or believe, but he recognizes his emptiness and the life that Jesus seems to have, and he wants to know more.

I bet some of you here today are in that category. You're not sure about this Christianity thing, not sure about Jesus, but you're curious enough to take that courageous step and check it out. Good for you.

You've got nothing to lose and you may just gain everything — you may just find that new life that you've heard about.

Even if you know a lot about faith and Christianity, you can still be in that space of recognizing your emptiness. A few years ago I was there. There were a series of factors that contributed to it — some of them were personal, and some related to my work at the church. On the personal front, my husband had gone back to school (all the way to Mississippi!) when the 4 kids ranged in age from 3-15. There was a lot on my plate! I don't regret any of it, but it was harder than I thought it would be. At the same time, at the church here, we were seeing the reality of declining offerings and income. We knew something had to be done, and I really hoped and prayed we could find a creative solution — maybe renting out part of the church to an outside business or sharing the church with another church — so that we could continue to have the staff complement that this church needs. But the solutions just didn't come, and we had to make the difficult decision to reduce staff from 2 full-time ministers to 1 full-time. That felt like a failure to me. The image I kept having was being hit by a slow-moving Tsunami. I just felt powerless over this wall of water that was headed our way and the way of the whole denomination, and frankly the mainline church in Canada. Have you ever been to a beach with really big waves that you jump in and all of a sudden find yourself knocked down by one and tumbling out of control underwater? That's how I felt. Knocked down and powerless. I'm a good swimmer, but I couldn't swim my way out of this wave.

That place and space can be a gift. When you know you are empty — when you know you are powerless, that's when you may be willing to take that brave step of seeking out Jesus at night. You are more likely to take that brave step of coming forward to get that desire chip and say "I don't know what to think or believe but what I'm doing isn't getting me anywhere, and I need help." That is a sacred space. When you realize you are poor, then you can look for real gold. *"For you say I am rich, I have prospered and I have everything I need, not realizing that you are poor, wretched, pitiable, blind and naked. I counsel you to buy from me gold, refined by fire, and white garments so that you may clothe yourself and the shame of your nakedness may not be seen and salve to anoint your eyes."* Rev. 3:17-18

Nicodemus knows a lot about his religion, but by the end of the conversation, it seems like he knows very little. He probably walked away from Jesus wondering if he knew anything at all.

This is the tricky thing about faith. Nicky Gumbel (of Alpha fame) made the comparison of how you can get to know everything about a car—

let's say a Toyota Camry. You can look at it and memorize the special features and all the statistics. You can go to Toyota conventions and learn even more. You can read the Owner's manual from cover to cover. You could even, if you were particularly enthusiastic, learn Japanese and read the owner's manual in its original language and therefore truly understand the vehicle in a way that few people do! However, most would agree that *if you do all these things but you don't actually drive the car, you've missed the whole point!*

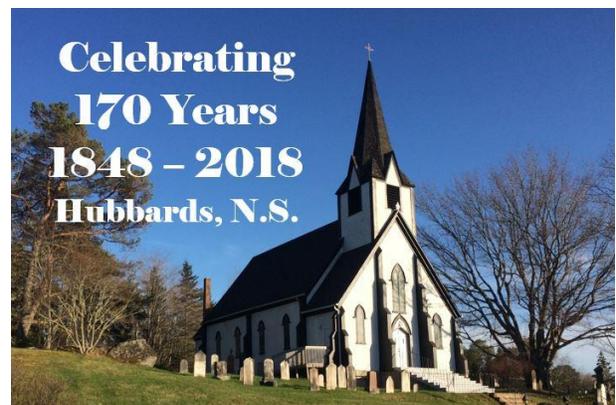
In a way, Nicodemus had done all the 'head work', but Jesus was telling him he'd missed the whole thing. We need to experience it anew in a way that doesn't just involve our head, but our heart and soul too.

