

New Eyes

My kids have been exploring the evangelical side of things lately, with Tea joining her best friend at King's Cathedral and Joey going to New Hope with his best buddy.

Funny how the other morning they both said they won't be going back.

For Tea, the King's Cathedral folks seem to put God in a very small box, because for them, the world is only 4000 years old, dinosaurs roamed the earth with people, Adam and Eve are historical figures and unless you are one of them, you are on a train heading straight to hell.

For Joey, the New Hope folks insist that the life of faith can only be walked on the straight and narrow, and that any deviation, like playing video games or engaging in other activities the church deems unfit, is to stray from God.

What Tea was able to see is that the true God cannot be put in a little box; that the God of all things has no problem with a creation that is billions of years old, that God can easily create through evolution, and that God's love is not for the few and select, but for the whole world.

What Joey was able to see is that God doesn't insist that we walk a straight and direct route to salvation, but rather that the life of faith zigs and zags, the life of faith is filled with failures and deviations, and yet through every zig and zag, God is there with us, in all of life's circumstances, when we are faithful and when we are not, when we are wise and when we are stupid; and yes, even when we play video games: that failure is often the most valuable teacher, that God loves us even, and perhaps most especially, in our brokenness.

Not bad for an 11 and 13 year old, eh?

I think that this is something like the dilemma that Nicodemus is facing when he comes in the dead of night to try to figure out Jesus.

Like some of today's evangelicals, he has a rather small view of God.

Nicodemus seems to have in mind a God determined to save only one group of people and a God who insists that you live exclusively by the rules as Nicodemus and his cohorts understand them.

And so a God who is in fact determined to save the whole world and who does so by blowing where he wills and doing what she wants is an entirely different kind of God altogether.

It's one thing to be convinced that the universe of the saved is limited to those who look like me, talk like me, and behave like me: it's an entirely different matter to open my eyes to the God who's on the hunt for everyone else, especially the strange, the different and the just plain weird.

And yet that is exactly how God is and has always been.

He picks the Jewish people not because they were especially smart or beautiful or deserving but precisely because they are an outcast group of nobodies and if they are anything at all in the eyes of the world, they are losers.

But by the time of Nicodemus, many of these same people are convinced that they are in fact God's darlings, that they are beautiful, that they are winners.

Leave it to Jesus to throw cold water on all of that!

Jesus reminds Nicodemus that God saves because God is good, not because we are good.

Jesus reminds Nicodemus that God is after every last person on this earth because every last person is a beloved son or daughter of God; that God will have all of us, and not simply a select few.

The truth is that God will stop at nothing to have us — by **becoming nothing** for us on the bloody wood of the cross, so that perhaps when we start thinking we can exclude those who we say are "nothings," God says - "then you exclude me, because I became nothing so that everyone might be brought home."

It's something like the old story of the Chinese man who tried for years to get into an all white parish back in the 1950s.

Every time he shows up, the good folks of that church find a different way to get rid of him.

He finally complains to God that try as he might to get in that church, he's denied.

And God says to him: "Don't feel so bad, I've been trying to get in there myself and they won't let me in either!"

So what is going on this night between Jesus and Nicodemus?

Jesus, as far as Nicodemus is concerned, is talking pure gibberish, what with all this talk of grown men being reborn and a Spirit of God that's as unpredictable as the wind.

And I wonder how many of us, when we really stop and hear the Gospel, have the same feeling — that what Jesus is talking about is so strange, so at odds with our daily experience, that he might as well be talking gibberish.

To say that the Holy Spirit moves where it will, that one needs to be born from above, to be born anew, to be born again, is all very strange talk indeed.

Perhaps what's happening is that Jesus, in his encounter with the wealthy, educated and curious Nicodemus, invites Nicodemus, invites us, to see ourselves through a different set of eyes.

When I was working in a psychiatric hospital many years ago as part of my training to become a priest, I learned that infants who are left alone and isolated from human touch have a much greater chance of developing schizophrenia than children who are routinely held.

As you know, schizophrenia is a very serious psychiatric illness in which the sufferer hears voices and sees things that aren't there.

Now it's true that schizophrenia has many other causes, but it was remarkable that in those children denied the human touch, it was quite common.

The crucial need for infants to be held and touched, a need that continues throughout our lives, is but one example of how interconnected we are with one another, how, as the old poem goes, no man is an island, how we influence each other as much as we need each other.

