

“A Deeper Connection”

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John 3:1-17 from the Contemporary English Version

There was a man named Nicodemus who was a Pharisee and a Jewish leader. One night he went to Jesus and said, “Rabbi, we know that God has sent you to teach us. You could not work these miracles, unless God were with you.”

Jesus replied, “I tell you for certain that you must be born from above before you can see God's kingdom!”

Nicodemus asked, “How can a grown man ever be born a second time?”

Jesus answered: I tell you for certain that before you can get into God's kingdom, you must be born not only by water, but by the Spirit. Humans give life to their children. Yet only God's Spirit can change you into a child of God. Don't be surprised when I say that you must be born from above. Only God's Spirit gives new life. The Spirit is like the wind that blows wherever it wants to. You can hear the wind, but you don't know where it comes from or where it is going.

“How can this be?” Nicodemus asked. Jesus replied: How can you be a teacher of Israel and not know these things? I tell you for certain we know what we are talking about because we have seen it ourselves. But none of you will accept what we say. If you don't believe when I talk to you about things on earth, how can you possibly believe if I talk to you about things in heaven?

No one has gone up to heaven except the Son of Man, who came down from there. And the Son of Man must be lifted up, just as the metal snake was lifted up by Moses in the desert. Then everyone who has faith in the Son of Man will have eternal life.

God loved the people of this world so much that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who has faith in him will have eternal life and never really die. God did not send his Son into the world to condemn its people. He sent him to save them!

After the height of the Covid pandemic, when we were finally permitted by the government to return to in-person worship, we opened the church for the evening Celebrate Life service earlier than for the morning service. Death by COVID 19 was matched by the risk of death by addiction and mental health challenges, making the evening worshippers more vulnerable than the morning crowd. We are blessed to have a very large facility which helps us with social distancing.

So we moved the service from our somewhat cozy Heritage Hall to the Gymnasium. Paul got his yard stick out and we set up 50 chairs exactly 6 feet apart. I want you to think back to high school exams — that's what the space looked like. It was awful! I thought ‘No one's going to come for this worship!’ We couldn't have coffee, we couldn't have treats, we couldn't sit at tables, we couldn't sing. We couldn't congregate and have conversation. You came in for your exam — I mean worship service! — and then you left. But people came! Not just the first night. They kept coming, even after realizing how awful it was! We didn't pack the place out,

but it was reasonably full every night.

Why? They were desperate. Desperate for connection to people and desperate for a connection to God.

Yesterday at our Regional Gathering for the United Church we had an online meeting with the theme: “Building Stronger Communities Through Deeper Connection.” There were three speakers. First was Rev. Dr. Frank Emanuel who spoke about *“Reaching out to the Stranger: The friend we don’t know yet.”* Who are the people who reach out to us? Why do we think they do that?

Then Dr. Bianca Briciu spoke about *“The Power of Diversity: Being ready for transformation in the encounter with the ‘other’.*

And the third speaker was me! I spoke about going beyond talking about the Church as a unique place for delving into deeper subjects – it’s about connecting our faith and our understanding of the divine with the world itself.

I agreed to speak partly because it tied in nicely to my doctoral work, but also because creating more meaningful connections has been my goal for this church for this year. After three years of pandemic (and I know we are still in it but we are learning to live with it) it is time for us to reconnect and find new ways of connecting.

Meaningful connection is critical. It’s critical for us to connect with other people. As Rev. Jessica preached last week, learning to connect with creation is key. We need to see how we are a part of — and now separate from — creation, and therefore change our relationship with the earth, and also our connection with God.

We have entered the season of Lent. When I think of Lent, I think of the earth preparing itself for spring and for growth. Lent is a time for us to stop the frenzy (I’ll try to listen to what I’m preaching!) and to be still and create enough space to go deeper with our relationships — with others, with the earth and with God. Especially with God. It’s a time to go deeper.

Nicodemus wanted a deeper connection. Especially with his faith. He had heard of Jesus ... maybe even seen him and heard him speaking. And he wanted to know more.

