

Born Again

Isaiah 6:1-8

Psalm 29

Romans 8:12-17

John 3:1-17

Well, it's Trinity Sunday today, the feast day that celebrates the mind boggling understanding that one God is expressed in three persons, yet remaining one God!

It's the day when smart priests take a vacation day and ask one of the junior clergy to do the preaching!

Clearly, you don't have a smart priest.....

Just last Monday, I was at the Oahu cemetery, where I have spent the last several Memorial days with British Naval officers, some Episcopalian friends and a fellow playing bagpipes as we pray for the honored dead from America, The United Kingdom, and the British commonwealth.

While we were standing around waiting for the bagpipe man to show up, the wife of the British officer mentioned that she is half Irish, which brought me to mention that the Irish had just, quite surprisingly to many, overwhelmingly approved a national referendum approving same sex marriage.

Surprising for many because Ireland is probably the most Roman Catholic nation on earth and has a reputation for being rather conservative on such matters.

But what surprised me is when the captain's wife said this:

"It wasn't a result based on religion, it was a result based on equal rights."

Which struck me as an understandable but sad comment on the shape of religion these days.

What she meant, she later explained, was that the "rules" and "regulations" and "right thinking" that we often define as religion got trumped by people's insistence that committed, loving relationships aren't confined to opposite sex couples, and that fact needs to be not only recognized but honored.

She wasn't thinking that religion embraces exactly this too: that God loves all of us, that all are welcome in the Kingdom, that faith is far more than the rules and the regs.

And it seems to me that this is the dilemma that old Nicodemus finds himself in today....

He's a top Pharisee, the guys who excel on knowing and following the rules and regs, and he's completely dumbfounded by Jesus - who's so far removed from a rules and regs idea of faith that he and Nicodemus aren't talking the same language.

He's curious about Jesus.

After all, the stories about changing all that water into wine, healing the fellow born blind, telling the lame man to walk, it's all making the 5 o'clock news.

Then there was that mess just a few days ago, what with Jesus storming the Temple and tossing out all the pay day lenders and pawn shop owners and their ilk.

Caused quite a stir....

So here's Nicodemus, an honorable and sincere man, who is dumbfounded when Jesus tells him, in so many words, that - as we are, we cannot encounter God.

It's a tough thing to swallow, so I'll say it again.

As we are, we cannot encounter God.

It's not only Jesus saying it.

Isaiah and Paul say it too.

Something has to change - a hot coal, says Isaiah; exchanging flesh for an invasion of the spirit, says Paul; a new birth, says Jesus.

And there's something else that's a shocker for we "pull up yer bootstraps," "earn your way home," "every man for himself" mentality that is the water we drink and the air we breath - that hot coal, that invasion of the spirit, that new birth, these aren't things **we** do, these are things that are done to us!

Which is particularly true when it comes to birth.

The one being born isn't doing much - it's the one giving birth whose doing all the work, at least from what I can see.

Now, I've never given birth, and I completely agree with those who say that if men had the babies, the human race would have died out immediately.

But I've been around a fair number of births, and what I can tell you from the outside looking in is that there's not a lot of refined behavior going on.

Rules and regulations don't seem to rule the day, at least not for the mom in labor.

Instead, it seems. from the outside looking in, a glorious agony of sweat and tears and bodily fluids and pain and effort and well, many of you sitting here know it from being there, and you don't need to hear more from me.

But here's the point.

We so often think of God as that old white man with a flowing beard, sitting on a cloud, all wrapped up in rules and regulations, taking note of every foible and mess up you or I commit.

But Jesus is telling us that God is not at all like that.

Jesus insists that God is like a woman in labor; laboring to give birth to us: human beings who are struggling to emerge into that which we were always intended to become.

This idea of God giving birth to us isn't new with Jesus, it's all over the Bible; it's just that when we get all dressed up in our Sunday best, many folks would rather hear about the rules rather than risk getting soaked in the backwash of the Holy Spirit.

So how might all of this inform our faith?

How might it change how we think when we think of religion?

There's a Hebrew word for "womb" that is also used to speak of God's compassion, forgiveness and kindness.

Imagine that God is, every moment of every day, birthing all of humanity from a place of compassion, forgiveness and kindness, and that God has been doing this ever since humanity first stepped foot out of the trees of Africa!

What a take on God, eh?

How different from some stoic old man sitting outside of time and unmoved by our problems.

There's another Hebrew word for "pain in childbearing" – it gets translated into English as "grieve."

Which is what God does when our first parents, Adam and Eve, leave the garden, having decided they are equipped to know the difference between good and evil all by themselves – it's what God does when the Jewish people, when we, put faith in machines of war and military alliances – rather than in the steadfast love of God.

God grieves....., God labors for us. Debbie Blue, *Sensual Orthodoxy*, 35-8, paraphrased.

So maybe what Jesus is saying to Nicodemus is that unless you're willing to be turned inside out; unless you will throw caution to the winds and slide down the slippery hill of God's boundless desire to have us all, unless you chuck everything you thought you knew about God, and look for God in the healing, compassionate, welcoming, inclusive, rowdy, soul stirring face of Jesus, who is our best window into the mystery that we call God, then you too, like Nicodemus, might just miss out on all the fun!

And maybe that's why the early church mothers and fathers give us this strange notion that one God is three, that three are one.....

What is the sound of one hand clapping?

How do you find your life by losing it?

How are three one?

Maybe we are not meant to "get it" as much as we are meant to wrestle with it and surrender to it all at the same time--and in the struggle, in the surrender, is it then we might glimpse the face of God?

+amen