Did Nicodemus change? The short answer is I don't know; the long answer is that he changed enough to continue following Jesus. He remained a Pharisee, but when Jesus was arrested he defended Jesus. Then after the crucifixion Nicodemus, along with Joseph of Arimathea, provided the expensive spices and ointments for anointing the body before burial. I don't know exactly how that encounter changed Nicodemus, but I know that it did change and affect him.

Somehow the Ruah — the breath of God, the wind that blows where it will — filled Nicodemus and changed him.

And what about me? Well, I too found gold. It came in small ways here and there. Some people experience the presence of God — the *Shekinah* — in a powerful specific moment, and they feel born again — that's how Jesus described it. Some get little bits of the presence of God over time and then later look back and say, 'I've changed'. This tiny mustard seed of a faith has grown. I remember 2 years ago going on a Pilgrimage, a long walk over a week in Nova Scotia. On a Pilgrimage you spend a lot of time working through and praying and thinking about your physical and emotional pain. We stayed in churches along the way. I remember one little old church we stayed in called St. Luke's. It was an Anglican church in Hubbards, Nova Scotia.

It was a beautiful spot with water all around. Anyway, this church had a little basket of small hand-painted rocks for sale (I think they were \$10 each). I looked through the basket thinking it was a neat idea and wanting to support this church that had supported us on the way,





and one of them jumped out at me. It was a little rock painted blue with a windsurfer on it.

Do you remember how I was feeling hit by a Tsunami or at least tumbling and drowning in waves too powerful for me to manage? Through this little rock, I felt like Jesus was telling me there was another way. There was no denying the water and waves, but I felt him saying *that if I filled myself more with his presence I would be windsurfing on top of the water instead of drowning under it*. Windsurfers need the wind and the waves to move — they see the wind and waves in a whole different way than I was seeing them.

Wind and waves to a windsurfer are an opportunity, not a threat!

I looked at the image on the rock and I said ‘Lord, that’s what I want’. I picked up a desire chip that evening — a desire for more of the Presence of God. My little rock has a magnet on the back of it and I’ve stuck it to the lamp beside my bed. (Which is sort of a terrible place to have it because I repeatedly knock it off in the middle of the night when I’m reaching to turn the lamp on or get a glass of water.) But I like seeing it when I go to bed and when I wake up. It reminds me that I can surf and even enjoy it if I surf with Jesus.

Since then, I have been more committed to things like a daily devotional and to hearing the voice of God. Part of the reason I started a little Hospitality group is not so that people who have the gift of serving would serve even more, but so that they too can deepen their faith and be filled with the Spirit of God and therefore have wind in their sails.

Church and society are changing, but the Life that Jesus offered Nicodemus has never changed. Jesus still offers that life today, to this church, to this denomination, and to you.

It starts with recognizing what you don’t have. It starts with recognizing that you are empty and poor. And then the next step is to have a desire — a desire for more life. You don’t have to have it all figured out. You don’t have to understand it all with your head. But if what you are doing in your life isn’t working for you, and if you need more life and you’d like to be filled with the presence of God, then pray and tell Jesus you have a desire for more. I encourage you to just pause right now and pray: “Jesus, I want more life in me. Come into my life.” It doesn’t have to be a fancy prayer — just pray saying you want more.

And then start walking! Make a commitment to read the scripture and pray and attend worship, and you will find that your life will change. This whole church will change: Wall Street and the United Church of Canada. Will we stop serving? We will do whatever the Spirit calls us to do, but I'd be willing to bet we'll be even more who we already are — a church that reaches out and says *God loves ALL*, a church that helps to bring more healing and reconciliation to Native people, a church that reaches out to the poor and lonely, to those who don't feel they belong within these walls and to the underfed and under-housed.

After Jesus died and rose again and ascended into heaven, the followers of Jesus stayed in Galilee and waited and prayed. Then one day, on the day we now call Pentecost, the Holy Spirit fell on the followers and filled them, and they became the Church. May we also be filled with the Spirit and so be the living church of Jesus today. Thanks be to God. Amen.