Nicodemus had a need to go deeper. He was a leader in his religious tradition and I suspect that his religion had started to feel mechanical. You follow the rules and the traditions but somehow it had lost its spark. Or maybe it never did have much spark ... I don’t know. I’m not saying that Judaism never had spark. If you read the Hebrew Scriptures, the Old Testament, you see in story after story God in action and the Holy Spirit at work. The slave girl, Hagar, cast out with her child and God seeing her and caring for her and her child in the desert; a young man, Joseph, sold into slavery by his brother but given the gift of interpreting dreams; a young teen, David, taking down a giant Philistine, and the list goes on. ... It wasn’t

the religion in which he practiced his faith that was the problem — but sometimes these containers that we call religion can take over and be the main thing. Remember that's what religion is — it's a container for something that is intangible, in the same way that your body is a container for your soul.

One of Nicodemus's great strengths is humility. Humility is not putting yourself down. It's not having low self-esteem. It's about not being full of yourself and pretending you know it all. Usually when someone seems to know everything they are suffering from a lack of self-esteem. Humility is being able to admit what you don't know, to admit weakness.

Nicodemus seeks out Jesus because of what he doesn't know. He wants to understand more and have a deeper connection to God and this man Jesus seems to have this. If you want deeper connections with God and with others, one of the places that starts is with a willingness to be vulnerable.

This is one of the things that our congregation has learned from people who are in recovery: if you want better relationships with people and with God, it starts with admitting powerlessness and with admitting where we have done wrong. It starts in humility.

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.

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.

Connecting deeply with God and with each other makes all the difference in the world.

I remember a little more than a decade ago I walked part of the pilgrimage, the Camino in Spain. On this particular day I left a little late so that I could stop at an internet café. Some days I walked with people and other days I walked alone, and this was one of those days.

I began the day in a great mood despite the fact that it began to rain. It rained off and on all that day. I thought about stopping in one town for lunch but decided to push on to the next one. By the time I reached the town I was really ready for a break. It had started raining again and I was hungry and tired. But as I walked through the town it became clear that all the cafés were closed. It was the siesta time and everything was closed.

I was getting cold. I found a little sheltered place near the doorway of a church and put on my fleece under my jacket, and grudgingly continued on, knowing that the next town, my destination for the night, was a good 2 hours away. Soon after I met a young man going the other way who asked me for money. It struck me as odd, but I gave him a few Euros and continued on. About half an hour later I saw another man still way up ahead who was behaving kind of strangely. Instead of just walking, he was crossing back and forth across the street that the path was next to. As I got nearer I was getting more nervous. A sense of vulnerability overwhelmed me. I was in the middle of nowhere. We were next to a road but you only saw a car about every 20 minutes. I considered my options and realized I really didn’t have any. There was no other way to go except past him, going back didn’t make any sense. So I just walked on, throwing up a “My life is in your hands God!” prayer. The guy was acting oddly but I walked past him fine.

I know this would not have been a problem if I’d been with people or if I was feeling stronger. I later thought of the AA line H.A.L.T.: Hungry, Angry, Lonely, Tired. I was four out of four. As I walked on I just started to cry. I cried for those reasons but also all the other difficult things in my life seemed to crop up, and I just cried and walked in the rain. It was after a little while of this that I turned a corner and stopped dead when I saw a fence. It was a long wire fence that Pilgrims had filled with crosses. They had taken little branches and stuck them in the fence in the shape of crosses. The fence went on for over a kilometre and all along there were

little crosses and I instantly thought of my congregation.

On the day I left, in a children's time, the retired minister Stewart Froese took a t-shirt and had the kids put crosses all over it. He said that those crosses were little blessings, 'little God bless you's'. And they were to be a reminder to me that the church was praying for me. So of course I started crying even harder, in a good way this time. I knew then in my head and in my heart that I was not really alone. I added another cross to the fence, and suddenly remembered that I had an emergency chocolate bar in my pack! I ate it and I kept walking until I made it to my destination, spent and tired but safe. The hostel host offered me a hot meal and then after I went to an amazing stone church where the monks sang Gregorian chants, and I lay in a back pew and gave thanks to God.