We might go even further and notice how our own perception of who we are, how we think of ourselves, how we come to define ourselves, so much of this comes through other people's perceptions of us, in other words, we tend to see and define and understand ourselves through the eyes of other people, or to put a finer point on it, we tend to see ourselves as we **believe** others see us....

And so, we have children who see themselves as stupid and inferior because that's how they perceive their parents seeing them, or children who perceive themselves as smart and secure for the same reason.

A good example of this is found in the first reading that we had last week, the story in the Garden of Eden, when temptation rears its ugly head.

"All the trees in the garden are beautiful, until our parents begin to look at one tree through the envious eyes of the snake and as they look at the tree of good and evil through the snake's eyes, they become envious like the snake, and they see reality like the snake, and they do what the snake suggests because they have in some ways become the snake by identifying with the way the snake sees things.

Before they saw themselves through the snake's eyes, they saw themselves only through God's eyes, where all is beautiful, all is sacred, where nothing is more important than the next thing." James Allison (paraphrased).

And we see it as well in this week's first reading, except here Abram sees himself through God's eyes, and sticks with that way of seeing, and in faith, leaves behind all that is familiar, all that is dear, in search of the undiscovered but promised new country.

How do you see yourself?

If you sit with that for awhile, and consider all the people who have been important in your life, perhaps you will come to see that how you define yourself is closely tied up with how all those other people, both the living and the dead, have defined **you**.

Which brings us back to poor, befuddled Nicodemus.

He sees himself through the eyes of upper class Judaism, where rules and customs and norms are in charge, and he has fit himself very nicely into the womb of that world view.

Meanwhile, Jesus is dropping dynamite down his chimney, pushing Nicodemus into another womb, where he may generate a new set of eyes, and be born into a reality so very different than the reality he exists in today, so that he may then, having been born anew, grow and mature into the odd life that Jesus calls every one of us to enter.

Look at yourself through God's eyes, Jesus says, and suddenly how you see yourself, how you see those you once considered to be losers or idiots, how you see God, it all begins to change.

This is the new birth awaiting you who claim Jesus as your Lord.

Like any birth, it's not easy.

"New birth is a breaking free of unbelief into belief.

It's a breaking free of darkness into light.

It's a breaking free of a tightly wound, judgmental life into an abundant life.

So yes, spiritual new birth is painful.

Just like physical birth it involves leaving the past behind and breaking into the present.

Just like physical birth, it might take longer than we want, and at other times it's there even before we are ready.

Spiritual new birth, while empowered by God's grace, takes real effort and real labor on our part." Alyce M. McKenzie, paraphrased.

And what does this new life look like?

It participates in God's on-going sweeping up and sweeping through the world that occurs every day in every nook and cranny of creation.

What is God's work?

It is creating!

Jesus reveals the power of eternal life by continuing to do God's work of creation, whether he's taking dirt and spit and rubbing it into a blind man's eyes giving him new sight, or eating with the untouchables or forgiving the unforgivable, or challenging a senior teacher like Nicodemus, it is all part of God creating a new earth and new human beings., a creation to which we are each of us invited, even beckoned, even summoned. James Allison, paraphrase.

And make no mistake, it's not a neat and clean and orderly creation dictated by Strategic Plans and precise goals and objectives.

The Holy Spirit is messy!

And Jesus points to that messiness by introducing Nicodemus to the God who teaches in parables, not in by-laws, a God who is "willing to live with wasted seed, with

nets full of good and bad fish, with fields that sprout both weeds and wheat, who says no to violence, who says no to forcing people to be or do or think one thing. Ours is a God, simply put, who loves us in our messiness." W. Willimon, Postmodern Preaching.

Saint Peter, the original guy who has trouble wrapping his head around the messy new eyes that Jesus creates, says it like this:

"Now that you've cleaned up your lives by following the truth, love one another **as if your lives depended on it.**

Your new life is not like your old life.

Your old birth came from mortal sperm; your new life comes from God's living Word.

Just think: a life conceived by God's own self!

So ... make a clean sweep of malice and pretense, envy and hurtful talk.

You've had a taste of God.

Now, like infants at the breast, drink deep of the Lord's pure kindness.

Then you'll grow up mature and whole in God." 1 Pet. 1:23-25 (The Message Tr.)

This is the new birth to which we are all invited — a birth that frees us from the pain of defining ourselves through the eyes of parents or siblings or grown children — into a life where we are defined through the eyes of the loving God — the God "who gives life to the dead, who calls into existence the things that do not exist." Rom. 4:17.

+amen

